

A MENACE TO CIVILIZATION

BY HAROLD BERMAN

THREE times daily, with the regularity of meals in any well-appointed household, the despairing cry goes up that "civilization is in danger" and that foundations of our social structure are about to give way, while the structure itself is ready to totter to a fall. The alarm is raised, the tocsin is sounded so that the poor inhabitants of this much-shattered earth may rush to arms and save this repeatedly-menaced civilization of ours.

When, however, we pause long enough in our tracks to seek for the cause of this threatened danger and are getting ready to resharpen our rusting bayonets, to get ready our hand-grenades, flame-throwers and tin hats so that we may, like honest and patriotic folk, rush to the defence of the thrice-daily endangered damozel, we discover that the call invariably comes from the identical quarter, though the echo reverberates far and wide afield. The French Foreign Office and Press Bureaus are evidently provided with excellent acoustics. What is euphoniously referred to as a menace really and properly means that two nations, consisting of Two Hundred Million souls, are trying desperately to get from under the crushing boot of a victor; it also means, a world in agony trying to emancipate itself from the ambition-crazed and victory-drunk autocracy formed of the Unholy Alliance between bankers and professional soldiers.

This blind and power-drunk clique, which evidently adopted the motto of the pre-revolutionary noblesse,—“After us the deluge”—is mistakenly supposed by some superficial observers to be merely the outgrowth of the abnormal experiences of the recent war, with all the harrowing Odyssey of suffering and the destruction that followed in the wake of that long-drawn-out test of endurance. The French, just now busily engaged with their brigand-errand in the Ruhr, certainly would be the very last to shatter this illusion. But this assumption, is absurd on the very face of it, and can only pro-

voke a smile from the student of French history, of French ambitions, wars, conquests and general policies.

There is no more pathetic sight than that of the undistinguished, plodding man of the every-day world who, once guided by blind destiny to some valorous deed, expects from us eternal homage, after he has sunk back into his every-day mediocrity and, mayhap, worse. Even more ludicrous is the plea of the one who demands love and homage for his all-but-worthless self as a reward for the achievements of his forefathers who have long since been gathered to the dust. On such an occasion, if we but discover the signs of misbehavior on the part of the importunate ne'er-do-well, we simply and unmistakably indicate the exhaustion of our patience with him and beg to be excused.

France had been chosen by a blind fate, in the course of a long career of autocracy and the rule of a shameless, as well as heartless, *noblesse*, to guide the other European Nations to the road of *partial* freedom. Before that eventful day there had been the great examples of the British uprising of 1648—when a kingly head fell on the scaffold—and the American Revolution. It is questionable, indeed, whether the French Revolution was due to the conscious formulation of *abstract* theories only, or whether it was mainly due to the *concrete* facts of the presence of an unlimited and utter heartlessness and lack of worldly wisdom on the part of the landed aristocracy and the governing cliques chosen from among them. For the postulate is thoroughly established that the French feudal system, surviving in its pristine glory up to the very day of the revolution, was the cruellest of all those remaining in force in the western and central parts of Europe at that day. The French peasant was the most heavily taxed—to the extent, in fact, of eighty-two per cent of his income,—the most remorselessly exploited, the most shamelessly treated and the least regarded, in a human sense, among all the peasantries of Europe.

The long reign of Louis XIV—“*la grande monarche*”—held the yet-partly conscious people together by the glamour of its glory on the many fields of battle, by the splendor of its exquisite court and its consummate and overwhelming knowledge of the weakness of the average man and his susceptibility to extraneous impressions. With the death of this consummate master of stage-craft, the undermined state of the foundations of the glamorous structure began to show plainly to the discerning eye, while it also became evident that no amount of shoring or bolstering would prolong its days. Doom was plainly and largely written on its walls by the invisible

hand of Time, and it was plain that a new structure, built on sounder foundations, must be substituted in its place. And then it was that the torrent did indeed break loose upon the nation, washing away the erstwhile oppressive *noblesse* and the landed aristocracy. That deluge to which they had frequently referred to with so much insuance and *sang froid* as apt to come *after* them now came before their day was done, and washed away all their iniquities in the baptismal font filled with seething human blood.

