

DENMARK

CHAPTER I

AN OUTLINE OF DANISH HISTORY

THE VIKINGS. Although Denmark is one of the oldest Kingdoms of Europe, there is little authentic history of events in the country before the ninth century. Tradition and legend, however, are abundant, and some of these old stories are highly fanciful—as, for instance, one which pictures Noah disembarking from the Ark on the coast of Jutland. Others, preserved in sagas, or told by early chroniclers, corroborate one another in the general presentation of heroic and often blood-thirsty chieftains (Vikings) warring among themselves, or, in search of ‘living-room’ and adventure, raiding the coasts and river channels of other countries. Massacres were not at all uncommon, and the story of Hamlet as recorded by a Danish chronicler ends in a far larger number of deaths than does the version which appears to have been used by Shakespeare; the climax is, in fact, the trapping of a banqueting party who are all burnt to death by the avenging Prince. The people of to-day are the descendants of these extravagant warriors, and their history shows a gradual development from the role of a people feared by their neighbours to that of the most pacific country in Europe.

Denmark adopted Christianity later than other

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northern countries of Europe. While Charlemagne was baptizing by force the peoples whom he had conquered, the Danes continued to be pagans. During the latter half of the eighth century there begin to be increasing references to the Danes in the annals of other European nations. They were feared throughout northern Europe where, as time went on, they appeared in increasing numbers as formidable raiders who sailed up the estuaries of rivers and made new homes for themselves at the point of the sword. As a result a new phrase was temporarily added to the Anglo-Saxon Litany: 'From the fury of the Danes, deliver us, Oh Lord.'

In England a great part of the country fell into their hands, and the invaders were only checked by the leadership and strategy of King Alfred the Great who won a decisive victory in 878. The Danes then sued for peace, and thirty of their leading men came to Alfred to be baptized. Under the ensuing agreement the Danes were confined within a prescribed region on the east coast—the Danelaw—and there they made permanent settlement.

Rather more than a hundred years later, however, another English King, Ethelred the Unready, did not fare so well. He tried to buy off the Danes with money raised especially for this purpose (Danegeld), and finally, by the senseless massacre of a number of Danes, including the sister of the Danish King, he provoked King Sweyn of Denmark into an avenging mission which resulted in the sacking and pillaging of East Anglia and southern England. Defeated and his forces routed, Ethelred was obliged to flee to Normandy.

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CANUTE THE GREAT. Sweyn died before he could enjoy his triumphs and his young son Canute became King of England, while his eldest son Harold succeeded to the throne of Denmark. By marrying Ethelred's widow, Canute the Great (as he was afterwards called) united the two royal families of England and Denmark, and by a conciliatory policy towards the English and a refusal to favour the Danes, he won the approbation of the English people. Later, Canute succeeded to the Danish throne, and a successful expedition to Norway ended by his being acclaimed King of that country also. Thus for a short time England, Denmark and Norway were united under one King. Danish rule over England ended shortly after Canute's death when the throne reverted to the English line of Kings.

One result of the temporary union of Denmark and England was that a number of English monks went to found monasteries in Denmark, thus helping to consolidate the original missionary work of Ansgar, a learned and pious monk who had introduced Christianity into the country about the year 826. But despite the growing influence of the new religion the eleventh and twelfth centuries were a period of great internal disturbance, and it was only when Valdemar gained the undisputed sovereignty of Denmark in 1157, after the violent deaths of his rivals, that better days set in.

DENMARK UNDER THE VALDEMARS. Under Valdemar I, Canute IV and Valdemar II, the country enjoyed a hundred years of prosperity. The King's power was consolidated through conquests in the

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Baltic states during wars with the Wends who used to raid the provinces in the south of Sweden, then under the Danish crown. In the south, the Danish frontier was pushed as far as the Elbe. Denmark was thus for a time a great power.

