

TWO PORTRAITS FROM DE VIGNY

CECIL H. S. WILLSON

A MIDST the welter of memoirs of the Napoleonic era, De Vigny's *Servitude et Grandeur Militaires* always seems to me to hold a peculiar charm and attraction. The very opening sentence of the book, which Tennyson seems to have had in mind in one of his well-known couplets, strikes that keynote of gentle melancholy and disillusion which is so characteristic of the high-souled Captain Renaud with his famous *Canne de Jonc*. "If it is true, according to the Catholic poet, that there is nothing so painful as remembering happy days in the midst of misery, it is also true that the heart finds a certain happiness in recalling times of hardship and slavery in a period of freedom and calm". This same air of philosophic detachment and experienced judgment pervades all the author's reflexions on the rottenness of the military system of the age, and the hollowness of military glory. Incidentally, the book contains also in the story of *Laurette ou le Cachet Rouge* one of the tenderest and most poignant love-stories ever written.

In the course of the Captain's memoirs there stand out in clear detachment the portraits of two of the leading protagonists in the great struggle for supremacy, one of the Emperor himself, the other of the most chivalrous and high-souled of all England's naval commanders, the illustrious Admiral Collingwood.

In 1804, while still a youth, Captain Renaud was appointed one of the Emperor's pages. From his close contact with his master in this capacity he gives us some vivid side-lights on the weakness of the great man. He himself was then at an age when the vision of military glory and the personality and power of the Emperor hypnotized him. Napoleon's love of display to dazzle the eyes of those around him, his tendency to take advantage of the weak and nervous, even his habit of pinching the cheeks and pulling the ears of subordinates, of planting his right hand in his waistcoat, and his great partiality for small cocked hats, violets and grey redingotes, are all faithfully recorded.

The Emperor's characteristic habit of pinching the ears of those with whom he was conversing was brought home to me by a rather remarkable conversation I had some years ago with an old lady

then living in Weybridge. This old lady was the daughter of Sergeant Cox, who served under Wellington in the 50th Regiment of Foot and was present at the battle of Waterloo. Sergeant Cox often told his daughter that later in his career he went to St. Helena with his wife as part of Napoleon's bodyguard. While there, his wife acted as nurse to the children of Count Bertrand, who was in attendance on Napoleon. Mrs. Cox acted in this capacity for some time, but ultimately left the service of Count Bertrand, because Napoleon in his numerous visits to the house was in the habit of pinching her ear, while enquiring after her young charges. She was at that time a young and comely woman, and she so resented this familiarity that she gave up her post. Other memoirs such as those of Bourrienne contain references to the same characteristic.

The young page then goes on to give us a vivid account of one of the most memorable interviews in history, that between Napoleon and Pope Pius VII, in which the Emperor's leading characteristics stand out in bold relief. The page was an unintentional eavesdropper at the interview, having hastily concealed himself behind a curtain in the great *salon*.

In his palace at Fontainebleau the Emperor was very agitated. He kept walking up and down his chamber impatiently. The noise of carriage wheels was heard in the courtyard below. He rushed to the door and opened it. Pius VII entered unattended, and the Emperor hastened to shut the door behind him with the promptitude of a jailor. The Pope was tall, his face marked by suffering, but ennobled by saintliness and kindness. He sat down, calm and dignified, and waited to hear what the other Italian had to say to him.

"Yes, Holy Father, I tell you once more that, in spite of the Republic, I shall attend Mass."

He flung a swift glance at the aged Pope to see what effect these words would produce, but the Pope only lowered his eyes and remained still as a statue. The Emperor continued to cast sidelong glances at him, uneasy with himself and his adversary. "There is one thing, Holy Father, which sticks in my throat, and that is that you consent to this coronation as if you were forced to do so. You assume the air of a martyr in my presence, but there is no need for that; you are not a prisoner, but free as the air".

Pius VII smiled wanly, and looked him in the face. He pierced swiftly that weakness of despotic characters who exact, over and above obedience, an ardent desire on the part of their servants to carry out their commands. "Holy Father", he continued, "if it were not for your sacred office, I should accuse you of ingratitude.

You appear to forget the great services which France has rendered you. The Conclave of Venice, which elected you Pope, was inspired by my Italian campaign and by my personal recommendation. Austria did not treat you well at that time, and now I cannot understand your repugnance to making Paris the centre of your power. If you like, you shall have the Tuileries, all to yourself, with your own private suite of apartments. Don't you see, Father, that the true capital of the world is here? As for myself, I am not so black as I am painted. Provided that political power is left in my hands, the Church will be completely under your control. Think now, what a splendid arrangement it would be. We should hold our councils like Constantine and Charlemagne. I would place in your hands the keys of the world; and as our Lord Himself said, 'I have come with a sword', I would keep the sword myself, only I would bring it for you to bless after each victory".

The Pope who, till then, had remained motionless as some Egyptian statue, slowly raised his lowered head, and with a melancholy smile and a far-off look uttered the one word "Comedian"!

Bonaparte leaped from his chair like a wounded leopard. The room shook, the curtains rustled like leaves on the approach of thunder. The bomb burst. "Ah! Comedian, am I? Well, I will give you comedies that will bring tears to the eyes of all of you. My theatre is the world, and I am master of it. You are all my puppets, Popes, Kings, Peoples, and the thread on which I hold you all is fear! Comedian! Don't you realize that except for me you would be a poor country curé? France would laugh at you, were it not for my recognition of your office. I could wipe you and your power out at a word."

The Pope waited, calm and dignified, till the storm should blow over; then with a bitter smile he uttered the single word "Tragedian".

