

HOW A FREE PEOPLE
CONDUCT A LONG WAR:

A CHAPTER FROM ENGLISH HISTORY.

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WE have known hitherto in this country so little of the actual realities of war on a grand scale, that many are beginning to look upon the violent opposition to the government, and the slowness of the progress of our arms, as signs of hopeless discouragement. History, however, shows us that these are the inevitable incidents of all wars waged by a free people. This might be abundantly illustrated by many remarkable events in English history, from the days of the Great Rebellion down through the campaigns of the Prince of Orange, and of Marlborough, to the wars which grew out of the events of the French Revolution. War is always entered upon amidst a vast deal of popular enthusiasm, which is utterly unreasoning. It is the universal voice of history, that such enthusiasm is wholly unreliable in supporting the prolonged and manifold burdens which are inseparable from every war waged on an extensive scale, and for a long period. The popular idea of war is a speedy and decisive victory, and an

immediate occupation of the enemy's capital, followed by a treaty of peace by which the objects of the war are permanently secured. Nothing is revealed to the excited passions of the multitude, but dazzling visions of national glory, purchased by small privations, and the early and complete subjugation of their enemies. It is, therefore, not unnatural that at the first reverse they should yield at once to an unmanly depression, and, giving up all for lost, they should vent upon the government for its conduct of the war, and upon the army and its generals for their failure to make their dreams of victories realities, an abuse as unreasoning as was their original enthusiasm.

Experience has taught the English people that the progress of a war never fulfils the popular expectations; that although victory may be assured at last to patient and untiring vigor and energy in its prosecution, yet during the continuance of a long war, there can be no well-founded hope of a uniform and constant series of brilliant triumphs in the field, illustrating the profound wisdom of the policy of the Cabinet; that, on the contrary, all war, even that which is most successful in the end, consists rather in checkered fortunes, of alternations of victory and disaster, and that its conduct is generally marked by what were evidently, when viewed in the light of experience, blunders so glaring in the policy adopted by the government, or in the strategy of its generals,

that the wonder is success was achieved at all. The English have thus been taught that the true characteristic of public opinion, in its judgment of a war, should be, not hopefulness nor impatience of immediate results, but rather a stern endurance—that king-quality of heroic constancy which, rooted deep in a profound conviction of the justice of the cause, supports a lofty public spirit equally well in the midst of temporary disaster, and in the hour of assured triumph.

We have had no such experience here. Our people are perhaps more easily excited by success, and more readily depressed by reverses, than the English, and it is, therefore, worth while to consider how they carried on war on a grand scale and for a protracted period. It will be found, if we mistake not, that the denunciations of the government, so common among us of late, and the complaints of the inactivity of the army, have their exact counterpart in the history of the progress of all the wars in which England has been engaged since the days of the Great Rebellion. He who draws consolation from the lessons of the past, will not, we think, seek comfort in vain when he discovers that in all those wars in which the government and the army have been so bitterly assailed, (except that of the American Revolution,) England has at last been triumphant. It is worth while, then, to look into English history to understand how war is successfully carried on, not-

withstanding the obstacles which, owing to a perverted public opinion, exist within the nation itself. These difficulties, although they inhere in the very nature of a free government, often prove, as we shall see, more fruitful of embarrassment to the favorable prosecution of a war, than the active operations of the enemy.

We propose to illustrate the propositions which we have advanced by a study of the series of campaigns known in English history as the Peninsular War. We select this particular war because we think that in many of its events, and in the policy which sustained it, there are to be observed many important, almost startling parallelisms with our present struggle. We have, of course, no reference to any similarity existing in the principle which produced the two wars, but rather to the striking resemblance in the modes adopted by the two people for prosecuting war on a grand scale, and for the vindication of a principle regarded as of vital importance by them.

The Peninsular War on the part of England, as was contended by the ministry during its progress, and as is now universally recognised, was a struggle not only to maintain her commercial supremacy, (which was then, as it is now, her life,) but also to protect her own soil from invasion by the French, by transferring the scene of conflict to distant Spain. The general purpose of assisting the alliance against