Absalon, Bishop of Roskilde and Archbishop of Lund, Denmark's first great statesman (1128–1201), was both a spiritual and military leader at this time. Having studied at the University of Paris himself, he encouraged his countrymen to study law and theology there, thereby strengthening the cultural bonds between the west of Europe and the north. The clergy acquired power and wealth through many great gifts and bequests, and new monasteries as well as churches sprang up, many of which are still standing. It was also the beginning of the age of chivalry in Denmark. The feudal system had not yet developed, and the nobility, though of no mean influence, served the King rather as officials than as feudal lords. Many of the best-known Danish folk songs date from this time of the Valdemars. Written anonymously, they were passed on from mouth to mouth and were sung as accompaniments to dances in the Danish castles. It was during this period, also, that Saxo Grammaticus was persuaded by Absalon to write his famous chronicles of early Danish history.

Danish horses were much in demand at this time, especially in England and Germany. Another source of wealth was the great herring fisheries on the coast of Skaane. Here the fish were so numerous that they could be scooped up with the bare hands.

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THE POWER OF THE NOBILITY. Internal dissensions broke out again after the death of Valdemar II in 1241 and, in fact, Denmark was the scene of almost uninterrupted strife for the next three hundred years. Apart from trouble with her neighbours and her acquired territories there was a long drawn-out struggle between the King and the Church and also between the King and the nobility. At the beginning of the period three sovereigns met their death by assassination, and during the whole time hardly any held the throne in safety and confidence. A few, like King Valdemar IV and his daughter Margaret, were able to bring benefits to the country. The real power in the land was the nobility, and eventually the Crown became subservient to the Council of State, consisting of the nobility and the chief clergy. It was this Council which appointed each new sovereign. At the end of the sixteenth century Denmark was ruled by an aristocracy. The power of the nobility had been reinforced by the Reformation, for although the nobles had at first resisted the religious change, the final result was the exclusion of the bishops from the Council of State, leaving it a lay assembly. In the meantime the condition of the peasants had deteriorated. Many of them had lost their independence to become tenants or mere serfs and they bore the chief burden of taxation.

WARS WITH SWEDEN. Under Christian IV (1588–1648), the most popular of Danish Kings, partly on account of the engaging simplicity of his personality, but chiefly for his great bravery in battle and devotion to his country, the

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Council of State, although outwardly as strong as ever, was beginning to lose its prestige. The national assemblies which were summoned for the purpose of approving legislation voiced widespread criticism, but it was the disastrous wars with Sweden in the reign of this King and more especially in that of his successor, Frederick III, which finally left the Council of State entirely discredited. The attempt of the Swedes to conquer Denmark brought King and people more closely together, and when the enemy besieged Copenhagen the King led the citizens in preparing the defences and personally took part in sorties against the besiegers. The conflict ended with a Danish victory at Nyborg at the end of 1659 and the death of the Swedish King at the beginning of the following year.

ABSOLUTE MONARCHY. A few months later representatives of all classes of the people, except the peasants, were summoned to a meeting in Copenhagen to furnish money for the payment of the war debt, for the maintenance of the army and for the expenses of the Court. The clergy and townspeople were united in a demand for a just sharing of the burden, but the nobility, who had hitherto been exempt from taxation, stubbornly refused to bear a tax on their consumption of food. As a result of this, the other sections of the community offered Denmark to the King as a hereditary Kingdom, similar to the existing Kingdoms of Sweden, England, France and Spain. The Council of State declared that the deputies of the people and of the clergy had no right to make this offer

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and refused at first to countenance it. The King, however, finally took his stand against the nobles and was ready to be proclaimed a hereditary monarch by the townspeople and clergy alone, whereupon the Council was obliged to comply (1660). Thus the long period of aristocratic rule ended and was replaced by an absolute monarchy. Having asserted themselves against the nobles, the deputies of the church and towns did not, however, form themselves into a regular assembly. They did not, in fact, meet again for two hundred years.

Nevertheless, the King's counsellors were henceforth drawn largely from the new middle class. One of the first burghers to rise to this high position was Griffenfeld, the son of a wine merchant. Under his able statesmanship the finances of the country were reorganized and foreign trade developed. East and West Indies trading companies received concessions and another company received the monopoly of trade and fishing in Greenland. Foreign capital was given the opportunity to build factories, and the merchant fleet was doubled in the space of two years. Eventually Griffenfeld overreached himself and his intrigues resulted in his imprisonment.

