

Chapter VII--The Midnight of Europe

Among the minor crimes of England may be classed the shallow criticism and easy abandonment of Napoleon III. The Victorian English had a very bad habit of being influenced by words and at the same time pretending to despise them. They would build their whole historical philosophy upon two or three titles, and then refuse to get even the titles right. The solid Victorian Englishman, with his whiskers and his Parliamentary vote, was quite content to say that Louis Napoleon and William of Prussia both became Emperors--by which he meant autocrats. His whiskers would have bristled with rage and he would have stormed at you for hair-splitting and "lingo," if you had answered that William was German Emperor, while Napoleon was not French Emperor, but only Emperor of the French. What could such mere order of the words matter? Yet the same Victorian would have been even more indignant if he had been asked to be satisfied with an Art Master, when he had advertised for a Master of Arts. His irritation would have increased if the Art Master had promised him a sea-piece and had brought him a piece of the sea; or if, during the decoration of his house, the same aesthetic humourist had undertaken to procure some Indian Red and had produced a Red Indian.

The Englishman would not see that if there was only a verbal difference between the French Emperor and the Emperor of the French, so, if it came to that, it was a verbal difference between the Emperor and the Republic, or even between a Parliament and no Parliament. For him an Emperor meant merely despotism; he had not yet learned that a Parliament may mean merely oligarchy. He did not know that the English people would soon be made impotent, not by the disfranchising of their constituents, but simply by the silencing of their members; and that the governing class of England did not now depend upon rotten boroughs, but upon rotten representatives. Therefore he did not understand Bonapartism. He did not understand that French democracy became more democratic, not less, when it turned all France into one constituency which elected one member. He did not understand that many dragged down the Republic because it was not republican, but purely senatorial. He was yet to learn how quite corruptly senatorial a great representative assembly can become. Yet in England to-day we hear "the decline of Parliament" talked about and taken for granted by the best Parliamentarians--Mr. Balfour, for instance--and we hear the one partly French and wholly Jacobin historian of the French Revolution recommending for the English evil a revival of the power of the Crown. It seems that so far from having left Louis Napoleon far behind in the grey dust of the dead despotisms, it is not at all improbable that our most extreme revolutionary developments may end where Louis Napoleon began.

In other words, the Victorian Englishman did not understand the words "Emperor of the French." The type of title was deliberately chosen to express the idea of an elective and popular origin; as against such a phrase as "the German Emperor," which expresses an almost transcendental tribal patriarchate, or such a phrase as "King of Prussia," which suggests personal ownership of a whole territory. To treat the Coup d'état as unpardonable is to justify riot against despotism, but forbid any riot against aristocracy. Yet the idea expressed in "The Emperor of the French" is not dead, but rather risen from the dead. It is the idea that while a government may pretend to be a popular government, only a person can be really popular. Indeed, the idea is still the crown of American democracy, as it was for a time the crown of French democracy. The very powerful official who makes the choice of that great people for peace or war, might very well be called, not the President of the United States, but the President of the Americans. In Italy we have seen the King and the mob prevail over the conservatism of the Parliament, and in Russia the new popular policy sacramentally symbolised by the Czar riding at the head of the new armies. But in one place, at least, the actual form of words exists; and the actual form of words has been splendidly justified. One man among the sons of men has been permitted to fulfil a courtly formula with awful and disastrous fidelity. Political and geographical ruin have written one last royal title across the sky; the loss of palace and capital and territory have but isolated and made evident the people that has not been lost; not laws but the love of exiles, not soil but the souls of men, still make certain that five true words shall yet be written in the corrupt and fanciful chronicles of mankind: "The King of the Belgians."

