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Volume II

J. R. Seeley

Excerpt

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PART IV.

MINISTRY OF STEIN.—TRANSITION.

My sentence is for open war ; of wiles
More unexpert I boast not : them let those
Contrive who need or when they need, not now.

MILTON.

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CHAPTER I.

THE SPANISH REVOLUTION.

WE are now arrived at the point in Napoleon's career which in a historical tragedy founded on the story of his life would make the natural commencement of the Fourth Act. We may suppose the first two acts of such a play to be occupied with his rise to supreme power, and the second to close with the Peace of Lunéville. The hero is left as First Consul in possession of the great conquest of the Revolution, the Left Bank of the Rhine, and holding the proudest position ever occupied by a man of the people at the age of thirty-two. The third act would bring us to the Peace of Tilsit, and leave him still in the enjoyment of the same unprecedented prosperity, but an object now of universal alarm, having brought to an end the Empire, humbled Austria, and crushed the army of Frederick. By this time the spectator is brought into the state of mind suitable to tragedy; he is full of troubled astonishment and misgivings about the ways of Providence. And now the fourth

act when it begins shows still further advances in the hero's power and success; but these excite wonder no more, for partly that passion is exhausted and partly it was evident that power raised so high could not fail by a kind of momentum to rise much higher; the absorbing question now is to conjecture what point Destiny has reserved, where is the vulnerable heel, or what circumstance, probably insignificant at first sight, can convert a series of good fortune so long and uniform into a tragedy. We have arrived now at the very moment when the thwarting power for the first time visibly intervenes, and some of the most anxious spectators see with a thrill of joy their long suspense relieved, the fatal uniformity of bad fortune broken; when here and there a few venture to say that they see now what Providence was aiming at, and can once more believe in a Providence; when a few, and Stein among them, begin to understand not only that Napoleon will fall, but also how he will fall.

In such a historical play as we have imagined, the second act ending with Lunéville would exhibit Napoleon restoring the throne of Louis XIV., and the third act would show him reviving that of Charlemagne. Lunéville places him at the head of a restored French monarchy with an extended frontier; Tilsit secures him in the headship of a Western Empire which showed by the side of Russia like that of Charlemagne by the side of the Byzantine Empire. The fourth act sees him leaving all precedent behind, but at the same time it gradually brings to light an obstacle which he proved unable to turn or remove.

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A new formula was wanted in this period, which should do what in the third period had been done by the conception of reviving the Empire of Charlemagne. The name of Charlemagne had helped men to grow accustomed to think of France, Germany and Italy as united under one ruler; the object now was to lead them to think of the whole Continent as united in the same way. The natural antithesis to the Continent was England, and so 'War against England,' or 'the Continental System,' became the watchword of this fourth period. By putting adhesion to this system into all his treaties Napoleon now acquired a certain footing of authority within every state including even Russia. Everywhere this system gave him a right to interfere with the internal affairs of government. The States which have given their adhesion to the Continental Blockade form a sort of wider Confederation of the Rhine, and by his right of enforcing this blockade Napoleon is now in all Europe what before as Protector of the Confederation he had been in Germany.

Thus was England called to contend, as it were, on equal terms against the whole Continent. It was the first plain indication given to the whole world of the approach of a period in which the old states of Europe would take up a secondary position compared to great Empires extending into the other Continents. England, Russia and the United States are now all alike Powers belonging to a higher scale of magnitude than the greatest purely European states. In that age it was England alone that stood out in this way, and to no one

was this view more familiar than to Napoleon. His Egyptian expedition had shown long before how little he limited his views to a European supremacy, and how jealously he regarded the Asiatic conquests of England. His formula of War against England was none the less seriously meant because it had also the indirect advantage of uniting the whole Continent under his ascendancy. But it was not England as a European State that he sought to rival or crush, but England as a World Empire. The failure of the Egyptian expedition and the destruction of the French fleet had for some time obliged him to abandon these designs and confine himself to aggressions upon Germany, but after Tilsit he returned to them with new hope. It was in his power to furnish himself with new weapons against England. He could replace the lost fleets of France by those of the minor maritime Powers whom he could now force into war with England; he could take more complete possession and control of the fleets, such as that of Spain, which had already assisted him; and there was a third way by which he could at once enter into rivalry with England, if not take precedence of her, in the extra-European world. France had failed as a colonising Power, but the Napoleonic Empire was no longer France and was under no necessity of putting up with the colonial insignificance of France. It was nearly equivalent to Western Europe, and Western Europe taken together was greatly superior to England in colonies. Spain and Portugal between them possessed almost the whole of Southern and Central America, an Empire compared to which

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that of England was both in extent and natural wealth insignificant. What now lay between this vast Empire and Napoleon? It could be conquered, so he might think, without the trouble of crossing the Atlantic; it could be conquered in Spain and Portugal themselves. Spain was already an ally completely subservient, a client state as humble as Bavaria, while Portugal, as the ancient ally of England, might be attacked with little ceremony, and was so weak that it could no more resist than any one of those numerous German or Italian states, such as Brunswick, Hannover, Electoral Hessen, Sardinia, Venice, or Naples, which had already suffered partition, annexation, or whatever lot France found it most expedient to consign them to.