HUMANITARIANISM AND NEUTRALITY. In the meantime, Denmark continued to be involved in wars with her neighbours, resulting in an increasing burden of taxation on her people. The new middle class produced landed proprietors who were as anxious to avoid taxation and to exact forced labour from the peasants as had been the old nobility. In 1733 a measure was introduced which made

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every farmer's son from his fourteenth to his thirty-sixth year liable either to military service or to work on the land. However, as the eighteenth century advanced, Denmark took a new turn both in foreign relations and in internal affairs. To other countries she adopted an attitude of neutrality which has ever since remained the keynote of her foreign policy. At home the lot of the peasants was finally improved by the abolition of the *Stavnsbaand* in 1788 and the gradual establishment of a free peasantry. The same spirit which revolutionized the lot of the peasants inspired the decision to end the slave trade in the Danish West Indies in 1792. Denmark was the first country to take this step and Britain was the first to follow her example. Another sign of the times was the establishment of the freedom of the press and the provision of free schools. By the end of the eighteenth century Denmark was one of the most liberal countries in Europe: it was also, through its seafaring trade, one of the most prosperous.

WARS WITH ENGLAND. Meanwhile, the Napoleonic wars kept the Western powers occupied; but the Danes, if they wished to sail the seas at all, could not escape being involved. The Danish Government started to convoy Danish merchantmen as a countermeasure against British inspection of neutral vessels, and the whole matter assumed very serious proportions. At this juncture, Russia, who was interested in obstructing Britain, suggested an alliance with Denmark, under the terms of which the partners were to defend their neutrality. In this difficult situation for a small state, Denmark

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chose not to offend Russia, with the inevitable result that on April 2, 1801, Admirals Parker and Nelson appeared off Copenhagen with a powerful British fleet. The Danes fought bravely, but the British gained the day, and Denmark had to sign harsh peace terms.

A few years later, Denmark's determination to remain neutral led to a second armed conflict with Britain. Fearing that Napoleon might demand the use of the Danish navy—a demand that so small a country would be powerless to resist—the British Government offered Denmark an alliance on condition that the fleet was handed over to Britain, to be returned intact after the war. The Danish Crown Prince Regent (later Frederick VI) indignantly refused this suggestion and hostilities followed. The British landed in Zealand, besieged the capital and, after a long and violent bombardment which laid parts of Copenhagen in ruins, the Danes were forced to surrender. In a fit of anger King Frederick VI ranged himself on the side of Napoleon and later signed a treaty of mutual assistance with France. Denmark's consequent participation in the Napoleonic wars was costly. When the Danish Government signed the Peace of Kiel in 1814, the long-standing union with Norway had been broken and that country was transferred to Swedish rule. Denmark itself was impoverished by the war and the stagnation of trade.

LIMITED MONARCHY. This state of affairs produced criticism of the absolute monarchy and, following the impetus of the French Revolution, there was a general demand for a more democratic

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form of government. In response to this the King instituted four Assemblies, in different parts of the country. Their function was to 'provide the King and his successors with the full knowledge of everything that could contribute to the welfare of his dear and faithful subjects'. In other words, they could discuss and advise, but they had no authority. Moreover, they met in private and were not the freely elected representatives of the people. In the short reign of the next King, Christian VIII, the movement for a new Constitution, sponsored by the Liberal party, gathered momentum and it gained strength from widespread resentment of restrictions on the freedom of the press. Christian VIII resisted the popular will over the Constitution question, but introduced reforms on his own account. These included a reorganization of the army, the introduction of a national budget and, most important of all, the institution of local self-government for the towns and countryside. This was a time of important developments for Denmark, not the least of which was the founding of the first Folk High School¹ by Grundtvig. It was also a time when the Scandinavian states seemed to have become aware of their common interests and racial bond. This growing sentiment was both expressed and stimulated by the poems of Öhenschläger. But the bloodless revolution which gave Denmark the much desired new Constitution and changed the absolute power of the King into a limited monarchy did not come about until 1849. Henceforth there was a national parliament, the *Rigsdag*, consisting of two houses, the *Folketing* and

¹ See Chapter III.