HAROLD FREDERIC

THE YOUNG EMPEROR, WILLIAM II OF GERMANY

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A Study in Character Development on a Throne

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CHAPTER I.—THE SUPREMACY OF THE HOHENZOLLERNS.

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In June of 1888, an army of workmen were toiling in the Champ de Mars upon the foundations of a noble World's Exhibition, planned to celebrate the centenary of the death by violence of the Divine Right of Kings. Four thousand miles westward, in the city of Chicago, some seven hundred delegates were assembled in National Convention, to select the twenty-third President of a great Republic, which also stood upon the threshold of its hundredth birthday. These were both suggestive facts, full of hopeful and inspiring thoughts to the serious mind. Considered together by themselves they seemed very eloquent proofs of the progress which Liberty, Enlightenment, the Rights of Man, and other admirable abstractions spelled with capital letters, had made during the century.

But, unfortunately or otherwise, history will not take them by themselves. That same June of 1888 witnessed a spectacle of quite another sort in a third large city—a spectacle which gave the lie direct to everything that Paris and Chicago seemed to say. This sharp and clamorous note of contradiction came from Berlin, where a helmeted and crimson-cloaked young man, still in his thirtieth year, stood erect on a throne, surrounded by the bowing forms of twenty ruling sovereigns, and proclaimed, with the harsh, peremptory voice of a drill-sergeant, that he was a War Lord, a Mailed Hand of Providence, and a sovereign specially

conceived, created, and invested with power by God, for the personal government of some fifty millions of people.

It is much to be feared that, in the ears of the muse of history, the resounding shrillness of this voice drowned alike the noise of the hammers on the banks of the Seine and the cheering of the delegates at Chicago.

Any man, standing on that throne in the White Saloon of the old Schloss at Berlin, would have to be a good deal considered by his fellow-creatures. Even if we put aside the tremendous international importance of the position of a German Emperor, in that gravely open question of peace or war, he must compel attention as the visible embodiment of a fact, the existence of which those who like it least must still recognize. This is the fact: that the Hohenzollerns, having done many notable things in other times, have in our day revivified and popularized the monarchical idea, not only in Germany, but to a considerable extent elsewhere throughout Europe. It is too much to say, perhaps, that they have made it beloved in any quarter which was hostile before. But they have brought it to the front under new conditions, and secured for it admiring notice as the mainspring of a most efficient, exact, vigorous, and competent system of government. They have made an Empire with it—a magnificent modern machine, in which army and civil service and subsidiary federal administrations all move together like the wheels of a watch. Under the impulse of this idea they have not only brought governmental order out of the old-time chaos of German divisions and dissensions, but they have given their subjects a public service, which, taken all in all, is more

effective and well-ordered than its equivalent produced by popular institutions in America, France, or England, and they have built up a fighting force for the protection of German frontiers which is at once the marvel and the terror of Europe.

Thus they have, as has been said, rescued the ancient and time-worn function of kingship from the contempt and odium into which it had fallen during the first half of the century, and rendered it once more respectable in the eyes of a utilitarian world.

But it is not enough to be useful, diligent, and capable. If it were, the Orleans Princes might still be living in the Tuileries. A kingly race, to maintain or increase its strength, must appeal to the national imagination. The Hohenzollerns have been able to do this. The Prussian imagination is largely made up of appetite, and their Kings, however fatuous and limited of vision they may have been in other matters, have never lost sight of this fact. If we include the Great Elector, there have been ten of these Kings, and of the ten eight have made Prussia bigger than they found her. Sometimes the gain has been clutched out of the smoke and flame of battle; sometimes it has more closely resembled burglary, or bank embezzlement on a large scale; once or twice it has come in the form of gifts from interested neighbours, in which category, perhaps, the cession of Heligoland may be placed—but gain of some sort there has always been, save only in the reign of Frederic William IV and the melancholy three months of Frederic III.

That there should be a great affection for and pride in the Hohenzollerns in Prussia was natural enough. They typified

the strength of beak, the power of talons and sweeping wings, which had made Prussia what she was. But nothing save a very remarkable train of surprising events could have brought the rest of Germany to share this affection and pride.

The truth is, of course, that up to 1866 most other Germans disliked the Prussians thoroughly and vehemently, and decorated those head Prussians, the Hohenzollerns, with an extremity of antipathy. That brief war in Bohemia, with the consequent annexation of Hanover, Hesse-Cassel, Nassau, and Frankfort, did not inspire any new love for the Prussians anywhere, we may be sure, but it did open the eyes of other Germans to the fact that their sovereigns—Kings, Electors, Grand Dukes, and what not—were all collectively not worth the right arm of a single Hohenzollern.