Napoleon seems always to have been a subordinate motive. It is now admitted by all historians, that upon success in this war depended not only England's rank among nations, but her very existence as an independent people. The war was carried on for more than five years, and on a scale, so far as the number of men and the extent of the military operations are concerned, until then wholly unattempted by England in her European wars. The result, as it need not be said, was not only to crown the British arms with the most brilliant and undying lustre, but also to retain permanently in their places the party whose only title to public favor was that they had carried on the war against the most serious obstacles, and brought it to a successful termination. Thus was delayed, it may be remarked, for at least twenty years, the adoption of those measures of reform which at last gave to England that place in modern civilization which had long before been reached by most of the nations of the Continent by passing through the trials of a bloody revolution. If we, then, in our dark hours, are inclined to doubt and despondency as to the final result, let us not forget the ordeal through which England successfully passed. We shall find that, in the commencement, there was the same wild and unreasoning enthusiasm with which we are familiar; the same bitter abuse and denunciation of the government at the first reverses; the same impatient

and ignorant criticism of military operations; the same factious and disloyal opposition on the part of a powerful party; the same discouragement and despondency at times on the part of the true and loyal; the same prophecies of the utter hopelessness of success; the same complaints of grievous and burdensome taxation, and predictions of the utter financial ruin of the country; the same violent attacks upon the government for its arbitrary decrees, and particularly for the suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus*; the same difficulties arising from the inexperience of the army; and the same weakness on the part of the government in not boldly and energetically supporting the army in the field. These are some of the more striking parallelisms between the Peninsular War and our own struggle, which a slight sketch of the progress of that war will render very apparent.

The insurrection in Spain which followed immediately upon a knowledge of the intrigues of Napoleon at Bayonne, in April 1807, by which the royal family was entrapped into an abdication of its right to the throne, and Joseph Bonaparte made king of that country, roused universal admiration and enthusiasm in England. It was thought by all parties that an obstacle to the further progress of Napoleon's schemes of the most formidable character had at last been found. It was the first popular insurrection in any country against Napoleon's power, and consequently, when the deputies from the Asturias reached Eng-

land imploring succour, their appeals excited the popular feeling to the highest pitch, and the opposite parties in Parliament and the country vied with each other in demanding that England should aid the insurrection with the whole of her military power. It is curious to observe, that when the question of aid was brought before Parliament, Mr. Canning and Mr. Sheridan, who had probably never acted together before on any political question, rivalled each other in their praise of the Spaniards, and in their expressions of hope and belief that Napoleon had at last taken a step which would speedily prove fatal to him. Large supplies were voted by acclamation, and an important expedition, afterwards operating in two columns, one under the command of Sir John Moore, the other under that of Sir Arthur Wellesley, was despatched to the Peninsula to aid the insurgents. It is not our purpose to trace the progress of this expedition, but merely to notice the effect which its immediate results, the retreat to Corunna, and the Convention of Cintra, produced upon popular feeling in England. As we look back on the history of that time, the folly and madness which seized upon the popular mind when the terms of the Convention of Cintra became known, can only be explained by recalling the high-wrought and extravagant expectations of immediate success with which the war had been entered upon. By this Convention, and as the result of a single battle, Portugal

was wholly evacuated by the French; yet such were the unreasonable demands of public opinion, that because the whole French army had not been made prisoners of war, the Ministry was almost swept away by the outburst, and it could only control the storm by removing the two generals highest in rank. It required all the family and political influence of the third, Sir Arthur Wellesley, to enable him to retain his position in the army. The disastrous retreat of Sir John Moore's army to Corunna, and the easy triumphs of the French at that period throughout all Spain, plunged the English into despair. Going from one extreme to another, men who, only three months before, had quarrelled with the army in Portugal because it had not given them the spectacle of a French marshal and twenty thousand of his soldiers as prisoners of war at Spithead, now spoke openly of the folly of any attempt at all on the part of England to resist the progress of the French arms in the Peninsula. In Parliament there was the usual lame apology for disaster, an attempt to shift the responsibility from the Ministry to the General in command; but the great fact, that all their hopes had been disappointed, still remained, and after the explanations of the government the general despondency became more gloomy than ever. It is not difficult in the light of history to see where the blame of failure should rest. Any one who is disposed now to sneer and cavil at the shortcomings of our own

administration, to impute to it views shortsighted and impracticable in their policy, and to blame it for want of energy and vigor in the prosecution of the war, has only to turn to Colonel Napier's account of the stupid blunders of the English government, its absurd and contradictory orders, its absolute ignorance not only of the elementary principles of all war, but of the very nature of the country in which the army was to operate, and of the resources of the enemy, to be convinced that had its mode of carrying on hostilities (which was the popular one) been adopted, in six months not an English soldier would have remained in the Peninsula except as a prisoner of war. The history of this campaign contains important lessons for us; it shows conclusively that the immediate results of war are never equal to the public expectation, and that if this public expectation, defeated by the imbecility of the government, or soured by disaster in the field, is to be the sole rule by which military operations are to be judged, no war for the defence of a principle can long be carried on.