But there was, for all that, no French nation at the time, properly speaking; if we understand by the term a body of men conscious of its manhood and worth, possessing a clear conception of its desires and future needs. The masses had been far too debased for that by centuries of inhuman treatment at the hands of its many overlords. Its final outbreak simply remained one of the periodic outbreaks of one of the inanimate forces of nature—a river breaking its dam, the pent-up forces of a volcano blowing off its cone or one of the Equatorial storms breaking, in torrential destructiveness, upon a parching earth. The theorists who wished to guide this elemental force and confine it to its bank, as well as those who had prepared the soil for the coming of it—Mirabeau, Montesquieu, Rousseau, and the few others—practically all belonged to this very class of effete noblesse, and were also soon swept aside by those who had not only experienced in their soul some theoretical wrongs under the *Ancient Regime*, but had felt the *concrete* and actual sting of the lash on their own backs. And then, as we all know, the Revolution veered away from its original path and proclaimed professions and sought to engage in foreign wars, faithful to the nation's traditional love of martial glory and conquest, and thus prepared the way for the coming of the "Man on Horseback," Bonaparte.

Napoleon was the first among conquerors to realize the value to the conqueror of bringing freedom to the masses of a conquered nation. He knew well, indeed, that amongst the oppressed peoples of Europe of that day (Nationalistic theories hadn't been invented yet) there would be many who would welcome the pill of Equality and Freedom, even if tied to the sharp edge of a bayonet, and even though the latter did somewhat unpleasantly tickle their throats. He also well knew that by conferring a modicum of democracy, and the rights implied in it, on this mass, he was thus erecting a stone wall between them and their hated masters. He acted thus, most likely, from motives of enlightened self-interest, in contradistinction to his opponents who hastened to put up the bars of division, the moment the blows of Thor's hammer ceased, and thus behaved,

with the characteristic selfishness of the porker who, by driving all the smaller piglets away from the trough and swallowing all the swill, simply hastens the day of his own slaughter.

With the fall of Napoleon, there came a backsliding to the standard French misrule under the mediocrities, Louis XVIII and Louis Philippe, "the Citizen King," culminating in the ambitious and dangerous Napoleon III, together with whom Ultramontane Catholicism jumped into the saddle, and the suppression of all free thought and action in the realms of faith, politics and the economic life soon followed. It then looked as if the nation that had put so much hope into the heart of Eighteenth Century Europe, and was the first to point the path of freedom to a continent was about to perish from the earth and to slide back permanently into the arms of an effete autocracy when Blind Destiny conjured up once more one of its agents to perform the unwitting Cæsarian operation and restore to the world some of its robust common sense.

The role of Germany in modern history is a curious one. Germany is the homunculus among nations. She hardly ever *consciously* sought for freedom, if we except the brief days of the "Young Germany" movement under Jung, and least of all did seek it her forty-odd petty Kinglets and Dukelets with their Lilliputian courts and Punch-and-Judy Majesty, or Bismarck and his followers. And yet, it was the will of a capricious Fate that she, above all others, bring freedom to Europe, that she alone shall use the battering ram on the walls of the last ghetto in Europe (Rome); that she, and only she, shall be the valiant who was to level to the earth the Temporal powers of the popes and abolish forever the anomaly of a State ruled by a Church. In 1917, it was again the hammer blows of the German armies that brought the overthrow of the Russian autocracy and brought freedom to one hundred and fifty millions of men who had long sought it in vain—again a happy eventuality quite undreamt of, and most likely even unwished for, by the unwitting tools in the hands of Fate, not to speak of a free Poland, a more-or-less Independent Lithuania, and, by dragging Turkey into the War, a free Palestine. All these are achievements which were far from the minds of the German statesmen and military leaders, yet they were accomplished through their plans and prowess, while their mouths never professed democracy nor indulged in any high-sounding phrases with hollow meanings.

France, on the very contrary, ever has the slogan of her revolutionary days on her lips, yet had she never fought for freedom as such, nor was she ever instrumental in bringing it to any people dur-

ing the entire past century. France has been compared to a hysterical woman, and the symptoms of hysteria are: an exaggerated nervous tension, constant irritability and unprovoked outbursts, the sublimation of petty things into great and weighty ones; the making mountains out of mole-hills and the creating of imaginary barriers in one's path. In days gone by one afflicted with it was considered as possessed by a devil and was chained to the wall, starved and beaten. At the present day we know better. We have also grown more humane and we try to soothe the patient's nerves instead of irritating them.

Far be it from me to suggest that the antiquated method of treating this aberration is what this hysterical woman needs, though defeat—when not too crushing—is usually followed by contrition, by a searching of hearts and a general house-cleaning in national ideals as well as in national economy. In this connection let it be parenthetically remarked that, in an ethical and spiritual sense, if not in a material one, it was the *defeated nation* that won the war, and the spoils, in this case, do not belong to the victor. For, if we see general reaction, greed, cupidity and soul-destroying hatreds making their hydra-headed appearance in the lands of the victors, while crushed Germany and dismembered Austria are engaged in throwing overboard, together with their armaments, the old Imperialistic lumber and the hampering survivals of the effete Middle Ages while they are also and at the same time busily engaged in introducing new Ideals in education and the economic and social realms, then we may say that they are merely passing through the fire-test, to emerge eventually much purified from the dross that still clings to the rest of Europe.