It was a good deal to learn even this—and, turning over this revelation in their minds, the Germans by 1871 were in a mood to move almost abreast of Prussia in the apotheosis of the victor of Sedan and Paris. To the end of old William's life in 1888, there was always more or less of the apotheosis about the Germans' attitude toward him. He was never quite real to them in the sense that Leopold is real in Brussels or Humbert in Rome. The German imagination always saw him as he is portrayed in the fine fresco by Wislicenus in the ancient imperial palace at Goslar—a majestic figure, clad in modern war trappings yet of mythical aspect, surrounded, it is true, by the effigies of recognizable living Kings, Queens, and Generals, but escorted also by heroic ancestral shades, as he rides forward out of the canvas. Close behind him rides his son,

Fritz, and he, too, following in the immediate shadow of his father to the last, lives only now in pictures and in sad musing dreams of what might have been.

But William II—the young Kaiser and King—*is* a reality. He has won no battles. No antique legends wreathe their romantic mists about him. It has occurred to no artist to paint him on a palace wall, with the mailed shadows of mediaeval Barbarossas and Conrads and Sigismunds overhead.

The group of helmeted warriors who cluster about those two mounted figures in the Goslar picture, and who, in the popular fancy, bring down to our own time some of the attributes of mediaeval devotion and prowess—this group is dispersed now. Moltke, Prince Frederic Charles, Roon, Manteuffel, and many others are dead; Blumenthal is in dignified retirement; Bismarck is at Friedrichsruh. New men crowd the scene—clever organizers, bright and adroit parliamentarians, competent administrators, but still fashioned quite of our own clay—busy new men whom we may look at without hurting our eyes.

For the first time, therefore, it is possible to study this prodigious new Germany, its rulers and its people, in a practical way, without being either dazzled by the disproportionate brilliancy of a few individuals or drawn into side-paths after picturesque unrealities.

Three years of this new reign have shown us Germany by daylight instead of under the glamour and glare of camp fires and triumphal illuminations. We see now that the Hohenzollern stands out in the far front, and that the other German royalties, Wendish, Slavonic, heirs of Wittekind, portentously ancient barbaric dynasties of all sorts, are only vaguely discernible in the background. During the lifetime of the old Kaiser it seemed possible that their eclipse might be of only a temporary nature. Nowhere can such an idea be cherished now. Young William dwarfs them all by comparison even more strikingly than did his grandfather.

They all came to Berlin to do him homage at the opening of the Reichstag, which inaugurated his reign on June 25, 1888. They will never make so brave a show again; even then they twinkled like poor tallow dips beside the shining personality of their young Prussian chief.

Almost all of them are of royal lines older than that of the Hohenzollerns. Five of the principal personages among them —the King of Saxony, the Regent representing Bavaria's crazy King, the heir-apparent representing the semi-crazy King of Wurtemberg, the Grand Duke of Baden, and the Grand Duke of Hesse-Darmstadt—owe their titles in their present form to Napoleon, who paid their ancestors in this cheap coin for their wretched treason and cowardice in joining with him to crush and dismember Prussia. Now they are at the feet of Prussia, not indeed in the posture of conquered equals, but as liveried political subordinates. No such wiping out of sovereign authorities and emasculation of sovereign dignities has been seen before since Louis XI consolidated France 500 years ago. Let us glance at some of

these vanishing royalties for a moment, that we may the better measure the altitude to which the Hohenzollern has climbed.

There was a long time during the last century when people looked upon Saxony as the most powerful and important State in the Protestant part of Germany. It is an Elector of Saxony who shines forth in history as Luther's best friend and resolute protector. For more than a hundred years thereafter Saxony led in the armed struggles of Protestantism to maintain itself against the leagued Catholic powers.

Then, in 1694, there ascended the electoral throne the cleverest and most showy man of the whole Albertine family, who for nearly thirty years was to hold the admiring attention of Europe. We can see now that it was a purblind and debased Europe which believed August *der Starke* to be a great man; but in his own times there was no end to what he thought of himself or to what others thought of him. It was regarded as a superb stroke of policy when, in 1697, he got himself elected King of Poland—a promotion which inspired the jealous Elector of Branden-berg to proclaim himself King of Prussia four years later. August abjured Protestantism to obtain the Polish crown, and his descendants are Catholics to this day, though Saxony is strongly Protestant. August did many wonderful things in his time—made Dresden the superb city of palaces and museums it is, among other matters, and was the father of 354 natural children, as his own proud computation ran. A tremendous fellow, truly, who liked to be called the Louis XIV of Germany, and tried his best to live up to the ideal!

