THE KING

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KARL ROSNER

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"Soft, and from a noble stem, this royal flower had sprung up under the immediate influence of majesty: the idea of moral rectitude with that of princely elevation, the feeling of the good and dignified with the consciousness of high birth, had in time been unfolded simultaneously. He was a prince, by birth a prince; and he wished to reign, only that good men might be good without obstruction."—"Wilhelm Meister," IV., 3.

> The time is out of joint: O cursèd spite,
> That ever I was born to set it right!

"In these words, I imagine, will be found the key to Hamlet's whole procedure. To me it is clear that Shakespeare meant, in the present case, to present the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it. . . . A lovely, pure, noble and most moral nature, without the strength of nerve which forms a hero, sinks beneath a burden which it cannot bear and must not cast away. All duties are holy to him; the present is too hard. Impossibilities have been required of him. He winds, and turns, and torments himself; he advances and recoils; is ever put in mind, ever puts himself in mind; at last does all but lose his purpose from his thoughts; yet still without recovering his peace of mind."—"Wilhelm Meister," IV., 13.

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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INTRODUCTION

By VISCOUNT HALDANE

KARL ROSNER'S short but famous historical novel appears in this volume in an English version. The translation is an excellent one and preserves much of Rosner's gift of describing phases of the mind with both delicacy and exactness. The book was soon recognized on the Continent as being a remarkable one. In Germany and Austria its sale has been enormous. The reason of this is more than its mere literary quality. What has made the narrative so generally popular is that the German people seem to have recognized in the picture painted by Rosner a portrait of William the Second that is for them true to life.

The portrait offered to us is that of the late Emperor as he was during the decisive days of the summer of 1918. Hindenburg and Ludendorff had devised and were executing what seemed to them a blow against the allies as secret as it was overwhelming. But the genius of Foch had divined their purpose. He withdrew from his forward positions and let the blow expend its force, mainly in vain. Then he advanced with tremendous swiftness, defending Rheims in his stride, and pouring on the German front and flanks masses of fresh troops.

The story told in these pages is that of the emotions of one who, believing himself to be accepted as the Supreme War Lord, found him-

self, respectfully but firmly, excluded from interference with their plans by the Great General Staff. He, the War Lord, begins gradually to realize that he does not really count as such, and that the army chiefs are the real rulers. He has the sense of deep responsibility if they should fail, and he knows the people of Germany will, as he has always bade them do, look to him and to him alone, whatever the result. This causes him deep pain. If he could only die on the field it would be better than to retreat defeated and having disappointed his people. But even this he sees that the Generals will not permit to him. In the end he reviews his whole life. Never has he really been left free, or treated sincerely. Assurances were given to him of reliance on his divine authority, but that authority was never allowed scope. He has been hemmed in by those around him, who had a less deep sense than himself of what was due from him to God and to the people. It had always been so and it was so in these fateful hours in which he found himself powerless, with disaster staring him in the face and the God on whom he had relied as his inspiration no longer befriending him.

The tragedy is intense, and Rosner thinks of Hamlet, as he describes the unhappy figure. In reality there have been two faiths operative and yet inconsistent; that in a divine mission, and that in an inheritance of power and policy from Frederick the Great. Both were very real in the case of the Emperor. But reconcile them he never could, for they were in truth incapable of being reconciled. What Frederick accomplished for Prussia, even in the old days in the face of the great difficulties and uncertainties, had been accomplished by a man of single and undivided purpose, unhampered by any sense of other duties. The world, too, was different from what it had become,

and William the Second reflects that even Bismarck came to appear conscious that Prussia could only pursue the old policy if new and unceasing caution were exercised. For himself he had felt assured by his faith in the divine source of his mission as King of Prussia. But that mission he had never detached from the old policy. Had he been right, or had he misunderstood the Command of God! How well he had intended even towards those who were now the enemies surrounding him! How little he had been understood! How unreal his position in his own army had turned out to be!

These are the questions with which the King, in the days in which Rosner describes him, is shown as tormenting himself. Not a strong figure, but one for which one cannot but feel compassion. He did not make his own nature, nor did those about him counsel him wisely. Even the ground plan of the Great General Staff was based on what turned out to be a colossal military error. It took insufficient account of the implications of superior sea-power. The result was an effective blockade, and the ultimate weakening of the foundations of the German Army. None of these things were made clear to the Emperor, and yet he had accepted the fullest responsibility for their consequences.

In Count Czernin's book on "The World War" the author describes the position of the Emperor, I think accurately, and certainly in a way that accords with what is said by the author of this book. Czernin declares that "far more than the public imagined the Emperor was a driven rather than a driving factor. Fate seemed to have chosen him to expiate a sin which, if it exists at all, is not so much his as that of his country and his times. The Byzantine atmosphere in Germany was the ruin of William the Second; it enveloped him and clung to him like a creeper