The Jews have been a defeated people for ever so many ages. But the probability is that had they remained in undisturbed possession of their land and had no interference from any of their more powerful neighbors, they would have gradually slunk into sloth and eventually have shared the decay of all the old kingdoms and nations of their day.

After the crushing defeats of 1806 and 1807, Jung arose to lead the youth of Germany to a renewed life. He thought that the best road to a National Renaissance lay not in teaching the goose-step to the rising generation but, on the contrary, in teaching it to love *nature*, the simple life and the great outdoors. He would assemble parties of the students (*Burschenschaften*) and march to a neighboring hill where, tramping barefooted and bareheaded, singing the songs of old Germany, cooking their simple fare over a few hand-

gathered faggots and sleeping under the open blue skies, they would learn to love the soil of their fathers and become *one* with its spirit. Events proved him supremely right, so that when the test came the youth of Germany was found to be girded with the armor that cannot be penetrated with the weapons made of steel and wielded by a hand guided by hate and greed.

France at the present day *is* Europe, or at least a great portion of it, being especially predominant in the new-born States and Nations. It is by her *fat* that the most of them were created, bolstered up in the moment of their weakness, supplied with modern weapons and told to rely upon these and none other tools in the art of governing the peoples—many of them of alien blood and culture—entrusted to their tender mercies. She *is* Poland's Czecho-Slovakia's, Greater Roumania's and even Hungary's Godmother. She is indeed their "*Alter ego*" so that what they do, either of good or evil, is really her work done by proxy. She is also the mentor and guide of the Arabs in Syria and Palestine, Damascus and the Lebanon, the inspirer of the reactionary policies of their rulers as well as of the bloody vandal deeds of their masses. The "frog" in the fable was not content to croak along in his marshy pool but must needs become a bull and rule the range. The consequence was fatal injury to himself before long.

Speaking specifically, Europe's sufferings are aggravated and prolonged by France's Imperialistic ventures and megalomaniac fatuities. A small and weak Poland, unsupported by French bayonets and unbolstered by her credits, would never have perpetrated the outrages upon the helpless which have so scandalized the human race. The Arab *Fellaheen* would never have added the world "pogrom" to their meagre vocabulary, while the newly-occupied Rhineland and the Ruhr would have not awakened to the clash of arms, the Babel of quarreling voices, internal strifes and civil wars. One of the greatest tragedies in human history would have been on the high road to a permanent solution and the curtain ready to be rung down *sine die* over the stage of a nation's and a world's misery.

But hope for us, as well as for the rest of harassed humanity, lies in the unexpected *rapprochement* between Russia and Germany, the treaty recently negotiated by the two so-called outcasts who perceived that salvation for them lay in combining their paradoxical strength-in-weakness. It is once more the case of the blind man and the lame one who had been left to guard an orchard, the owner thereof feeling certain that neither one of them would be able to climb the trees and eat of their fruit. But what did they do? The

blind man climbed upon the shoulders of his lame colleague and by the aid of the latter's directions, helped himself and his friend to the most luscious specimens in the garden. Even so will it be in this instance. These two despised ones among the nations will now be enabled to get some of the fruits from the Tree of Life, the one climbing upon the back of the other and ultimately will force their seemingly virtuous adversaries to share their all with them.

There is reason to believe that England, while pretending to be surprised as well as shocked by this supposed act of "perfidy," is really secretly gratified at the result achieved, as this Alliance will undoubtedly tend to weaken her former Ally and present-day adversary and thus restore a much-needed balance to the chaotic affairs of the World. And gossip does indeed connect her Statesmen with this coup in numerous ways.

Should this treaty of amity and concord between Russia and Germany be allowed to stand—and it will, by all present indications—there will be a check given to the cause of Reaction in the entire world. France will find herself isolated, her orders, based on brute strength only, defied by her erstwhile vassals, and will also find herself deserted by America, who is even now being drawn ever tighter into the clasp of the British nation. She will then find herself forced by inexorable circumstance to reduce her armies, remove her strangle hold from the throat of the conquered, withdraw her support from Hungary and Poland, loosen her grip upon the Arabs and will eventually become the boaster of a Pyrrhic victory—illusory and unsubstantial—while her great edifice of world-hegemony, reared by aid of the bayonet and civic reaction, will vanish, as but another of the evil dreams, from humanity's consciousness!