THE GERMAN EMPEROR

The list of the really serious, the really convinced, the really important and comprehensible people now alive includes, as most Englishmen would now be prepared to admit, the German Emperor. He is a practical man and a poet. I do not know whether there are still people in existence who think there is some kind of faint antithesis between these two characters; but I incline to think there must be, because of the surprise which the career of the German Emperor has generally evoked. When he came to the throne it became at once apparent that he was poetical; people assumed in consequence that he was unpractical; that he would plunge Europe into war, that he would try to annex France, that he would say he was the Emperor of Russia, that he would stand on his head in the Reichstag, that he would become a pirate on the Spanish Main. Years upon years have passed; he has gone on making speeches, he has gone on talking about God and his sword, he has poured out an ever increased rhetoric and æstheticism. And yet all the time people have slowly and surely realised that he knows what he is about, that he is one of the best friends of peace, that his influence on Europe is not only successful, but in many ways good, that he knows what world he is living in better than a score of materialists.

The explanation never comes to them--he is a poet; therefore, a practical man. The affinity of the two words, merely as words, is much nearer than many people suppose, for the matter of that. There is one Greek word for "I do" from which we get the word practical, and another Greek word for "I do" from which we get the word poet. I was doubtless once informed of a profound difference between the two, but I have forgotten it. The two words practical and poetical may mean two subtly different things in that old and subtle language, but they mean the same in English and the same in the long run. It is ridiculous to suppose that the man who can understand the inmost intricacies of a human being who has never existed at all cannot make a guess at the conduct of man who lives next door. It is idle to say that a man who has himself felt the mad longing under the mad moon for a vagabond life cannot know why his son runs away to sea. It is idle to say that a man who has himself felt the hunger for any kind of exhilaration, from angel or devil, cannot know why his butler takes to drink. It is idle to say that a man who has been fascinated with the wild fastidiousness of destiny does not know why stockbrokers gamble, to say that a man who has been knocked into the middle of eternal life by a face in a crowd does not know why the poor marry young; that a man who found his path to all things kindly and pleasant blackened and barred suddenly by the body of a man does not know what it is to desire murder. It is idle, in short, for a man who has created men to say that he does not understand them. A man who is a poet may, of course, easily make

mistakes in these personal and practical relations; such mistakes and similar ones have been made by poets; such mistakes and greater ones have been made by soldiers and statesmen and men of business. But in so far as a poet is in these things less of a practical man he is also less of a poet.

If Shakespeare really married a bad wife when he had conceived the character of Beatrice he ought to have been ashamed of himself: he had failed not only in his life, he had failed in his art. If Balzac got into rows with his publishers he ought to be rebuked and not commiserated, having evolved so many consistent business men from his own inside. The German Emperor is a poet, and therefore he succeeds, because poetry is so much nearer to reality than all the other human occupations. He is a poet, and succeeds because the majority of men are poets. It is true, if that matter is at all important, that the German Emperor is not a good poet. The majority of men are poets, only they happen to be bad poets. The German Emperor fails ridiculously, if that is all that is in question, in almost every one of the artistic occupations to which he addresses himself: he is neither a first-rate critic, nor a first-rate musician, nor a first-rate painter, nor a first-rate poet. He is a twelfth-rate poet, but because he is a poet at all he knocks to pieces all the first-rate politicians in the war of politics.

Having made clear my position so far, I discover with a certain amount of interest that I have not yet got to the subject of these remarks. The German Emperor is a poet, and although, as far as I know, every line he ever wrote may be nonsense, he is a poet in this real sense, that he has realised the meaning of every function he has performed. Why should we jeer at him because he has a great many uniforms, for instance? The very essence of the really imaginative man is that he realises the various types or capacities in which he can appear. Every one of us, or almost every one of us, does in reality fulfil almost as many offices as Pooh-Bah. Almost every one of us is a ratepayer, an immortal soul, an Englishman, a baptised person, a mammal, a minor poet, a juryman, a married man, a bicyclist, a Christian, a purchaser of newspapers, and a critic of Mr. Alfred Austin. We ought to have uniforms for all these things. How beautiful it would be if we appeared to-morrow in the uniform of a ratepayer, in brown and green, with buttons made in the shape of coins, and a blue income-tax paper tastefully arranged as a favour; or, again, if we appeared dressed as immortal souls, in a blue uniform with stars. It would be very exciting to dress up as Englishmen, or to go to a fancy dress ball as Christians.

Some of the costumes I have suggested might appear a little more difficult to carry out. The dress of a person who purchases newspapers (though it mostly consists of coloured evening editions arranged in a stiff skirt, like that of a saltatrice, round the waist of the wearer) has many mysterious points. The attire of a person prepared to criticise the Poet Laureate is something so awful and

striking that I dare not even begin to describe it; the one fact which I am willing to reveal, and to state seriously and responsibly, is that it buttons up behind.

But most assuredly we ought not to abuse the Kaiser because he is fond of putting on all his uniforms; he does so because he has a large number of established and involuntary incarnations. He tries to do his duty in that state of life to which it shall please God to call him; and it so happens that he has been called to as many different estates as there are regiments in the German Army. He is a huntsman and proud of being a huntsman, an engineer and proud of being an engineer, an infantry soldier and proud of being so, a light horseman and proud of being so. There is nothing wrong in all this; the only wrong thing is that it should be confined to the merely destructive arts of war. The sight of the German Kaiser in the most magnificent of the uniforms in which he had led armies to victory is not in itself so splendid or delightful as that of many other sights which might come before us without a whisper of the alarms of war. It is not so splendid or delightful as the sight of an ordinary householder showing himself in that magnificent uniform of purple and silver which should signalise the father of three children. It is not so splendid or delightful as the appearance of a young clerk in an insurance office decorated with those three long crimson plumes which are the well-known insignia of a gentleman who is just engaged to be married. Nor can it compare with the look of a man wearing the magnificent green and silver armour by which we know one who has induced an acquaintance to give up getting drunk, or the blue and gold which is only accorded to persons who have prevented fights in the street. We belong to quite as many regiments as the German Kaiser. Our regiments are regiments that are embattled everywhere; they fight an unending fight against all that is hopeless and rapacious and of evil report. The only difference is that we have the regiments, but not the uniforms.

Only one obvious point occurs to me to add. If the Kaiser has more than any other man the sense of the poetry of the ancient things, the sword, the crown, the ship, the nation, he has the sense of the poetry of modern things also. He has one sense, and it is even a joke against him. He feels the poetry of one thing that is more poetic than sword or crown or ship or nation, the poetry of the telegram. No one ever sent a telegram who did not feel like a god. He is a god, for he is a minor poet; a minor poet, but a poet still.