Contemporary observers would have laughed at the idea that Frederick William, the surly, bearish Prussian King, with his tobacco orgies and giant grenadiers, was worth considering beside the brilliant, luxurious, kingly August. Ah, “gay eupeptic son of Belial,” where is thy dynasty now?

There is to-day a King of Saxony, descended six removes from this August, who is distinctly the most interesting and valuable of these minor sovereigns. He is a sagacious, prudent, soldierlike man, nominal ruler of over three millions of people, actual Field Marshal in the German Army which has a Hohenzollern for its head. Although he really did some of the best fighting which the Franco-German war called forth, nobody outside his own court and German military circles knows much about it, or cares particularly about him. The very fact of his rank prevents his generalship securing popular recognition. If he had been merely of noble birth, or even a commoner, the chances are that he would now be chief of the German General Staff instead of Count von Schlieffen. Being only a king, his merits as a commander are comprehended alone by experts.

There is just a bare possibility that this King Albert may be forced by circumstances out of his present obscurity. He is only sixty-three years old, and if a war should come within the next decade and involve defeat to the German Army in the field, there would be a strong effort made by the other subsidiary German sovereigns to bring him to the front as Generalissimo.

As it is, his advice upon military matters is listened to in Berlin more than is generally known, but in other respects his position is a melancholy one. Even the kindliness with

which the Kaisers have personally treated him since 1870, cannot but wear to him the annoying guise of patronage. He was a man of thirty-eight when his father, King John, was driven out of Dresden by Prussian troops, along with the royal family, and when for weeks it seemed probable that the whole kingdom of Saxony would be annexed to Prussia. Bismarck's failure to insist upon this was bitterly criticised in Berlin at the time, and Gustav Frey-tag actually wrote a book deprecating the further independent existence of Saxony. Freytag and the Prussians generally confessed their mistake after the young Saxon Crown Prince's splendid achievement at Sedan; but that could scarcely wipe from his memory what had gone before, and even now, after the lapse of a quarter century, King Albert's delicate, clear-cut, white-whiskered face still bears the impress of melancholy stamped on it by the humiliations of 1866.

Two other kings lurk much further back in the shadow of the Hohenzollern—idiotic Otto of Bavaria and silly Charles of Wurtemberg. Of the former much has been written, by way of complement to the picturesque literature evoked by the tragedy of his strange brother Louis's death. In these two brothers the fantastic Wittelsbach blood, filtering down from the Middle Ages through strata of princely scrofula and imperial luxury, clotted rankly in utter madness.

As for the King of Würtemberg, whose undignified experiences in the hands of foreign adventurers excited a year or two ago the wonderment and mirth of mankind, he also pays the grievous penalty of heredity's laws. Writing thirty years back, Carlyle commented in this fashion upon the royal house of Stuttgart: "There is something of the

abstruse in all these Beutelsbachers, from Ulric downwards —a mute *ennui*, an inexorable obstinacy, a certain streak of natural gloom which no illumination can abolish; articulate intellect defective: hence a strange, stiff perversity of conduct visible among them, often marring what wisdom they have. It is the royal stamp of Fate put upon these men —what are called fateful or fated men." * The present King Charles was personally an unknown quantity when this picture of his house was drawn. He is an old man now, and decidedly the most "abstruse" of his whole family.

* "History of Friedrich II, of Prussia," book vii. chapter vi.

Thus these two ancient dynasties of Southern Germany, which helped to make history for so many centuries, have come down into the mud. There is an elderly regent uncle in Bavaria who possesses sense and respectable abilities; and in Würtemberg there is an heir-apparent of forty-three, the product of a marriage between first cousins, who is said to possess ordinary intelligence. These will in time succeed to the thrones which lunacy and asininity hold now in commission, but no one expects that they will do more than render commonplace what is now grotesquely impossible.

Of another line which was celebrated a thousand years ago, and which flared into martial prominence for a little in its dying days, when this century was young, nothing whatever is left. The Fighting Brunswickers are all gone.