The Emperor could scarcely restrain himself from laying violent hands on His Holiness. He suddenly seized a priceless Sévres vase and dashed it to the ground, grinding the pieces under his feet. Then he fell into one of his fits of moody silence. "Yes, you are right," he resumed, "it is all a play, all a pose. To dazzle the eyes of the world, to be its master, and then not know what to do with it! How weary I am of it all! Now I can speak frankly to you. I have schemes enough in my head for forty emperors, but before I have carried out two of them I shall be worn out. Our brief lamp is soon snuffed out. And even if all my plans were carried out, I could not swear that the world would be any the better. Well, never mind; it is my business to succeed, and that I know how to do. Those who are born in poverty, like me, must

carve their own fortune. Every man eats according to his appetite, and I have a big one. Look you, Holy Father, at Toulon I had not enough money to buy a pair of epaulettes; instead of these I had a mother and a crowd of brothers on my shoulders. They are all well placed now, and Josephine took pity on me and married me, and now you will crown us in our imperial robes. Yes, Father, there are workers of all kinds, builders, painters and authors, but I am an artist in battles, that is my calling. A throne is no great reward for my victories. Yes, sprung as I am like you from the people, you will see whole dynasties date from me".

He ceased, and drawing near offered his hand to the old man, who, moved for a moment by this touch of kindness, and not perhaps without sad reflections on his own destiny and the future of the Christian Churches, gently gave him his finger tips as a mark of reconciliation. Yet he shook his head sadly, a tear coursed swiftly down his withered cheek. Perhaps it was the last farewell of a dying Christianity betraying the faithful to selfishness and chance, to the rulers of this world.

This remarkable interview was the beginning of disillusion for the young page. The veil began to be removed from his eyes. The dignity of the aged Pope easily surpassed that of his idol. Henceforth he began to realize the petty tricks and cruelty to which political power can descend.

The second outstanding portrait is that of the noblest and most beautiful character amongst England's great naval heroes, that of Admiral Lord Collingwood. The young page, suspected probably by Napoleon, was promptly ordered to sea. His ship was quickly sunk by an English frigate, and he himself rescued from the sea and taken on board the Admiral's ship the "Victory". During the days that followed, the great Admiral showed a special interest in his young prisoner and, in the conversations which took place between them, Collingwood's noble character, deep patriotism, stern sense of duty and touching love of his children are revealed in masterly colours. One evening, when the young prisoner after a month's captivity was sadly gazing at the fast receding coast of France, he turned suddenly to find the Admiral gazing at him. He had his telescope in his hand, and was dressed in full uniform. He placed one hand on the shoulder of his prisoner in a fatherly fashion, and there was a look of deep melancholy in his eyes. His white hair fell carelessly enough over his ears, and there was a depth of sadness in his calm even voice which aroused his hearer's respect and attention. "Ah! my child", he began, "you have been a prisoner for

only a month, and I have been one for thirty-three years. Yes, a prisoner of the sea, which shuts me in on all sides; the everlasting waves, my hairs have grown white beneath their spray and my back bowed beneath their salt. I have spent so short a time in England that I know it only by the map. One's country is an ideal which I have only half seen, but which I serve as a slave. England's claims on me increase in rigour as I become more necessary to her. This is the common lot, and indeed we ought to desire to be bound by such chains, but at times alas! they are very heavy".

The young French officer was deeply moved by the great man taking him thus into his confidence, and requested him to initiate him into the secret of his philosophic calm and loftiness of soul. He thought perhaps it was only an act of perpetual dissimulation in the midst of his weariness.

"There you are wrong", replied the Admiral, "the sentiment of duty so dominates the spirit in the end that it enters into one's character and becomes one of its chief features. I have felt, more perhaps than any man, to what a degree it is possible to forget oneself entirely, but one cannot strip oneself of all human weaknesses".

The Admiral goes on to speak kindly of the lad's father, who had formerly been a prisoner of his, and had fallen in the war. The young officer admits that he knew little of his father, having only seen him at Malta once or twice.

"Ah!" broke out the Admiral, "now you have exposed the real cruelty of this long warfare. My two dear little daughters, Sarah and Mary, they too will say one day 'We do not know our father'; and yet I love them deeply and tenderly, I write to them every day, I direct their reading and their work. I send them the best thoughts I have in me. I know all they are doing. I even think in advance of the future lovers who will marry them, I do my utmost to make them good sincere women; no man could be more of a father to his children, but alas! it is all nothing, for they do not see me"! These last words he uttered in a voice full of emotion. Then he continued, "Yes, Sarah has never sat on my knees, except once when she was two years old, and I only once held Mary in my arms when she was a babe. How can children love the invisible? What am I to them? A letter, a piece of advice—children can love only a living being whom they see, and when I am dead it can mean nothing to them—how can they weep for me"?

The effect of this cry from the heart on the young French officer was to make him realize that even military glory cannot satisfy a truly great soul for the loss of family life and love. He realized, as never before, all that he had lost in his own life because of the

long years of war, and he wept as he thought how this great seaman and stern fighter could be so full of human tenderness and love.

As his health began to fail him, the Admiral begged that his place might be taken by some younger officer. He had not spent ten days in a port since leaving England. His eyesight was failing, but England replied inexorably "You will remain at sea", and sent him another decoration.

At sea he died, where he had lived for forty-nine years without complaint or boast, *without ever seeing again Sarah and Mary*, as solitary and sad as one of those "sea-dogs" of Ossian who keep eternal watch over the coasts of England amidst the waves and sea mist.