

## **An Account of the Emperor Charles V**

Most of the figures that stand out in history do so through some exceptional personal quality, good or bad, that makes them more significant than their fellows. But there was born at Ghent in Belgium, in 1500, a man of common-place abilities and melancholy temperament, the son of a mentally defective mother who had been married for reasons of State, who was, through no fault of his own, to become the focus of the accumulating stresses of Europe. The historian must give him a quite unmerited and accidental prominence side by side with such marked individualities as Alexander and Charlemagne and Frederick II. This was the Emperor Charles V. For a time he had an air of being the greatest monarch in Europe since Charlemagne. Both he and his illusory greatness were the results of the matrimonial statecraft of his grandfather, the Emperor Maximilian I (1459-1519).

Some families have fought, others have intrigued their way to world power; the Habsburgs married their way. Maximilian began his career with the inheritance of the Habsburgs, Austria, Styria, part of Alsace and other districts; he married—the lady's name scarcely matters to us—the Netherlands and Burgundy. Most of Burgundy slipped from him after his first wife's death, but the Netherlands he held. Then he tried unsuccessfully to marry Brittany. He became Emperor in succession to his father, Frederick III, in 1493, and married the duchy of Milan. Finally he married his son to the weak-minded daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, the Ferdinand and Isabella of Columbus, who not only reigned over a freshly united Spain, and over Sardinia and the kingdom of the two Sicilies, but, by virtue of the papal gifts to Castile, over all America west of Brazil. So it was that Charles, his grandson, inherited most of the American continent and between a third and a half of what the Turks had left of Europe. The father of Charles died in 1506, and Maximilian did his best to secure his grandson's election to the imperial throne.

Charles succeeded to the Netherlands in 1506; he became practically king of the Spanish dominions, his mother being imbecile, when his grandfather Ferdinand died in 1516; and his grandfather Maximilian dying in 1519, he was in 1520 elected Emperor at the still comparatively tender age of twenty.

His election as Emperor was opposed by the young and brilliant French King Francis I, who had succeeded to the French throne in 1515 at the age of twenty-one. The candidature of Francis was supported by Leo X (1513), who also requires from us the epithet brilliant. It was, indeed, an age of brilliant monarchs. It was the age of Baber in India (1526-1530) and Suleiman in Turkey (1520). Both Leo and Francis dreaded the concentration of so much power in the hands of one man as the election of Charles threatened. The only other monarch who seemed to matter in Europe was Henry VIII, who had become King of England in 1509 at the age of eighteen. He also offered himself as a candidate for the empire, and the imaginative English reader may amuse himself by working out the

possible consequences of such an election.

There was much scope for diplomacy in this triangle of kings. Charles on his way from Spain to Germany visited England and secured the support of Henry against Francis by bribing his minister, Cardinal Wolsey. Henry also made a great parade of friendship with Francis; there was feasting, tournaments, and such-like antiquated gallantries in France, in a courtly picnic known to historians as the Field of the Cloth of Gold (1520). Knighthood was becoming a picturesque affectation in the sixteenth century. The Emperor Maximilian I is still called "the last of the knights" by German historians. The election of Charles was secured, it is to be noted, by a vast amount of bribery. He had, as his chief supporters and creditors, the great German business house of the Fuggers. That large treatment of money and credit which we call finance, which had gone out of European political life with the collapse of the Roman Empire, was now coming back to power. This appearance of the Fuggers, whose houses and palaces outshone those of the emperors, marks the upward movement of forces that had begun two or three centuries earlier in Cahors in France and in Florence and other Italian towns. Money, public debts, and social unrest and discontent re-enter upon the miniature stage of this Outline. Charles V was not so much a Habsburg as a Fugger emperor.

For a time this fair, not very intelligent-looking young man with the thick upper lip and long, clumsy chin was largely a puppet in the hands of his ministers. Able servants after the order of Machiavelli guided him at first in the arts of kingship. Then in a slow but effectual way he began to assert himself. He was confronted at the very outset of his reign in Germany with the perplexing dissensions of Christendom. The revolt against the papal rule which had been going on since the days of Huss and Wycliffe had been recently exasperated by a new and unusually cynical selling of indulgences to raise money for the completion of St. Peter's at Rome. A monk named Luther, who had been consecrated as a priest, who had taken to reading the Bible, and who, while visiting Rome on the business of his Order, had been much shocked by the levity and worldly splendour of the Papacy, had come forward against these papal expedients at Wittenberg (1517), offering disputation and propounding certain theses. An important controversy ensued. At first Luther carried on this controversy in Latin, but presently took to German, and speedily had the people in a ferment. Charles found this dispute raging when he came from Spain to Germany. He summoned an assembly or "diet" of the empire at Worms on the Rhine. To this, Luther, who had been asked to recant his views by Pope Leo X, and who had refused to do so, was summoned. He came, and, entirely in the spirit of Huss, refused to recant unless he was convinced of his error by logical argument or by the authority of Scripture. But his protectors among the princes were too powerful for him to suffer the fate of John Huss.

