Chapter IX

The Possibility of a World-Empire

THE PROGRESS of the imperial idea from the artificial and constructive stage to the position of a realised psychological truth controlling the human mind with the same force and vitality which now distinguish the national idea above all other group motives, is only a possibility, not a certainty of the future. It is even no more than a vaguely nascent possibility and so long as it has not emerged from this inchoate condition in which it is at the mercy of the much folly of statesmen, the formidable passions of great human masses, the obstinate self-interest of established egoisms, we can have no surety that it will not even now die still-born. And if so, what other possibility can there be of the unification of mankind by political and administrative means? That can only come about if either the old ideal of a single world-empire be, by developments not now apparently possible, converted into an accomplished fact or if the opposite ideal of a free association of free nations overcome the hundred and one powerful obstacles which stand in the way of its practical realisation.

The idea of a world-empire imposed by sheer force is in direct opposition, as we have seen, to the new conditions which the progressive nature of things has introduced into the modern world. Nevertheles, let us isolate these new conditions from the problem and admit the theoretical possibility of a single great nation imposing its political rule and its predominant culture on the whole earth as Rome once imposed hers on the Mediterranean peoples and on Gaul and Britain. Or let us even suppose that one of the great nations might possibly succeed in overcoming all its rivals by force and diplomacy and afterwards, respecting the culture and separate internal life of its subject nations, secure its sway by the attraction of a world-peace, of beneficent administration and of an unparalleled organisation
of human knowledge and human resources for the amelioration of the present state of mankind. We have to see whether this theoretical possibility is at all likely to encounter the conditions by which it can convert itself into a practical possibility, and if we consider, we shall find that no such conditions now exist: on the contrary, all are against the realisation of such a colossal dream— it could only come about by immense changes as yet hidden in the secrecy of the future.

It is commonly supposed that the impulse which brought Germany to her recent struggle with the world was rooted in even such a dream of empire. How far there was any such conscious intention in her directing minds is a question open to some doubt; but it is certain that, if she had prevailed in the war as she had first expected, the situation created would inevitably have led her to this greater endeavour. For she would have enjoyed a dominant position such as no nation has yet possessed during the known period of the world's history; and the ideas which have recently governed the German intellect, the idea of her mission, her race superiority, the immeasurable excellence of her culture, her science, her organisation of life and her divine right to lead the earth and to impose on it her will and her ideals, these with the all-grasping spirit of modern commercialism would have inevitably impelled her to undertake universal domination as a divinely given task. The fact that a modern nation and indeed the nation most advanced in that efficiency, that scientific utilisation of Science, that spirit of organisation, State help and intelligent dealing with national and social problems and ordering of economic well-being which Europe understands by the word civilisation,— the fact that such a nation should be possessed and driven by such ideas and impulses is certainly a proof that the old gods are not dead, the old ideal of dominant Force conquering, governing and perfecting the world is still a vital reality and has not let go its hold on the psychology of the human race. Nor is there any certainty that the recent war has killed these forces and this ideal; for the war was decided by force meeting force, by organisation triumphing over organisation, by the superior or
at any rate the more fortunate utilisation of those very weapons which constituted the real strength of the great aggressive Teutonic Power. The defeat of Germany by her own weapons could not of itself kill the spirit then incarnate in Germany; it may well lead merely to a new incarnation of it, perhaps in some other race or empire, and the whole battle would then have to be fought over again. So long as the old gods are alive, the breaking or depression of the body which they animate is a small matter, for they know well how to transmigrate. Germany overthrew the Napoleonic spirit in France in 1813 and broke the remnants of her European leadership in 1870; the same Germany became the incarnation of that which it had overthrown. The phenomenon is easily capable of renewal on a more formidable scale.

Nor was the failure of Germany any more a proof of the impossibility of this imperial dream than the previous failure of Napoleon. For the Teutonic combination lacked all the necessary conditions except one for the success of so vast an aim. It had the strongest military, scientific and national organisation which any people has yet developed, but it lacked the gigantic driving impulse which could alone bring an attempt so colossal to fruition, the impulse which France possessed in a much greater degree in the Napoleonic era. It lacked the successful diplomatic genius which creates the indispensable conditions of success. It lacked the companion force of sea-power which is even more necessary than military superiority to the endeavour of world-domination, and by its geographical position and the encircling position of its enemies it was especially open to all the disadvantages which must accompany the mastery of the seas by its natural adversary. The combination of overwhelming sea-power with overwhelming land-power can alone bring so vast an enterprise into the domain of real possibility; Rome itself could only hope for something like a world-empire when it had destroyed the superior maritime force of Carthage. Yet so entirely did German statesmanship miscalculate the problem

1 But now also, in a far greater degree, overwhelming air-power.
that it entered into the struggle with the predominant maritime Power of the world already ranked in the coalition of its enemies. Instead of concentrating its efforts against this one natural adversary, instead of utilising the old hostility of Russia and France against England, its maladroit and brutal diplomacy had already leagued these former enemies against itself; instead of isolating England, it had succeeded only in isolating itself and the manner in which it began and conducted the war still farther separated it morally and gave an added force to the physical isolation effected by the British blockade. In its one-sided pursuit of a great military concentration of Central Europe and Turkey, it had even wantonly alienated the one maritime Power which might have been on its side.

