INTRODUCTION

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

I

A MAN who was born in the same year as Shakespeare and was alive at the accession of Charles I must have lived to see many changes. His adult life would have covered the whole of the period of that great outburst of literary and dramatic activity which is generally grouped together under the designation "Elizabethan," although it extended, roughly, from the publication of *The Shepheardes Calender* in 1579 to the death of James I. But the average man was, then as now, doubtless more deeply stirred by events that were political and national rather than literary, and the patriotism which found its expression in Shakespeare's historical plays, no less than in *The Faerie Queene* or Raleigh's account of the last fight of the *Revenge*, reached its apexes in three great outbursts of national rejoicing. These were the defeat of the Spanish Armada, the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, and the return of Prince Charles from Madrid in 1624 without a Spanish bride. The third event aroused the last manifestation of the intense spirit that had animated Elizabethan England; thenceforward the eyes of the nation were turned inwards upon itself, and with the growth of the power of Parliament domestic affairs consumed all those energies that had previously found a wider expression.

The fears which the defeat of the Armada in 1588 dispelled for Protestantism in England returned with greater strength in the reign of James I. The counter-Reformation had won great successes abroad, and the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War seemed to many to threaten the complete overthrow of the Protestant cause. The King's

ambitions to hold the balance between the two creeds, and to reconcile them sufficiently so that Catholic and Protestant nations could live together in peace, filled the average Englishman with dismay, for to him the thing was as impossible as a truce between God and the devil. The Gunpowder Plot had arisen from the disappointment of the Catholic hopes in the new sovereign, and, although subsequent events showed that James was willing to make considerable concessions, the memory of the Plot rankled in the minds of his subjects, and would have kept alive the popular hatred against the Catholics, even if the growth of their power abroad had not raised new fears.

There was a nobility of purpose behind James' diplomatic efforts that few of his contemporaries were capable of understanding, but his weakness and his many vacillations made his efforts unavailing, so that eventually his ineffectual embassies became the scorn of Europe. It is difficult, too, to distinguish the noble motives from the sordid ones, for James' desire to secure peace through a marriage alliance of the greatest Catholic with the greatest Protestant reigning house cannot be altogether separated from his desire to obtain a large dowry, with which he hoped to be able to pay off some of his debts. It is no wonder, then, that the King was misunderstood by his subjects, whose instincts were still guided by a fear of Spanish domination. They looked askance at, and finally execrated, the influence of Gondomar, and their mistrust deepened still further at the favours shown to the Catholics. In 1622 orders were issued to restrain preachers from expressing their feelings too openly from the pulpit, and at the same time large numbers of Catholic prisoners were released:

> the Jayles flew open (without miracle)
> And let the locusts out, those dangerous Flies
> Whose propertie is to burne Corne with touching;
> The Heretique Granaries feele it to this minute,
> And now they haue got amongst the Countrie-Crops

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> They stick so fast to the conuerted Eares
> The lowdest Tempest that Authoritie Rowzes
> Will hardlie shake 'em off.[1]

Pamphlets denouncing Catholic and Spaniard poured from the presses; advice was proffered and strictures were passed on the King's policy from every side; and suppression only drove men like Thomas Scott[2] across the water to Holland, where they continued their pamphleteering with unabated vigour.

When it was learnt that Charles and Buckingham had secretly departed on February 18, 1623 on their adventurous journey to Madrid, the popular fears increased tenfold, for the danger appeared much closer and therefore more real. Apprehension was not allayed by Charles' long absence, particularly as it was known that efforts were being made to persuade him to change his religion.

> All the world wishes him here again [wrote Chamberlain] for the Spanish delayes are like to weare out his patience... besides, there is *periculum in mora* in many wayes, specially in regard of his religion, w^{ch} is no small daunger considering his age, the cunning of those he hath to deale wth all, and other circumstance.[3]

It was not till more than three months after this letter was written that Charles set foot on English soil again, and public anxiety had in the meanwhile been raised to a fever heat. The sense of national relief was enormous; the people did not ask if there were any engagements to which the Prince of Wales had pledged himself—they realised only the fact that he had returned in safety and without a bride. At no other period of his life was Charles so popular, and the welcome he received in London was all the more remarkable for being so spontaneous. Wealthy citizens gave banquets in the streets outside their houses to all who

