

## The Mistakes of the Kaiser

By RENE VIVIANI

Premier of France When the War Broke Out

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## XXXVI.—THE AbdICATION

In the month of July, 1918, the fourth anniversary of the implacable war was about to come, and the opposing armies, so disproportionate at the beginning, were vigorous, well armed, ready for battle. But—now the stakes were different. In 1914 France had held in her hands not only her own fate, but the fate of the world. No matter what might happen after the Marne, after the Yser, after Verdun, after the heroic recovery of 1918, after the formidable onrush of the Americans against the common enemy, the future, though still dark, was less terrible than it had been at the beginning of the war.

But Germany now stood on the brink of the pit which she herself had dug.

She could no longer count on winning victory by one final blow, nor on being lastingly favored by fortune. It was necessary for her to win, advantage enough for obtaining a favorable armistice, followed by a "white" peace, leaving neither victor nor vanquished. If not this, there were left to her only two alternatives: to yield or to die.

The German army, on the terrible evening of July 14, 1918, plunged forward in an attack which was expected by the French high command and was received by the Allied armies in such fashion that it was smashed to pieces at the very outset. The German army was hurled back in confusion and terror, torn to pieces on the wire entanglements of the Allies, now fighting under a single command for a single purpose; the Germans were cowed by the havoc wrought by the internal inventions which they had been the first to employ in a barbarous manner; and little by little, the German army, scattered, fell back through France.

It was the end. The huge organism drew together, no longer able to fill the gaps in its ranks, and the German soldiers learned while they retreated that there was no army held in reserve, that they themselves were the only rampart protecting their crumbling country. Behind the army of combatants was desolation, devastated lands, the remote fatherland, innumerable villages traversed before by the light of conflagrations voluntarily kindled, when those same soldiers were bent under the weight of the plunder that they were carrying.

Kaiser Prey to Mortal Anxiety

At the Kaiser's headquarters everything suddenly became sombre around the personage who had become, during the past few weeks, the prey of terror and of mortal anxiety, which had wrinkled his forehead and cheeks. Around that man before whom all had bowed, that man who had expected to dominate the world, even the most faithful were beginning to waver, and misfortune, in the guise of tardy and incomplete retribution, was now beginning to close down upon this mediocre man, who had never realized what misfortune might do, who was incapable of enduring it.

The greatest of the German chiefs are shaken by what is befalling them: the storm-wind of catastrophe blows from all quarters upon the helpless ship, whose captain, unable to meet the tempest face to face, seeks, with terror-stricken eyes, the light of the faraway beacon, the sheltered harbor, the lifeboats, safety in flight. Now is when his qualities and vir-

tues are to be put to the test—for it is by marching them against adversity that the characters of men are judged.

## Germany Ready to Collapse

Germany was in revolt. Everything points to this, contrary to what is told by those who wish to preserve the German army's reputation that army was exhausted, crushed, incapable of going further, ready to surrender if the Allies had continued their efforts.

It was a case of complete collapse; army and nation were a prey to the same panic. Something must be done.

The Emperor must adopt some course.

How well had Bismarck and the father of the Kaiser understood the character of "the young man full of tricks," the comedian, the man with the little brain, the mediocre actor!

Nothing is more pitiful than that part of his Memoirs where he explains the events bearing down upon him. What happened is well known. It is quite evident that the Kaiser must have been filled with surprise at having been of so little importance at the end of the drama and at the fact that the scenario suddenly dropped down upon his head while he was still acting out the end of his part.

Around him anxious generals were no longer sure of their troops. These men, who had created and imposed upon others the terrible bonds of German discipline, gauged at a glance the state of mind, soon to develop into open revolt, among those soldiers, now sad and haggard, who tomorrow were to be wild with exasperation. And they told the Kaiser their thoughts.

"Ah, well, they are probably exaggerating," thinks the Kaiser, lost in a dream about a fortunate lull in the fighting, which will allow him to keep upon his brow, already almost livid, the towering imperial crown.

## Abdication or Revolution?

But—what is this? A telephone call from Berlin! What is happening? Chancellor Prince Max of Baden is not sure of the man in the street, there are grumblings that seem to pressurize riots, the big cities are agitated, the storm is brewing. Confined to his bed by gripe, the provisional head of the country is leaving everything in the hands of subordinates. And then comes the message: "Abdication or revolution?"

These two sinister words fall upon the august ear of the Kaiser like a knell of death, in tragic alternation. The Kaiser is badly shaken.

He talks about abdicating, of abdicating as Emperor while keeping the title of King of Prussia. Then he hesitates, walks up and down, agitated, nervous, even more unrecognizable now than before; pale, wan, hollow-eyed, trembling beneath his ridiculous uniform.

Finally the German commanders declare that they can not act, after having advised the Kaiser to return to Berlin.

"Return?" exclaims Berlin. "That means that all is over!" And as the Kaiser delays in answering, others take it upon themselves to tell him what his answer is to be. Just as he is leaving the table after a meal, he is informed that he has abdicated—the Chancellor had stolen a march on him. No longer even King of Prussia? No—neither Emperor nor King.

Never did human contempt so soundly and thoroughly slap the face of one who had been great the day before; who, incapable of giving up power of

his own volition, sees it snatched from his trembling hands like a child's toy.

He must go. It is midnight. He fixes his departure for next day, not for the morning, but for 5 o'clock on that November day, to forestall the pale light by which a mournful dawn might betray the fugitive.