Here was a perplexing situation for the young Emperor. There is reason to suppose that he was inclined at first to support Luther against the Pope. Leo X had opposed the election of Charles, and was friendly with his rival, Francis I. But Charles V was not a good Machiavellian, and he had acquired in Spain a considerable religious sincerity. He decided against Luther. Many of the German princes, and especially the Elector of Saxony, sided with the reformer. Luther went into hiding under the protection of the Saxon Elector, and Charles found himself in the presence of the opening rift that was to split Christendom into two contending camps.

Close upon these disturbances, and probably connected with them, there came a widespread peasants' revolt throughout Germany. This outbreak frightened Luther very effectually. He was shocked by its excesses, and from that time forth the Reformation he advocated ceased to be a Reformation according to the people and became a Reformation according to the princes. He lost his confidence in

that free judgment for which he had stood up so manfully.

Meanwhile Charles realized that his great empire was in a very serious danger both from the west and from the east. On the west of him was his spirited rival, Francis I; to the east was the Turk in Hungary, in alliance with Francis and clamouring for certain arrears of tribute from the Austrian dominions. Charles had the money and army of Spain at his disposal, but it was extremely difficult to get any effective support in money from Germany. His grandfather had developed a German infantry on the Swiss model, very much upon the lines expounded in Machiavelli's *Art of War*, but these troops had to be paid and his imperial subsidies had to be supplemented by unsecured borrowings, which were finally to bring his supporters, the Fuggers, to ruin.

On the whole, Charles, in alliance with Henry VIII, was successful against Francis I and the Turk. Their chief battlefield was North Italy; the generalship was dull on both sides; their advances and retreats depended chiefly on the arrival of reinforcements. The German army invaded France, failed to take Marseilles, fell back into Italy, lost Milan, and was besieged in Pavia. Francis I made a long and unsuccessful siege of Pavia, was caught by fresh German forces, defeated, wounded, and taken prisoner. He sent back a message to his queen that all was "lost but honour," made a humiliating peace, and broke it as soon as he was liberated—so that even the salvage of honour was but temporary.

Henry VIII and the Pope, in obedience to the rules of Machiavellian strategy, now went over to the side of France in order to prevent Charles becoming too powerful. The German troops in Milan, under the Constable of Bourbon, unpaid, forced rather than followed their commander into a raid upon Rome. They stormed the city and pillaged it (1527). The Pope took refuge in the Castle of St. Angelo while the looting and slaughter went on. He bought off the German troops at last by the payment of four hundred thousand ducats. Ten years of such stupid and confused fighting impoverished all Europe and left the Emperor in possession of Milan. In 1530 he was crowned by the Pope—he was the last German Emperor to be crowned by the Pope—at Bologna. One thinks of the rather dull-looking blond face, with its long lip and chin, bearing the solemn expression of one who endures a doubtful though probably honourable ceremony.

Meanwhile the Turks were making great headway in Hungary. They had defeated and killed the King of Hungary in 1526, they held Buda and Pesh, in 1529, as we have already noted, Suleiman the Magnificent very nearly took Vienna. The Emperor was greatly concerned by these advances, and did his utmost to drive back the Turks, but he found the greatest difficulty in getting the German princes to unite, even with his formidable enemy upon their very borders.

Francis I remained implacable for a time, and there was a new French war; but in 1538 Charles won his rival over to a more friendly attitude by ravaging the south of France. Francis and Charles then formed an alliance against the Turk, but the Protestant princes, the German princes who were resolved to break away from Rome, had formed a league, the Schmalkaldic League (named after the little town of Schmalkalden in Hesse, at which its constitution was arranged), against the Emperor, and, in the place of a great campaign to recover Hungary for Christendom, Charles had to turn his mind to the gathering internal struggle in Germany. Of that struggle he saw only the opening war. It was a struggle, a sanguinary irrational bickering of princes for ascendancy, now flaming into war and destruction, now sinking back to intrigues and diplomacies; it was a snake's sack of Machiavellian policies, that was to go on writhing incurably right into the nineteenth century, and to waste and desolate Central Europe again and again.

The Emperor never seems to have grasped the true forces at work in these gathering troubles. He

was, for his time and station, an exceptionally worthy man, and he seems to have taken the religious dissensions that were tearing Europe into warring fragments as genuine theological differences. He gathered diets and councils in futile attempts at reconciliation. Formulae and confessions were tried over. The student of German history must struggle with the details of the Religious Peace of Nuremberg, the settlement at the Diet of Ratisbon, the Interim of Augsburg, and the like. Here we do but mention them as details in the worried life of this culminating emperor.

(H.G. Wells, from *The Outline of History*)