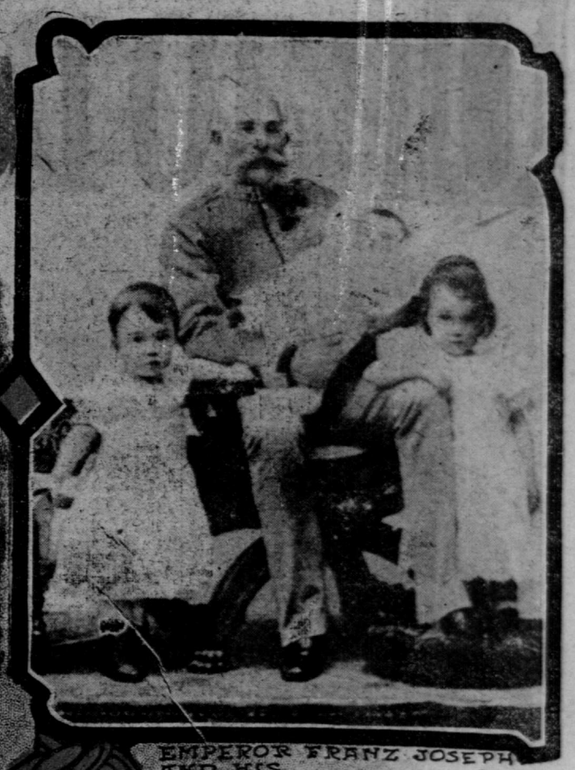
The Hoodooed House of Hapsburg

Emperor Franz Joseph's Long Reign of Tragedy and the Sinister Fate Which Has Followed the Members of the Royal Austrian Family

CROWN PRINCE RUDOLPH WHO WAS BEATEN TO DEATH



EMPEROR FRANZ JOSEPH AND HIS GRANDCHILDREN.

THE EMPRESS ELIZABETH WHO WAS ASSASSINATED

CARLOTTA, WIFE OF MAXIMILIAN, WHO WENT INSANE.

EMPEROR MAXIMILIAN, WHO WAS EXECUTED.

By Edwin Emerson Jr.
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JUST as empires and nations have their rise and fall, so do families and dynasties. In some instances both go together.

A case in point is the present low fortunes of the empire of Austria, which have followed steadily upon the successive misfortunes, mistakes and tragic catastrophes that have befallen the ruling imperial house of Hapsburg.

From the point of view of poetic justice perhaps this is but as it should be, since the rise of the house of Hapsburg from its first beginnings in the early middle ages was never gained by personal effort or military prowess, but almost invariably by well calculated matrimonial matches, supplemented by cold, diplomatic cunning.

Thus it was that the descendants of the first count of Hapsburg in Switzerland, whose six daughters all married ruling princes, ultimately became kings and emperors, ruling all the richest domains of Europe and of America as well until one of them, the great Charles V, could boast that the sun never set on his dominions.

Yet no sooner was this high zenith reached when the imperial sun begun to set even faster than it had risen. The mighty Emperor Charles V himself was the first to weary of his scepter, and, letting it fall from his listless fingers, hid himself away in a monk's cowl behind the walls of a cloister.

Defeats in the Field

After that followed disaster after disaster for Hapsburg, signalized by defeats on land and on sea, from the loss of the armada and the loss of the Netherlands down to the ruinous wars for the Austrian succession and Maria Theresa's seven years' war with Frederick the Great. After the loss of Silesia to Prussia, came the loss of the Italian provinces to the French, followed shortly by the crushing defeats inflicted by Moreau and Napoleon at Hohenlinden, at Marengo, Ulm, Austerlitz and Wagram, followed by the loss of the Tyrol, the Illyrian provinces and Dalmatia.

Yet these disastrous losses of the best blood and lands of Austria were not as serious to the pride of Hapsburg as the loss of personal prestige sustained from the unavenged murder of the Princess Marie Antoinette; from the unbroken record of military failures achieved by the Austrian archdukes in the field and from the shameful marriage of the Princess Marie Louise to the upstart Corsican.

The beginning of the end came with the enforced abdication of Francis as emperor of Rome and of Germany. With his remaining subjects in Austria, Bohemia and Hungary, this ill starred ruler was made thoroughly unpopular by the odious misrule of his prime minister, Metternich. Under Ferdinand matters went from bad to worse. When the storm broke Metternich went down in disgrace, dragging his master down with him. Thanks to the renunciation of his father, the crown of St. Stephen descended upon Francis Joseph, then a beardless princeling. With it went an ominous heritage of Hapsburg—hatred and incompetence.

If these reigns were ill starred, what is to be said of the reign of his successor, Francis Joseph, as viewed through the vista of the last 60 years?

Beginning in revolution and hatred, it has ended in such, truly a record reign not only in years, but in disasters and tragedies.

While there seems to have been no tangible connection between the private misfortunes of the family of Hapsbury and the public disasters that have befallen the patchwork empire of Austria-Hungary, no one can fail to see that private and public calamities have always stalked hand in hand until it became an open question which was the worst sufferer, the stricken head of the empire or the worse stricken head of the house.

Long protracted as Francis Joseph's rule has been, the history of its 60 years can be told by a brief enumeration of its most signal setbacks.

At the outset of the reign in 1848 came the revolution in Hungary, in Bohemia and at the very doors of the imperial palace in Vienna.