It is a common phrase, recurring constantly in the real if rabid eloquence of Victor Hugo, that Napoleon III. was a mere ape of Napoleon I. That is, that he had, as the politician says, in "L'Aiglon," "le petit chapeau, mais pas la tête"; that he was merely a bad imitation. This is extravagantly exaggerative; and those who say it, moreover, often miss the two or three points of resemblance which really exist in the exaggeration. One resemblance there certainly was. In both Napoleons it has been suggested that the glory was not so great as it seemed; but in both it can be emphatically added that the eclipse was not so great as it seemed either. Both succeeded at first and failed at last. But both succeeded at last, even after the failure. If at this moment we owe thanks to Napoleon Bonaparte for the armies of united France, we also owe some thanks to Louis Bonaparte for the armies of united Italy. That great movement to a freer and more chivalrous Europe which we call to-day the Cause of the Allies, had its forerunners and first victories before our time; and it not only won at Arcola, but also at Solferino. Men who remembered Louis Napoleon when he mooned about the Blessington salon, and was supposed to be almost mentally deficient, used to say he deceived Europe twice; once when he made men think him an imbecile,

and once when he made them think him a statesman. But he deceived them a third time; when he made them think he was dead; and had done nothing.

In spite of the unbridled verse of Hugo and the even more unbridled prose of Kinglake, Napoleon III. is really and solely discredited in history because of the catastrophe of 1870. Hugo hurled any amount of lightning on Louis Napoleon; but he threw very little light on him. Some passages in the "Châtiments" are really caricatures carved in eternal marble. They will always be valuable in reminding generations too vague and soft, as were the Victorians, of the great truth that hatred is beautiful, when it is hatred of the ugliness of the soul. But most of them could have been written about Haman, or Heliogabalus, or King John, or Queen Elizabeth, as much as about poor Louis Napoleon; they bear no trace of any comprehension of his quite interesting aims, and his quite comprehensible contempt for the fat-souled senatorial politicians. And if a real revolutionist like Hugo did not do justice to the revolutionary element in Cæsarism, it need hardly be said that a rather Primrose League Tory like Tennyson did not. Kinglake's curiously acrid insistence upon the Coup d'état is, I fear, only an indulgence in one of the least pleasing pleasures of our national pen and press, and one which afterwards altogether ran away with us over the Dreyfus case. It is an unfortunate habit of publicly repenting for other people's sins. If this came easy to an Englishman like Kinglake, it came, of course, still easier to a German like Queen Victoria's husband and even to Queen Victoria herself, who was naturally influenced by him. But in so far as the sensible masses of the English nation took any interest in the matter, it is probable that they sympathised with Palmerston, who was as popular as the Prince Consort was unpopular. The black mark against Louis Napoleon's name until now, has simply been Sedan; and it is our whole purpose to-day to turn Sedan into an interlude. If it is not an interlude, it will be the end of the world. But we have sworn to make an end of that ending: warring on until, if only by a purgatory of the nations and the mountainous annihilation of men, the story of the world ends well.

There are, as it were, valleys of history quite close to us, but hidden by the closer hills. One, as we have seen, is that fold in the soft Surrey hills where Cobbett sleeps with his still-born English Revolution. Another is under that height called The Spy of Italy, where a new Napoleon brought back the golden eagles against the black eagles of Austria. Yet that French adventure in support of the Italian insurrection was very important; we are only beginning to understand its importance. It was a defiance to the German Reaction and 1870 was a sort of revenge for it, just as the Balkan victory was a defiance to the German Reaction and 1914 was the attempted revenge for it. It is true that the French liberation of Italy was incomplete, the problem of the Papal States, for instance, being untouched by the Peace of Villafranca. The volcanic but fruitful spirit of Italy had

already produced that wonderful, wandering, and almost omnipresent personality whose red shirt was to be a walking flag: Garibaldi. And many English Liberals sympathised with him and his extremists as against the peace. Palmerston called it "the peace that passeth all understanding": but the profanity of that hilarious old heathen was nearer the mark than he knew: there were really present some of those deep things which he did not understand. To quarrel with the Pope, but to compromise with him, was an instinct with the Bonapartes; an instinct no Anglo-Saxon could be expected to understand. They knew the truth; that Anti-Clericalism is not a Protestant movement, but a Catholic mood. And after all the English Liberals could not get their own Government to risk what the French Government had risked; and Napoleon III. might well have retorted on Palmerston, his rival in international Liberalism, that half a war was better than no fighting. Swinburne called Villafranca "The Halt before Rome," and expressed a rhythmic impatience for the time when the world

"Shall ring to the roar of the lion Proclaiming Republican Rome."

