CHAPTER XXV.

CALAMITIES OF POLAND.

No kingdom in Europe has been subjected to so many misfortunes and changes, considering its former greatness, as the Polish monarchy. Most of the European states have retained their ancient limits, for several centuries, without material changes, but Poland has been conquered, dismembered, and plundered. Its ancient constitution has been completely subverted, and its extensive provinces are now annexed to the territories of Russia, Austria, and Prussia. The greatness of the national calamities has excited the sympathy of Christian nations, and its unfortunate fate is generally lamented.

In the sixteenth century, Poland was a greater state than Russia, and was the most powerful of the northern kingdoms of Europe. The Poles, as a nation, are not, however, of very ancient date. Prior to the ninth century, they were split up into numerous tribes, independent of each other, and governed by their respective chieftains. Christianity was introduced in the tenth century, and the earliest records of the people were preserved by the monks. We know but little, with certainty, until the time of Piast, who united the various states, and whose descendants reigned until 1386, when the dynasty of the Jagellons commenced, and continued till 1572. Under the princes of this line, the government was arbitrary and oppressive. War was the great business and amusement of the princes, and success in it brought the highest honors. The kings were, however, weak, cruel, and capricious, ignorant, fierce, and indolent. The records of their reigns are the records of drunkenness, extortion, cruelty, lust, and violence — the common history of all barbarous kings. There were some of the Polish princes who were benignant and merciful, but the great majority of them, like the Merovingian and Carlovingian princes of the Dark Ages, were unfit to reign, were the slaves of superstition, and the tools of designing priests. There is a melancholy

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gloom hanging over the annals of the Middle Ages, especially in reference to kings. And yet their reigns, though stained by revolting crimes, generally were to be preferred to the anarchy of an interregnum, or the overgrown power of nobles.

The brightest period in the history of Poland was during the reigns of the Jagellon princes, especially when Casimir I. held the sceptre of empire. During his reign, Lithuania, which then comprised Hungary, Bohemia, and Silesia, was added to his kingdom. The university of Cracow was founded, and Poland was the great resort of the Jews, to whom were committed the trade and commerce of the land. But the rigors of the feudal system, and the vast preponderance of the aristocracy, proved unfortunate for the prosperity of the kingdom. What in England was the foundation of constitutional liberty, proved in Poland to be subversive of all order and good government. In England, the representative of the nation was made an instrument in the hands of the king of humbling the great nobility. Absolutism was established upon the ruins of feudalism. But, in Poland, the Diet of the nation controlled the king, and, as the representatives of the nobility alone, perpetuated the worst evils of the feudal system.

Reign of Casimir I.

When Sigismund II., the last male heir of the house of Jagellon, died, in 1572, the nobles were sufficiently powerful to make the crown elective. From this period we date the decline of Poland. The Reformation, so beneficent in its effects, did not spread to this Sclavonic country; and the barbarism of the Middle Ages received no check. On the death of Sigismund, the nobles would not permit the new sovereign to be elected by the Diet, but only by the whole body of the nobility. The plain of Praga was the place selected for the election; and, at the time appointed, such a vast number of nobles arrived, that the plain, of twelve miles in circumference, was scarcely large enough to contain them and their retinues. There never was such a sight seen since the crusaders were marshalled on the field of Chalcedon, for all the nobles were gorgeously apparelled, and decked with ermine, gold, and jewels. The Polish horseman frequently invests half his fortune in his horse and dress. In the centre of the field was the tent of the late king, capable of accommodating eight thousand men. The candidates for the crown were Ernest

The Crown of Poland made Elective.

Arch duke of Austria; the Czar of Russia; a Swedish prince, and Henry of Valois, Duke of Anjou, and brother of Charles IX., king of France.

The first candidate was rejected because the house of Austria was odious to the Polish nobles; the second, on account of his arrogance; and the third, because he was not powerful enough to bring advantage to the republic. The choice fell on the Duke of Anjou; and he, for the title of a king, agreed to the ignominious conditions which the Poles proposed, viz., that he should not attempt to influence the election of his successors, or assume the title of heir of the monarchy, or declare war without the consent of the Diet, or impose taxes of any description, or have power to appoint his ambassadors, or any foreigner to a benefice in the church; that he should convoke the Diet every two years; and that he should not marry without its permission. He also was required to furnish four thousand French troops, in case of war; to apply annually, for the sole benefit of the Polish state, a considerable part of his hereditary revenues; to pay the debts of the crown; and to educate, at his own expense, at Paris or Cracow, one hundred Polish nobles. He had scarcely been crowned when his brother died, and he was called to the throne of France. But he found it difficult to escape from his kingdom, the government of which he found to be burdensome and vexatious. No criminal ever longed to escape from a prison, more than this prince to break the fetters which bound him to his imperious subjects. He resolved to run away; concealed his intentions with great address; gave a great ball at his palace; and in the midst of the festivities, set out with full speed towards Silesia. He was pursued, but reached the territories of the emperor of Germany before he was overtaken. He reached Paris in safety, and was soon after crowned as king of France.