They had a fair right to this name, had the Guelphs of the old homestead, for of the forty-five of them buried in the crypt of the Brunswick Burg Kirche nine fell on the battlefield. This direct line died out seven years ago with a curiously-original old Duke who bitterly resented the new

order of things, and took many whimsical ways of showing his wrath. In the sense that he scorned to live in remodeled Germany, and defied Prussia by ostentatiously exhibiting his sympathy for the exiled Hanoverian house, he too may be said to have died fighting. The collateral Guelphs who survive in other lands are anything but fighters. The Prince of Wales is the foremost living male of the family, and Bismarck's acrid jeer that he was the only European Crown Prince whom one did not occasionally meet on the battlefield, though unjustly cruel, serves to point the difference between his placid walk of life and the stormy careers of his mother's progenitors. Another Guelph, who is *de jure* heir to both Brunswick and Hanover—Ernest, Duke of Cumberland—has a larger strain of the ancestral Berserker blood, but alas! no weapon remains for him but obdurate sulkiness. He buries himself in his sullen retreat at Gmunden in uncompromising rage, and the powers at Berlin have left off striving to placate him with money—his relatives not even daring now to broach the subject to him.

And so there is an end to the Fighting Bruns-wickers, and a Hohenzollern has been put in their stead. Prince Albert of Prussia—a good, wooden, ceremonious man of large stature, who stands straight in jack boots and cuirass and is invaluable as an imposing family figure at christenings and funerals—reigns as Regent in Brunswick. So omnipotent are the Hohenzollerns grown that he was placed there without a murmur of protest—and when the time comes for the Prussian octopus to gather in this duchy, that also will be done in silence.

Of the sixteen remaining sovereigns-below-the-salt, the Grand Duke of Baden is a fairly-able and wholly-amiable man, much engrossed in these latter days in the fact that his wife is the Kaiser's aunt. This makes him feel like one of the family, and he takes the aggrandizement of the Hohenzollerns as quite a personal compliment. The venerable Duke Ernest, of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, has an active mind and certain qualities which under other conditions might have made him a power in Germany. But Bismarck was far too rough an antagonist for him to cope with openly, and he fell into the feeble device of writing political pamphlets anonymously against the existing order of things, using the ingenuity of a jealous woman to circulate them and denying their authorship before he was accused. This has, of course, been fatal to his influence in the empire. Duke George, of Saxe-Meiningen, is another able and accomplished prince, who has devoted his energies and fortune to the establishment and perfecting of a very remarkable theatrical company. The rest are mere dead wood—presiding over dull little country Courts, wearing Prussian uniforms at parades and reviews, and desiring nothing else so much as the reception of invitations to visit Berlin and shine in the reflected radiance of the Hohenzollern's smile.

The word "invitations" does indeed suggest that the elderly Prince Henry XIV, of Reuss-Schleiz, should receive separate mention, as having but recently abandoned a determined feud with Prussia. It is true that Reuss-Schleiz has only 323 miles of territory and 110,000 people, but that did not prevent the feud being of an embittered, not to say

menacing, character. When the invitations were sent out for the Berlin palace celebration of old Kaiser Wilhelm's ninetieth birthday, in 1887, by some accident Henry of Reuss-Schleiz was overlooked. There are so many of these Reusses, all named Henry, all descended from Henry the Fowler, and all standing so erect with pride that they bend backward! The mistake was discovered in a day or two and a belated invitation sent, which Henry grumblingly accepted. On the appointed day he arrived at the palace in Berlin and went up to the banqueting hall with the other princes. Being extremely near-sighted, he made a tour of the table, peering through his spectacles to discover his name-card. Horror of horrors! No place had been provided for him, and everybody in the room had observed him searching for one! Trembling with wrath, he stalked out, brushing aside the chamberlains who essayed to pacify him, and during that reign he never came to Berlin again. Not death itself could mollify him, for when Kaiser Wilhelm died the implacable Henry XIV, who personally owns most of his principality, refused his subjects a grant of land on which to rear a monument to his memory. But even he is reconciled to Berlin now.

Thus with practical completeness had the ancient dynasties of old Germany been subordinated to and absorbed by the ascendency of the Hohenzollerns, when young William II stepped upon the throne. Thus, too, with this passing glance at their abasement or annihilation, the way is cleared for us to study the young chief of this mighty and consolidated Empire, to examine his personality and his power, and, by tracing their growth during the first three

years of his reign, to forecast their ultimate mark upon the history of his time.

CHAPTER II.—WILLIAM’S BOYHOOD

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