[1] Act III, sc. i, ll. 92–99. [2] The author of *Vox Populi*.
[3] Chamberlain to Carleton, June 28, 1623 (*S.P.* (*Dom.*), *James I*, vol. 147, no. 80).

passed by, and bonfires were lit on every available open space. Taylor the Water-Poet wrote enthusiastically:

> The Bels proclaim'd aloud in euery Steeple,
> The ioyfull acclamations of the people.
> The Ordnance thundred with so high a straine,
> As if great *Mars* they meant to entertaine.
> The Bonfires blazing, infinite almost,
> Gaue such a heat as if the world did roast.
> True mirth and gladnesse was in euery face,
> And healths ran brauely round in euery place;
> That sure I thinke this sixt day of October,
> Ten thousand men will goe to bed scarce (&c.)
> This was a day all dedicate to Mirth,
> As 'twere our Royall CHARLES his second birth:
> And this day is a Iewell well return'd
> For whom this Kingdome yesterday so mourn'd.
> God length his dayes who is the cause of this,
> And make vs thankfull for so great a blisse.[1]

So triumphant an occasion was not soon forgotten, and several years later an item on the books of Pembroke Hall, Cambridge, bears witness that the anniversary of the Prince's return was still being celebrated:

> Pro igne gratulatorio in anniversarii memoria reditus Principis Caroli ex Hispania . . . . . 2*s.* 6*d.*[2]

II

This is not the place to recount the long and tortuous course of the negotiations for the Spanish match, nor to show how they were affected by the events of the Thirty Years' War and reacted, in their turn, on the fortunes of the English Catholics. *A Game at Chesse* has little to do with the *minutiae* of historical truth, so carefully recorded in Gardiner's well-known work, for by the very nature of things, anyone in Middleton's position could not have had access to the true facts. The play is primarily the expression of current popular feelings; it is the embodiment of the prejudices of the multitude, who were incapable of grasping

[1] J. Taylor, *Works* (fo. 1630), p. 102.
[2] Treasurer's Accounts, 1626–7.

more than one idea at a time, and whose line of thought was based not so much on principle as on instinct. Yet there is something to be said for the blind hatred which regarded Gondomar as the incarnation of evil, and the narrow mentality which, in its inability to comprehend the motives of de Dominis, could find him nothing but an "arch-hypocrite." Popular prejudice had in these cases gone down to essentials, and it was well for England that the aims of both men were thwarted.

As early as 1611 James had asked for the hand of a Spanish princess for his eldest son, Henry, but the negotiations came to nothing. In 1613, however, a new Spanish ambassador, Don Diego Sarmiento da Acuña (later Count Gondomar), arrived in England, and in 1614 the project of a marriage alliance with Spain was revived through the influence of the King's reigning favourite, Somerset. As early as December 1614 it had been suggested by Sarmiento that Prince Charles (Henry had died in 1612) should visit Madrid, and by the middle of 1615 James had practically agreed to the Spanish terms. The negotiations were interrupted by the fall and disgrace of Somerset, but in 1616 they were again renewed. Raleigh's ill-fated expedition to Guiana interrupted them once more, but Gondomar's firmness prevented the breaking off of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and ultimately led Raleigh to the block. Gondomar returned to Spain in triumph, but meanwhile the Thirty Years' War broke out and James, who was attempting to act as mediator, became more convinced than ever that a close alliance between England and Spain was the only road to the peace of Europe, and the Spaniards themselves were only too glad to continue negotiations for a marriage treaty in order to prevent a breach with England. The war party in England was strong, and the only way they could be overridden was by holding out hopes of the marriage to the King. In 1620 Gondomar returned to England, and he was not long in regaining his influence over James. When

he left England two years later he had also a firm adherent in Buckingham, so that, however much the people of England might desire it, an immediate rupture with Spain was impossible. But the triumph of his diplomacy came nearly a year later when Charles and Buckingham accepted his repeated invitation, and set out together for Madrid.