He was succeeded by Stephen, Duke of Transylvania; and he, again, by Sigismund, Prince of Sweden. The two sons of Sigismund, successively, were elected kings of Poland, the last of whom, John II., was embroiled in constant war. It was during his disastrous reign that John Sobieski, with ten thousand Poles, defeated eighty thousand Cossacks, the hereditary enemies of Poland. On the death of Michael, who had succeeded John II.,

Sobieski was elected king, and he assumed the title of *John III.* He was a native noble, and was chosen for his military talents and successes. Indeed, Poland needed a strong arm to defend her. Her decline had already commenced, and Sobieski himself could not avert the ruin which impended. For some time, Poland enjoyed cessation from war, and the energies of the monarch were directed to repair the evils which had disgraced his country. But before he could prosecute successfully any useful reforms, the war between the Turks and the eastern powers of Europe broke out, and Vienna was besieged by an overwhelming army of two hundred thousand Mohammedans. The city was bravely defended, but its capture seemed inevitable. The emperor of Germany, Leopold, in his despair, implored the aid of Sobieski. He was invested with the command of the allied armies of Austrians, Bavarians, Saxons, and Poles, amounting to seventy thousand men. With this force he advanced to relieve Vienna. He did not hesitate to attack the vast forces encamped beneath the walls of the Austrian capital, and obtained one of the most signal victories in the history of war. Immense treasures fell into his hands, and Vienna and Christendom were saved.

But the mean-spirited emperor treated his deliverer with arrogance and chilling coldness. No gratitude was exhibited or felt. But the pope sent him the rarest of his gifts — "the dove of pearls." Sobieski, in spite of the ingratitude of Leopold, pursued his victories over the Turks; and, like Charles Martel, ten centuries before, freed Europe from the danger of a Mohammedan yoke. But he saved a serpent, when about to be crushed, which turned and stung him for his kindness. The dismemberment of his country soon followed the deliverance of Vienna.

He was succeeded, in 1696, by Frederic Augustus, Elector of Saxony, whose reign was a constant succession of disasters. During his reign, Poland was invaded and conquered by Charles XII. of Sweden. He was succeeded by his son, Frederic Augustus II., the most beautiful, extravagant, luxurious, and licentious monarch of his age. But he was a man of elegant tastes, and he filled Dresden with pictures and works of art, which are still the admiration of travellers. His reign, as king of Poland, was exceedingly disastrous. Muscovite and Prussian armies traversed

the plains of Poland at pleasure, and extorted whatever they pleased. Faction was opposed by faction in the field and in the Diet. The national assembly was dissolved by the *veto*, the laws were disregarded, and brute force prevailed on every side. The miserable peasants in vain besought the protection of their brutal yet powerless lords. Bands of robbers infested the roads, and hunger invaded the cottages. The country rapidly declined in wealth, population, and public spirit.

Dismemberment of Poland 1764.

Under the reign of Stanislaus II., who succeeded Frederic Augustus II., in 1764, the ambassadors of Prussia, Austria, and Russia, informed the miserable king that, in order to prevent further bloodshed, and restore peace to Poland, the three powers had determined to insist upon their claims to some of the provinces of the kingdom. This barefaced and iniquitous scheme for the dismemberment of Poland originated with Frederic the Great. So soon as the close of the Seven Years' War allowed him repose, he turned his eyes to Poland, with a view of seizing one of her richest provinces. Territories inhabited by four million eight hundred thousand people, were divided between Frederic Maria Theresa, and Catharine II. There were no scruples of conscience in the breast of Frederic, or of Catharine, a woman of masculine energy, but disgraceful morals. The conscience of Maria Theresa, however, long resisted. "The fear of hell," said she, "restrains me from seizing another's possessions;" but sophistry was brought to bear upon her mind, and the lust of dominion asserted its powerful sway. This crime was regarded with detestation by the other powers of Europe; but they were too much occupied with their own troubles to interfere, except by expostulation. England was disturbed by difficulties in the colonies, and France was distracted by revolutionary tumults.

Stanislaus, robbed of one third of his dominions, now directed his attention to those reforms which had been so long imperatively needed. He intrusted to the celebrated Zamoyski the task of revising the constitution. The patriotic chancellor recommended the abolition of the "liberum veto," a fatal privilege, by which any one of the armed equestrians, who assembled on the plain of Praga to elect a king, or deliberate on state affairs, had power to nullify the most important acts, and even to dissolve the assembly. A

single word, pronounced in the vehemence of domestic strife, or by the influence of external corruption, could plunge the nation into a lethargic sleep. And faction went so far as often to lead to the dissolution of the assembly. The treasury, the army, the civil authority then fell into a state of anarchy. Zamoyski also recommended the emancipation of serfs, the encouragement of commerce, the elevation of the trading classes, and the abolition of the fatal custom of electing a king. But the Polish nobles, infatuated and doomed, opposed these wholesome reforms. They even had the madness to invoke the aid of the Empress Catharine to protect them in their ancient privileges. She sent an army into Poland, and great disturbances resulted.