Fortunately for the fame and the power of England, the ministry, although ignorant of the true mode of prosecuting hostilities, had sense enough to perceive that their only true policy was perseverance. They were strong enough to resist the formidable opposition which the events we have referred to developed in Parliament and the country, and, undismayed by the experience of the past, concluded a

treaty with the Provisional Government of Spain, by which they pledged England never to abandon the national cause until the French were driven across the Pyrenees. The army was placed upon a better footing, was largely reinforced, and Sir Arthur Wellesley was appointed to the chief command. The government, not yet wholly awakened from its illusions, still thought it practicable to reach Madrid in a single campaign, and to that end the efforts of Wellington were directed. It became necessary first to dislodge Soult at Oporto, and the magnificent victory of the English, gained by the passage of the Douro at that point, went far to revive confidence at home in the invincibility of their army. Yet so clear is it that victory in war often depends upon what, for some better name, we may call mere good fortune, that we have the authority of the Duke of Wellington himself for saying, that this army, which had just exhibited such prodigies of valor, was then in such a state of demoralization, that although "excellent on parade, excellent to fight, it was worse than an enemy in a country, and liable to dissolution alike by success or defeat." Certainly no severer criticism has ever been justified by the inexperience and want of discipline of our own raw levies, than that contained in this memorable declaration. A little reflection and candor might perhaps teach us, as it did the English, that nothing can compensate for the want of experience, and that every allowance

is to be made for disasters where it is necessary to educate both officers and soldiers in the actual presence of the enemy. Wellington soon afterwards moved towards the Spanish frontier, hoping by a junction with the army under Cuesta to fight a battle with the French which would open to him the road to the capital. The battle was fought at Talavera, and although it has since been claimed by the English as one of their proudest victories, and the name of TALAVERA is now inscribed upon the standards of the regiments that took part in it with those of Salamanca and Vittoria, yet the result was in the end, that Wellington was obliged to retreat to Lisbon just three months after he had set out from that place, having left his wounded in the hands of the French, having escaped as if by a miracle from being wholly cut off in his retreat, and having lost one-third of his army in battle and by disease. Of course the blame was thrown upon the want of coöperation on the part of the Spaniards. This we have nothing to do with; it is the result of the campaign with which we are concerned. Dependence upon the Spaniards was certainly, as it turned out, a fault, but it was one of the fair chances of war, and it was a fault in which Wellington, made wise by experience, was never again detected.

When the news of the untoward result of this campaign reached England, the clamor against the government and against Wellington was quite as

violent as that excited by the disasters of Sir John Moore's army. The opposition in Parliament took advantage of this feeling to rouse public opinion to such a manifestation as might compel the termination of the war in the Peninsula and drive the ministry from office. The Common Council of London, probably a fair exponent of the opinions of the middle class, petitioned the King not to confirm the grant of £2000 a year, which the Ministry had succeeded in getting Parliament to vote to Wellington. The petitioners ridiculed the idea that a battle attended with such results should be called a victory. "It should rather be called a *calamity*," they said, "since we were obliged to seek safety in a precipitate flight, abandoning many thousands of our wounded countrymen into the hands of the French." In the opinion of the strategists in the Common Council, and of their friends in Parliament, Wellington might be a brave officer, but he was no general; he had neglected the protection of his flanks and his line of communication. When it is remembered, that at this very time, Wellington, profiting by the experience of the past, was diligently making his army really effective within the lines of Torres Vedras, from which stronghold it was in due time to sally forth like a giant refreshed, never to rest until it had planted the English flag on the heights of Toulouse, we may perhaps smile at the presumption of those who, sincere well-wishers to the cause, displayed only their

ignorance in their criticism. But what shall be said of those who, knowing better, being quite able to understand the wisdom of the policy adopted by the General to insure success in the stupendous enterprise in which the country was engaged, yet with a factious spirit, and with the sole object of getting into power themselves, took advantage of the excitement of the ignorant multitude to paralyze the energies of the government? That hideous moral leprosy, which seems to be the sad but invariable attendant upon all political discussions in a free government, corrupting the very sources of public life, breeding only the base spirit of faction, had taken complete possession of the opposition, and in its sordid calculations, the dishonor of the country, or the danger of the army, was as nothing, provided the office, the power, and the patronage of the government were secured in their hands. It mattered little to them, provided they could drive the ministry from office, whether its downfall was brought about by blunders in Spain, or by the King's obstinacy about Catholic Emancipation, or by an obscure quarrel about the influence of the Lords of the bed-chamber. The sincerity of these declamations of the opposition was curiously enough put to the test some time afterwards, when the ministry, wearied by the factious demagoguism with which all their measures were assailed, and understanding perfectly their significance, boldly challenged their

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