

Tremendous Trifles

History

EDMUND A. WALSH, in *The Fall of the Russian Empire* (Little, Brown):

The last Tzar of All Russias, far from being exempt from the psychological idiosyncrasies that influence men's judgment was notoriously subject to them. The shadow of a domestic tragedy lay across his latter years and clouded his reasoning powers. A baby's fingers had been tugging at his heartstrings for a decade, and the image of the Empress, battling for her boy's dynastic rights, held first place at every Council of the Empire.

There usually comes a moment in the conscious development of every human soul when some serious choice, or important decision, or difficult renunciation must be made, and made irrevocably. On that decision frequently depend the lives and fortunes of numerous other human beings—as happens in the case of the engineer of a fast express who discerns, dimly, but not surely, some danger signal set against him; or in the case of the navigator of an ocean liner adrift in a dangerous sea with a broken rudder. Such a moment came to Russia's supreme ruler in the spring of 1917. His decision affected 180,000,000 people.

Now, the instinctive, instantaneous reaction of the alert engineer as he reaches for the emergency brake, or the notions of a seasoned pilot as he endeavors to head his ship into the teeth of the storm instead of exposing his craft broadside to the fury of the waves, are not isolated, unrelated facts bearing no reference to previous training and habitual modes of action.

Such coordination of sense preception, judgment, and manual execution is not the child of chance nor the unflinching perquisite of genius. It is the hard-won achievement of mental discipline. Men in the ways of human nature tell us, too, that there are few real accidents in the moral order, though there are many tragedies.

It was no stern necessity of war, nor gigantic despair, nor sudden conjunction of overpowering circumstances that drove Nicholas II into the course of action that wrecked his empire and provoked the revolution. His every decision and blunder was a palpable, traceable resultant of previous habits acquired with fatal facility. He lived in the grip of a hidden fear which, because it met him every morning at breakfast, dogged him through his hours of domestic privacy, and slept nearby in the nursery at night, had become inescapable and tyrannous. The elimination of Romanov rule, though inevitable in the long run and a political necessity if the Russian people were to survive, was measurably increased by a little prince's inherited weakness of physique and his tendency to bleed at the nose or fall into painful convulsions at the slightest bruising of his sensitive skin. Had her son not been a chronic hæmophilic, had she not been an abnormal hypochondriac, the Empress Alexandra might not have been the innocent tool for Rasputin's machinations, Russia might have been spared the scourges that came upon her, and the world might not have known the challenge of Bolshevism—at least not so soon. What men too

frequently overlook in chronicling the causes of stirring historic events is the essential humanity of kings and queens and the influence exerted by relatively petty factors on the destiny of states and peoples. Had Anne Boleyn been less comely, Henry VII might never have repudiated Katherine of Aragon; there might have been no Spanish Armada, no schism, no religious wars in England. A diamond necklace and a woman's vanity can never be disassociated from the inner history of the French Revolution and the hecatombs of heads that fell into its baskets. Neither can a withered arm be considered irrelevant by investigators of the role played by the German Kaiser in modern times.

That physical deformity, giving rise, during boyhood, to an inferiority complex in the last of the Hohenzollerns, stimulated a conscious—and legitimate—passion to overcome the handicap. The paralyzed hand was trained to rest in a natural way on the sword-hilt hanging at the Kaiser's left side; the feel and rattle of the ever-present saber became part of its wearer's nature and was a necessary adjunct of every photograph depicting Wilhelm in his favorite histrionic attitude. The fixed idea of personal majesty triumphing over physical limitations became a permanent obsession which transformed itself, eventually, into a political nervousity that unsettled Middle Europe from Berlin to Bagdad and would be satisfied with nothing short of a prominent place somewhere in the sun.

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The Well-Bred Indian

Ethnology

J. ALMUS RUSSELL in *The Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*:

All of the history of the peacetime and military events in which the red man had a part has been written by the "civilized" European or his descendants; this, almost without exception, has been biased in order to justify the white man's cruel treatment of the aborigine; only by the most painstaking study can the historian do justice to the noble savage, too often pictured as cruel, ignorant, and ignoble by the greedy colonist. . . .

Benjamin Franklin, in his *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* (1797), prefaced his paper by saying that the red man is called

a *savage* because his manners differ from ours, which we think are the perfection of civility; "they think the same of ours." At the Treaty of Lancaster, in 1744, the Virginia Commissioners offered to take six Indian youths and educate them at William and Mary. They politely refused, saying (according to Franklin):

"Several of our young people were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces; they were instructed in all your Sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods, unable to bear either Cold or Hunger, knew neither how to build a Cabin, take a

Deer, or kill an Enemy, spoke our Language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, or Counsellors; they were totally good for nothing. We are, however, not the less obliged by your kind Offer, tho' we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons we will take great care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them."

The offer was received in silence, courteously refused, and a reciprocal proposition made. Civilization could not ask for more!

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