No foreign ambassador, before or since, has ever exerted so much influence in England as Gondomar did. He was directly responsible for the execution of Sir Walter Raleigh, the last of the great Elizabethan sea-captains; he was the means of obtaining large concessions for the Catholics, who for a while enjoyed greater freedom than they had known for many years; but, above all, he succeeded in keeping England at peace with Spain, although the majority of the people had been eager for war since 1617. His tact, his wit, and his keen perception of character enabled him to influence James and Buckingham alike; his charm of manner no less than his power made him eagerly sought after in Court circles, but beyond the Court his influence was regarded with the deepest suspicion. Yet he seems to have been capable of kindness and generosity and to have acquired a real fondness for England. Howell records that while Charles was in Spain:

> Count *Gondamar* helpt to free some *English* that were in the Inquisition in *Toledo* and *Sevill*, and I could alledge many instances how ready and chearfull he is to assist any *Englishman* whatsoever, notwithstanding the base affronts he hath often receivd of the *London buys* as he calls them.[1]

But the public ear was deaf to such accounts as this. Gondomar's vivacity seemed but the mask which concealed schemes for the overthrow of everything that England valued; he was the personification of the unholy ambitions of Spain and the abominable perversions of the Papacy. "The cunning Don," says Fuller, "so carried himself in the twilight of *jest-earnest* that with his *jests* he pleased His MAJESTY of England, and with his *earnest* he

[1] *Familiar Letters* (1645), sec. 3, p. 80.

pleasured his Master of *Spain*."[1] The figure of Gondomar, as the Black Knight, is drawn with great gusto and satiric force in *A Game at Chesse*; he dominates the play, and his chuckling speeches of sardonic self-revelation must undoubtedly have been its principal attraction. Here is the full-length portrait of the Gondomar of popular imagination, the man whom "starlings and parrots were first taught to curse."

III

Although Protestantism seemed to many to be losing ground all over Europe during James' reign, it gained for a time one notable convert. This was Marco Antonio de Dominis, Archbishop of Spalatro.[2] Educated by the Jesuits at Padua, he had found the repressive discipline of the order too strict for his active mind, and he turned aside to seek ecclesiastical preferment elsewhere. He became Bishop of Segnia, and eventually Archbishop of Spalatro and primate of his native province, Dalmatia, which was part of the territory belonging to Venice. According to Goodman, de Dominis "was a man of a very deep understanding and of an unquiet spirit."[3] He became an intimate of the great Paolo Sarpi, author of the *History of the Council of Trent*,[4] and with Sarpi vigorously upheld the cause of Venice in its quarrel with Pope Paul V in 1606. It was while he was engaged in refuting some of the pamphlets that were written against Venice at that time that he re-read the works of the early Fathers, in order to examine more closely the basis of the papal authority, and these studies convinced him that the popes had systematically usurped authority that did not belong to them. This, he realised, had been the principal cause of the schisms o. the Reformation, and he bent his energies to evolve a

[1] *Church History of Britain* (1655), bk x, p. 100.
[2] The name of his see appears as *Spalato* or *Spoletta* in all the English writings of the period.
[3] *Court and Times of James I*, vol. 1, p. 341.
[4] De Dominis brought the manuscript of this famous book to England, where it was published in 1617.

scheme whereby the unity of the Church might be re-established; in outward form, at any rate, it should be one, although there might be considerable differences of thought within it. He developed his ideas with a great wealth of learning in the three large volumes of his book *De Republica Ecclesiastica*, which, however, he did not yet dare to publish, even under the protection of Venice. Meanwhile, through Sarpi he had become acquainted with Bedell, the saintly chaplain of Sir Henry Wotton who was then the English ambassador at Venice, and from Bedell he had heard in full the doctrines of the Church of England. In 1616 he determined to leave Italy and go to a country where it would be possible to spread his ideas more widely. He travelled rapidly to Holland, until he was out of the reach of papal emissaries, and, on reaching the Hague, went to Sir Dudley Carleton, the English ambassador, who assured him that James would welcome him warmly if he crossed over into his dominions.