But he might have remembered, after all, that it was not the British lion, that a British poet should have the right to say so imperiously, "Let him roar again. Let him roar again."

It is true that there was no clear call to England from Italy, as there certainly was from Denmark. The great powers were not bound to help Italy to become a nation, as they were bound to support the unquestioned fact that Denmark was one. Indeed the great Italian patriot was to experience both extremes of the English paradox, and, curiously enough, in connection with both the two national and anti-German causes. For Italy he gained the support of the English, but not the support of England. Not a few of our countrymen followed the red shirt; but not in the red coat. And when he came to England, not to plead the cause of Italy but the cause of Denmark, the Italian found he was more popular with the English than any Englishman. He made his way through a forest of salutations, which would willingly have turned itself into a forest of swords. But those who kept the sword kept it sheathed. For the ruling class the valour of the Italian hero, like the beauty of the Danish Princess, was a thing to be admired, that is enjoyed, like a novel--or a newspaper. Palmerston was the very type of Pacifism, because he was the very type of Jingoism. In spirit as restless as Garibaldi, he was in practice as cautious as Cobden. England had the most prudent aristocracy, but the most reckless democracy in the world. It was, and is, the English contradiction, which has so much misrepresented us, especially to the Irish. Our national captains were carpet knights; our knights errant were among the dismounted rabble. When an Austrian general who had flogged women in the conquered provinces appeared in the London streets, some common draymen off a cart behaved with the direct quixotry of Sir Lancelot or Sir Galahad. He had beaten women and they

beat him. They regarded themselves simply as avengers of ladies in distress, breaking the bloody whip of a German bully; just as Cobbett had sought to break it when it was wielded over the men of England. The boorishness was in the Germanic or half-Germanic rulers who wore crosses and spurs: the gallantry was in the gutter. English draymen had more chivalry than Teuton aristocrats--or English ones.

I have dwelt a little on this Italian experiment because it lights up Louis Napoleon as what he really was before the eclipse, a politician--perhaps an unscrupulous politician--but certainly a democratic politician. A power seldom falls being wholly faultless; and it is true that the Second Empire became contaminated with cosmopolitan spies and swindlers, justly reviled by such democrats as Rochefort as well as Hugo. But there was no French inefficiency that weighed a hair in the balance compared with the huge and hostile efficiency of Prussia; the tall machine that had struck down Denmark and Austria, and now stood ready to strike again, extinguishing the lamp of the world. There was a hitch before the hammer stroke, and Bismarck adjusted it, as with his finger, by a forgery--for he had many minor accomplishments. France fell: and what fell with her was freedom, and what reigned in her stead only tyrants and the ancient terror. The crowning of the first modern Kaiser in the very palace of the old French kings was an allegory; like an allegory on those Versailles walls. For it was at once the lifting of the old despotic diadem and its descent on the low brow of a barbarian. Louis XI. had returned, and not Louis IX.; and Europe was to know that sceptre on which there is no dove.

The instant evidence that Europe was in the grip of the savage was as simple as it was sinister. The invaders behaved with an innocent impiety and bestiality that had never been known in those lands since Clovis was signed with the cross. To the naked pride of the new men nations simply were not. The struggling populations of two vast provinces were simply carried away like slaves into captivity, as after the sacking of some prehistoric town. France was fined for having pretended to be a nation; and the fine was planned to ruin her forever. Under the pressure of such impossible injustice France cried out to the Christian nations, one after another, and by name. Her last cry ended in a stillness like that which had encircled Denmark.

One man answered; one who had quarrelled with the French and their Emperor; but who knew it was not an emperor that had fallen. Garibaldi, not always wise but to his end a hero, took his station, sword in hand, under the darkening sky of Christendom, and shared the last fate of France. A curious record remains, in which a German commander testifies to the energy and effect of the last strokes of the wounded lion of Aspromonte. But England went away sorrowful, for she had great possessions.