Liberum Veto.

Second dismemberment of Poland.

Too late, at last, the nobles perceived their folly, and adopted some of the proposed reforms. But these reforms gave a new pretence to the allied powers for a second dismemberment. An army of one hundred thousand men invaded Poland, to effect a new partition. The unhappy country, without fortified towns or mountains, abandoned by all the world, distracted by divisions, and destitute of fortresses and military stores, was crushed by the power of gigantic enemies. There were patriotism and bravery left, but no union or organized strength. The patriots made a desperate struggle under Kosciusko, a Lithuanian noble, but were forced to yield to inevitable necessity. Warsaw for a time held out against fifty thousand men; but the Polish hero was defeated in a decisive engagement, and unfortunately taken prisoner. His countrymen still rallied, and another bloody battle was fought at Praga, opposite Warsaw, on the other side of the Vistula, and ten thousand were slain; Praga was reduced to a heap of ruins; and twelve thousand citizens were slaughtered in cold blood. Warsaw soon after surrendered, Stanislaus was sent as a captive to Russia, and the final partition of the kingdom was made.

"Sarmatia fell," but not "unwept," or "without a crime" "She fell," says Alison, "a victim of her own dissensions, of the chimera of equality falsely pursued, and the rigor of aristocracy unceasingly maintained. The eldest born of the European family was the first to perish, because she had thwarted all the ends of the social union; because she united the turbulence of democratic to the exclusion of aristocratic societies; because she had

the vacillation of a republic without its energy, and the oppression of a monarchy without its stability. The Poles obstinately refused to march with other nations in the only road to civilization; they had valor, but it could not enforce obedience to the laws; it could not preserve domestic tranquillity; it could not restrain the violence of petty feuds and intestine commotions; it could not preserve the proud nobles from unbounded dissipation and corruption; it could not prevent foreign powers from interfering in the affairs of the kingdom; it could not dissolve the union of these powers with discontented parties at home; it could not inspire the slowly-moving machine of government with vigor, when the humblest partisan, corrupted with foreign money, could arrest it with a word; it could not avert the entrance of foreign armies to support the factious and rebellious; it could not uphold, in a divided country, the national independence against the combined effects of foreign and domestic treason; finally, it could not effect impossibilities, nor turn aside the destroying sword which had so long impended over it."

But this great crime was attended with retribution. Prussia, in her efforts to destroy Poland, paralyzed her armies on the Rhine. Suwarrow entered Warsaw when its spires were reddened by the fires of Praga; but the sack of the fallen capital was forgotten in the conflagration of Moscow. The remains of the soldiers of Kosciusko sought a refuge in republican France, and served with distinction, in the armies of Napoleon, against the powers that had dismembered their country.

The ruin of Poland, as an independent state, was not fully accomplished until the year 1832, when it was incorporated into the great empire of Russia. But the history of the late revolution, with all its melancholy results, cannot be well presented in this connection.

REFERENCES. — Fletcher's History of Poland. Rulhière's Histoire de l'Anarchie de Pologne. Coyer's Vie de Sobieski. Parthenay's History of Augustus II. Hordynski's History of the late Polish Revolution. Also see Lives of Frederic II., Maria Theresa, and Catharine II.; contemporaneous histories of Prussia, Russia, and Austria; Alison's History of Europe; Smyth's Lectures; Russell's Modern Europe; Heeren's Modern History.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DECLINE OF THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE.

WHILE the great monarchies of Western Europe were struggling for preëminence, and were developing resources greater than had ever before been exhibited since the fall of the Roman empire, that great power which had alarmed and astonished Christendom in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, began to show the signs of weakness and decay. Nothing, in the history of society, is more marvellous than the rise of Mohammedan kingdoms. The victories of the Saracens and Turks were rapid and complete; and in the tenth century, they were the most successful warriors on the globe, and threatened to subvert the world. They had planted the standard of the Prophet on the walls of Eastern capitals, and had extended their conquests to India on the east, and to Spain on the west. Powerful Mohammedan states had arisen in Asia, Africa, and Europe, and the Crusaders alone arrested the progress of these triumphant armies. The enthusiasm which the doctrines of Mohammed had kindled, cannot easily be explained; but it was fresh, impetuous, and self-sacrificing. Successive armies of Mohammedan invaders overwhelmed the ancient realms of civilization, and reduced the people whom they conquered and converted to a despotic yoke. But success enervated the victorious conquerors of the East, the empire of the Caliphs was broken up, and great changes took place even in those lands where the doctrines of the Koran prevailed. Mohammed perpetuated a religion, but not an empire. Different Saracenic chieftains revolted from the "Father of the Faithful," and established separate kingdoms, or viceroyalties, nearly independent of the acknowledged successors of Mohammed. The Saracenic empire was early dismembered, and the sultans of Egypt, Spain, and Syria contested for preëminence.

But a new power arose on the ruins of the Saracen empire, and became the enthusiastic defenders of the religion of Islam. The