## Thus It Ends

Thus ends his tragic adventure—not for the world, but for the man whose name will be heard, as long as there exists a conscience in the human race, amid curses of the mothers of men. Though he played a certain role at the time of his accession to the throne, because of the imperious desire to reign that filled him, he played none at all when he fell; he was satisfied to fall heavily beneath the buffers of those surrounding him. Not for him was the role of the ship's captain, who is the last to remain aboard his ship; William's role was that of the passenger who is carried away in a dead faint.

Never would one have believed that the Kaiser would have told what he does in his Memoirs about this succession of events. He complains of having been deceived by all, of having been deceived at Berlin by an ambitious Chancellor, deceived at the front; he complains that men whom he believed to be faithfully attached to his fortunes were in reality hypocritical emissaries of the Chancellor, who came to him to give him the kiss of Judas.

What a taste of life for a man who

had known other men! To what were they to remain attached in those fatal hours, they who were the last survivors of this ephemeral splendor?

## Where Was the Genius of William?

Men remain faithful to undeserved misfortune, but not to misfortune like that of William Hohenzollern! Men remain faithful to greatness, which, even crushed to the ground, retains its grim attraction—but what was the greatness of William? Men remain faithful to genius, whose radiance misfortune can not at once eclipse, and which sets in glory like the sun—but where was the genius of William?

He had reigned, commanded, sent others to death, despised his fellow men, reduced man to the level where he found him. What has he to complain about? Why did he depart? The Kaiser explains that, being a Christian, he could not kill himself. Very well. Only religion forbids suicide. But the Kaiser might have died. Others, officers and soldiers, filled with much profounder piety and much higher ideals, fell in battle, their heads bared to Heaven, without the slightest thought of insulting Heaven by doing so. That haughty monarch was ignorant of history—or, if he had read it, what did he remember about it?

Bonaparte at Acrea, his face radiant with the promise of genius and the grace of youth, hurled himself into the midst of the enemy's fire. At Waterloo, with his sceptre broken in pieces, he snatched up his sword and sought a soldier's death in the immortal ranks. Napoleon—William! May the shade of the great man forgive me for such a sacrilegious coupling of names!

In 1859, King Victor Emmanuel I,

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advancing to win his throne over the Austrian entrenched, pushed aside the men of the First Zouaves who filled with admiration by his reckless bravery, wished to protect him with their bodies. And, during the great war, the aged King Peter of Serbia, driven from his throne, in the darkness of a night when all seemed over, went

straight to his soldiers and said to them: "My children, I have come to die with you."

Did the Kaiser do anything like this? No, the Kaiser feared the enemy, whom he had always defied hundreds of kilometers in the rear, and he also feared his soldiers, who, he thought, might rise in revolt. In vain certain carefully chosen men—as he tells in his Memoirs—came to acclaim him; he was well informed as to the state of mind of the army and knew full well how bitterly hostile toward him were its sentiments.

German officers of inferior rank, upon whom rested no responsibility, who happened to find themselves, in the course of the retreat, in the last villages close to the French frontier, having been insulted and degraded and spat upon by their soldiers, cowered in hiding in the rooms of French women, whom they would not even salute one month before in their own houses. Pointing to the soldiers pouring through the streets, they begged for protection, with pale faces distorted by terror; to go out into the street meant, for them, to be assassinated. And he, the Kaiser, was thinking, doubtless, of what he said in 1891: "You belong to me body and soul, and if I should give you the order to fire upon your fathers and mothers you would obey me without a murmur!" And, doubtless, while he was thinking of that incitement to murder, he must have heard another voice borne on the wings of the tempest, crying: "Why not fire upon the Emperor?"

Why Did He Fly?

Shall we now discuss that part of the Memoirs in which, exalting his cowardice to the height of sacrifice, the Kaiser pretends to have deserted his post for the good of Germany and because he thought that, by doing so, less severe terms would be meted out to his country in the treaty of peace? Which means, if he speaks the truth, that he felt himself to be the one upon whom the main burden of guilt fell, and that he offered the ridiculous ransom of this precipitate departure into a gilded sojourn in foreign parts?

To declare war after having pre-

pared for it for years, to plunge the world into carnage, and then to hand in his resignation in order to avoid scandal, and—as we say in governmental circles—in order that the incident be closed—to do these things presupposes a degree of cynicism which might almost lead one to doubt the Kaiser's sanity. However, at bottom, the Kaiser knows that there is nothing in what he says.

The Kaiser did not depart in order to obtain, by his accommodating flight, better treatment for his country. He had lost that country of his already, torn to pieces and soaked it in blood, and he could no longer return to it. He departed, because he had been driven away by his troops and by the entire world. He did not think that rigorous treatment such as was meted out in earlier times to illustrious men vanquished in war, even to the moment of their last agonies, could be imposed upon him, since he felt, doubtless, that their memory would be insulted by "being thus brought into comparison with him."

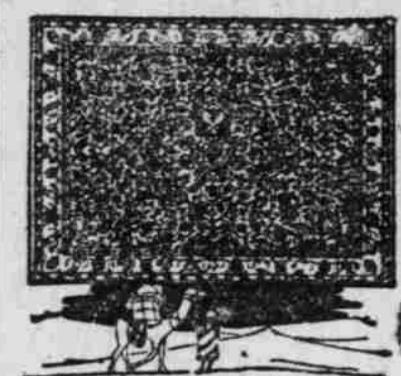
Now he writes, groans, lies, places the blame upon others, denounces his co-workers and servants. And, by so doing, he has succeeded in making the role played by him even more contemptible.

Let him live, if living brings him joy! Let him taste, almost on the anniversary of the Kaiser's death, the perverse joys of a seditious birthright!

The man belongs to History—let us leave History to complete her work.

(To Be Continued)

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