These considerations enable us to understand the course taken by Napoleon at the beginning of this his fourth period, that is, in the months following the Peace of Tilsit, the months measuring the earlier half of Stein's ministry. His objects are to get possession of the fleet of Denmark, to annex or partition Portugal, and to get complete control of Spain.

The critical question for him was what form of control to establish over Spain. Spain had been but lately one of the Great Powers, and to usurp such a complete possession of her government as Napoleon had in view was a more serious undertaking than if she had been on a level with the minor German or Italian States. Much risk would have been avoided if he could have treated Spain as he treated, for example, Bavaria; if he could have given her the position of an honoured ally sharing his glory and

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his gains, receiving for instance a principal share in the spoils of Portugal, as Bavaria did in those of Austria, on condition of placing her army and navy completely at his disposal. By this plan it may seem he would have reaped at once the principal advantages to be gained by the possession of Spain, and by slow degrees he would have gained all that he could possibly desire, and seen Spain gradually merge her independence and distinctness in the greatness of her ally. When such an easy course was open to him, why did Napoleon adopt a totally different one? Why did he treat Spain as an enemy rather than as an ally, and try to control her not as Bavaria, but as the territories conquered from Prussia and Hannover and Electoral Hessen, which he erected into the Kingdom of Westphalia under one of his brothers? Why did he insist upon setting up a Bonaparte in Spain also, and that not by the right of the stronger after conquering the country, but while the country was still unconquered and by an act of outrageous violence and treachery?

It was not only a great mistake, but the great mistake of Napoleon's life; it was the very mistake for which all his enemies had long been eagerly waiting. That it was this, and that the consequences of it affected all Europe, and Prussia among other states very speedily, is my reason for making it so prominent here. But it is also a reason why we should take peculiar pains to understand how Napoleon came to commit it. It is with the *blunder*, of course, not with the *crime* that we are concerned. In its monstrous lawlessness the act is only of a

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piece with the whole foreign policy which Napoleon inherited from the Revolution. But it was a great miscalculation made by a very accurate reckoner, and the danger here, as in Napoleon's other mistakes, is of our putting up with the childish quasi-poetical explanation furnished by the heathen proverb of 'Quem Deus volt perdere,' &c. His conduct here was no doubt Napoleonic, but it will not be found that there was anything of infatuation in it, or that he simply indulged in a freak of omnipotence. He took a course such as might have been expected of him, and such as he had found successful before, and if he made a fatal mistake it was not because an infallible judgment slumbered for a moment, but because his judgment was fallible; not from a momentary aberration but from a want of sagacity. What was it then in politics that Napoleon did not know and could not understand?

I have pointed out how vastly important the possession of Spain was to Napoleon, as carrying with it a sort of hegemony in the New World. There were other considerations which tempted him not less. First, the ships and sailors which Spain could furnish were of most essential importance in the maritime war with England, and would remain as a great acquisition even if he failed in getting possession of the colonies along with the mother country. Secondly, the displacement of the ruling house in Spain would be a final blow given to the House of Bourbon, and we know with what persistence Napoleon always pursued the design of rooting out the dynasty to whose place he had succeeded in France. Thirdly, it would give an

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opportunity of repairing a serious loss which France had suffered through her Revolution, the loss of the ascendancy of her ruling house over the kindred ruling house of Spain. It was true that France had scarcely as yet felt the loss, and that the miserable Spanish Government had ever since 1795 been as subservient to France as it could have been if France had still been ruled by a Bourbon. But this might not last; in particular, since a new king mounted the Spanish throne after the Revolt of Aranjuez in February, 1808, Napoleon might have reason to fear the defection of Spain from his policy; and in any case, he who had risen so far beyond Louis XIV. in other respects might naturally desire to have the same ascendancy in Spain which Louis XIV. had enjoyed, or would at least be strongly tempted by an opportunity of acquiring it so remarkable as that which now offered.

Now these considerations urged him to deviate from the policy he had pursued towards the minor States of Germany. Substantial ascendancy might suffice him in his relation to Bavaria or Würtemberg, but the case was different in Spain, where the sovereign was a Bourbon. There his views required the actual expulsion of the Bourbon and the substitution of a Bonaparte in his place. But it is to be added that Napoleon had tried for several years the plan of treating Spain as he treated his vassal States in Germany, and that it did not answer. He had long used the fleets of Spain at his pleasure. But the misgovernment of Spain was such that he derived little advantage from its subservience. Its debt had increased in the twenty years of Charles IV.'s reign