It is conceivable that the imperial enterprise may be renewed at some future date in the world’s history by a nation or by statesmen better situated, better equipped, gifted with a subtler diplomatic genius, a nation as much favoured by circumstances, temperament and fortune as was Rome in the ancient world. What then would be the necessary conditions for its success? In the first place, its aim would have small chances of prospering if it could not repeat that extraordinary good luck by which Rome was enabled to meet its possible rivals and enemies one by one and avoid a successful coalition of hostile forces. What possibility is there of such a fortunate progress in a world so alert and instructed as the modern where everything is known, spied on, watched by jealous eyes and active minds under the conditions of modern publicity and swift world-wide communication? The mere possession of a dominant position is enough to set the whole world on its guard and concentrate its hostility against the Power whose secret ambitions it instinctively feels. Therefore such a fortunate succession would only seem to be possible if, in the first place, it were carried out half unconsciously without any fixed and visible ambition on the part of the advancing Power to awaken the general jealousy and, secondly, by a series of favouring occurrences which would lead so near to the desired end that it would be within the grasp before those who could still prevent it had awakened to its possibility.
If, for instance, there were a series of struggles between the four or five great Powers now dominating the world, each of which left the aggressor broken without hope of recovery and without any new Power arising to take its place, it is conceivable that at the end one of them would be left in a position of such natural predominance gained without any deliberate aggression, gained at least apparently in resisting the aggression of others as to put world-empire naturally into its grasp. But with the present conditions of life, especially with the ruinous nature of modern war, such a succession of struggles, quite natural and possible in former times, seems to be beyond the range of actual possibilities.

We must then assume that the Power moving towards world-domination would at some time find inevitably a coalition formed against it by almost all the Powers capable of opposing it and this with the sympathy of the world at their back. Given even the happiest diplomacy, such a moment seems inevitable. It must then possess such a combined and perfectly organised military and naval predominance as to succeed in this otherwise unequal struggle. But where is the modern empire that can hope to arrive at such a predominance? Of those that already exist Russia might well arrive one day at an overwhelming military power to which the present force of Germany would be a trifle; but that it should combine with this force by land a corresponding sea-power is unthinkable. England has enjoyed hitherto an overwhelming naval predominance which it might so increase under certain conditions as to defy the world in arms; but it could not even with conscription and the aid of all its colonies compass anything like a similar force by land, — unless indeed it created conditions under which it could utilise all the military possibilities of India. Even then we have only to think of the formidable masses and powerful empires that it must be prepared to meet and we shall see that the creation of this double predominance is a contingency which the facts themselves show to be, if not chimerical, at least highly improbable.

2 This is no longer true since the enormous increase of the American Navy.
Given even largely superior numbers on the side of its possible enemies, a nation might conceivably prevail over the coalition of its opponents by a superior science and a more skilful use of its resources. Germany relied on its superior science for the successful issue of its enterprise; and the principle on which it proceeded was sound. But in the modern world Science is a common possession and even if one nation steals such a march on the others as to leave them in a position of great inferiority at the beginning, yet experience has shown that given a little time, — and a powerful coalition is not likely to be crushed at the first blow, — the lost ground can be rapidly made up or at least methods of defence developed which will largely neutralise the advantage gained. For success, therefore, we should have to suppose the development by the ambitious nation or empire of a new science or new discoveries not shared by the rest which would place it in something like the position of superiority over greater numbers which Cortez and Pizarro enjoyed over the Aztecs and Peruvians. The superiority of discipline and organisation which gave the advantage to the ancient Romans or to the Europeans in India is no longer sufficient for so vast a purpose.

We see, therefore, that the conditions for the successful pursuit of world-empire are such that we need hardly take this mode of unification as within the bounds of practical possibility. That it may again be attempted, is possible; that it will fail, may almost be prophesied. At the same time, we have to take into account the surprises of Nature, the large field we have to allow to the unexpected in her dealings with us. Therefore we cannot pronounce this consummation an absolute impossibility. On the contrary, if that be her intention, she will suddenly or gradually create the necessary means and conditions. But even if it were to come about, the empire so created would have so many forces to contend with that its maintenance would be more difficult than its creation, and either its early collapse would bring the whole problem again into the field for a better solution or else it would have, by stripping itself of the elements of force and domination which inspired its attempt, to contradict the essential aim of its great effort. That, however, belongs to another side of our
subject which we must postpone for the moment. At present we may say that if the gradual unification of the world by the growth of great heterogeneous empires forming true psychological unities is only a vague and nascent possibility, its unification by a single forceful imperial domination has passed or is passing out of the range of possibilities and can only come about by a new development of the unexpected out of the infinite surprises of Nature.