Encouraged by these assurances, de Dominis landed in England not long afterwards. He was received with every honour; he was given apartments in Lambeth Palace, and in a short time was appointed Dean of Windsor and Master of the Savoy. He published his *magnum opus*, and busied himself with a number of pamphlets against Rome. But soon the nine days wonder of his conversion died down, and it was not long before Englishmen began to realise that his ways were not theirs. He discovered flaws in the leases of some of his tenants at the Savoy, and proposed to eject them; he even presented himself to a living in the gift of the Dean of Windsor. He was eager for further advancement, and when a report of the death of Toby Matthew, the Archbishop of York, reached his ears,[1] he

[1] The old Archbishop used to spread these reports himself in order to enjoy hearing of the suitors who had petitioned to be his successor. Fuller, in recording his death, remarks: "He dyed *yeerly* in report, and I doubt not, that in the Apostles sense he *dyed dayly* in his mortifying meditations. He went over the graves of many who looked for his Archbishoprick; I will not say they catched a cold waiting barefoot for a living mans shoes" (*Church History*, bk XI, p. 133).

hastened to Theobalds to ask the King for the vacant see. James very properly replied that he would never think of appointing a foreigner to such a dignity; but the incident shows only too clearly the opinion de Dominis had of his own merits. It must have disappointed him deeply, too, to find that his ideas for the reunion of the Church were no nearer fulfilment; Englishmen understood and applauded him when he denounced the faults of Rome, but his proposals for reunion were incomprehensible to most of them, and nothing more than a vague dream to the more advanced Arminians among them.

Meanwhile changes had occurred in Italy. Paul V was dead, and he had been succeeded by Gregory XV, who had been a friend of de Dominis in his younger days. De Dominis felt that he might find conditions there more favourable to him than they had been before; perhaps, too, as he suggests in a letter to James,[1] he was genuinely homesick—he missed his old friends, and was oppressed by the dull English climate. He therefore determined (in 1622) to return, and doubtless before he announced his intentions he corresponded secretly with the Pope and the various Catholic powers from whom he required safe-conducts. When he asked James to be allowed to depart, the King was exceedingly angry, and it was with considerable difficulty that he eventually obtained the required permission. He tried to convey away the goods he had amassed in this country among the baggage of a departing ambassador,[2] but they were seized at Dover, and only restored to him after the most piteous pleading. On the other side of the Channel de Dominis was warmly welcomed, and the Pope placed a retinue at his disposal for his journey through Italy. But his good fortune did not last for long, for his old friend died a few months afterwards and a new Pope was elected. De Dominis spent the last year of his life in confinement; after his death he was

[1] The letter is printed in Fuller's *Church History*, bk x, p. 96.
[2] There is a reference to this incident in the play at III, i, 337–340.

found guilty of heresy, and his body was disinterred and burnt.

The character of such a man easily lends itself to satire, and in its details the figure of the Fat Bishop is nearer to its original than that of the Black Knight. There is no doubt that de Dominis was a prey to vaulting ambition, and he had given several startling examples of his covetousness. Admitting, as we must, that he possessed these qualities, it was only natural that his return to Rome should lay him open to the charge of hypocrisy. The truth, however, is that de Dominis fell between two stools; or to change the metaphor, he could cut his cloth neither to the Roman nor to the Protestant pattern, though he tried to fit both. Perhaps the aptest remark made concerning him was that of Bishop Andrewes soon after he came to England; someone had asked Andrewes if de Dominis were a Protestant: "Truly I know not," he replied, "but I think he is a detestant of most of the opinions of Rome."[1]

IV

Gondomar and de Dominis are the two outstanding figures in the main plot of Middleton's play. Of the other characters who can be identified much less need be said. The White King is clearly James; there is a considerable strain of flattery infused into the speeches put into his mouth, but to the modern reader they are long-winded, sententious, and dull—for virtue is always less interesting than vice. The White Knight is Charles, and the White Duke is Buckingham;[2] these two are little more than spectators in the earlier part of the play, but the visit to Madrid is allegorically portrayed in IV,iv, v,i and v,iii, and the White Knight gains the final victory by giving check-mate by discovery—a reference to the hostility towards Spain which Charles and Buckingham showed after their return.

[1] Bacon's *Apophthegms*, no. 158.

[2] Bullen is wrong in identifying the White Duke with Charles and the White Knight with Buckingham, as Ward (*Eng. Dram. Lit.* vol. II, pp. 530–1) and Morris (*Eng. Stud.* Band XXXVIII (1907), pp. 43–45) have shown.