When the mob broke into the reichsrath and surged up to the portals of the kaiserburg Prince Metternich, the author of it all, took to his heels and Emperor Ferdinand abdicated. His brother did not care to take up the crown. The hopes of the empire were centered on the brother's oldest son, Francis Joseph.

By a conciliatory policy Francis Joseph might have won all the love of the Czechs and Magyars and could thus have cemented his crumbling empire. Instead of that he chose to use repressive measures. With the help of a Russian army, Hungary was devastated and beaten into submission. The Hungarian patriots, men like Kossuth, Deak, Goergey and Batthyani, were either driven into exile or put to death. The result of it all was a heritage of fierce resentment and racial antipathy which has lasted until the present day.

The revolution in Italy was put down in the same ruthless manner, till the name of Austria in Italy spelled only hatred. Italy's hour of deliverance struck in 1859, when Cavour gained the alliance of France. Then Emperor Francis Joseph took the field. He was defeated decisively on the disastrous day of Solferino, when 25,000 of his loyal Austrian soldiers lost their lives. Further battles at Magenta and Novera were equally disastrous. Northern Italy was lost to Austria, all but Venetia.

Maximilian's Tragic Death

Francis Joseph's brother, Maximilian, had been Austria's stake holder in Italy. Now he was without a job. By way of compensation Napoleon III a few years later offered him the imperial crown of Mexico, which was being invaded by a French army aided by Austrian and Belgian auxiliaries. Maximilian's wife, Carlotta, was a Belgian, the sister of the scapegrace Leopold.

Maximilian was allowed to accept the Mexican "imperial crown" only on condition of abdicating his rights of succession to the throne of Hapsburg; though in a secret document he repudiated this agreement as obtained under duress.

All Americans are familiar with the sequel. Maximilian, after paying the third Napoleon his price, 74,000,000 francs, was abandoned by him in Mexico on a peremptory hint from our government that the French must evacuate Mexico within 60 days. He was taken captive at Queretaro and shot under the terms of his own fatal decree condemning to death as an outlaw any man taken in arms in Mexico. Since the execution of Louis XVI and his Austrian wife no such tragic fate had befallen any reigning house of Europe. Maximilian's widow, the Empress Carlotta, lost her reason and is still confined as a violent maniac in an insane asylum in Belgium.

Maximilian's body was taken home to Trieste by Admiral Tegethoff on the Austrian man-of-war Novara, the ship on which Maximilian in his youth had sailed around the globe.

Both the names of the commander and of the ship must have had a tragic ring to Austrians, since it was at Novara that Napoleon III had his headquarters when he defeated Francis Joseph, while it was Admiral Tegethoff who won the fruitless naval victory of Lissa in the disastrous war of 1866. It was then that Austria definitely lost her ascendency in Germany after the brief six weeks' war with Prussia, which ended in the crushing defeat of Sadowa. As one of the results of this war Francis Joseph lost Venice and Venetia.

Since then the so called empire of Austria-Hungary has been but a second class power; a crazy patchwork quilt of different races and dominions hostile to one another. Its history has been little more than a succession of ill adjusted differences between the warring races, to offset which there were only constantly renewed alliances with Germany in which Austria played second fiddle to her powerful neighbor.

Even now the kingdom of Hungary appears to be once more on the verge of secession and civil war.

Such has been the course of public and political events in the history of Austria-Hungary during the last 60 years.

Ten Decades of Disaster

The record of events in the private family history of the Hapsburgs is even more sinister; the most tragic in fact of any ruling family of Europe.

Francis Joseph, as has been told, ascended the throne amid turmoil and revolutions on December 2, 1848, when he was a mere lad of 18. The Hungarian half of his kingdom refused to acknowledge him, and a Magyar army marched on his capital. Even in Vienna itself the people rose against him. The rebel flag was raised over the cathedral of St. Stephen. The young emperor had to flee to Innsbruck. His first measures of government were acts of civil war.

Among the revolutionists a price was set on his head. One assassin, Libenyi, managed to plunge a dagger into the young emperor's breast, and came within a hair's breadth of killing him.

He had scarcely recovered from his wound when he was induced by his political counselors to marry Princess Elizabeth of Austria. This marriage of convenience proved a profoundly unhappy match from first to last. Elizabeth was in love with her cousin, young Prince Louis of Bavaria, who afterward went violently insane and committed suicide. Elizabeth's older sister married the king of Naples, who not only maltreated her atrociously, but lost his throne into the bargain. The younger sister, the duchess of Alencon, was burned to death in a charity bazaar at Paris.

Elizabeth herself was so unhappy in her marriage that she twice fled from her husband—first to Madeira and the last time to Corfu in the Mediterranean. She refused to be reconciled to him until the tragic death of their only son, Crown Prince Rudolph, who was murdered together with his mistress, the Baroness Vetsera, at the castle of Meyerling, in 1889. Both were murdered after an all night brawl, in which the baroness' brothers are said to have figured. The official version was "heart failure." The most charitable private version was "suicide." King Leopold of Belgium, whose daughter was married to Prince Rudolph, wrote to the pope: "All reports are better than the knowledge of the real, hideous truth."

After Rudolph's death, Archduke John Salvator, one of the heirs presumptive to the throne of Austria, lost faith in the fortunes of his house. He renounced his titles and all his rights to the succession, and, dropping the ancient name of Hapsburg for that of simple John Orth, he embarked on a ship bound for America. Neither he nor his ship were ever heard of again. With him perished the best brains of the house of Hapsburg.

A few years later the tide of misfortune shifted to another scion of the Hapsburg family, Princess Maria Christina, queen regent of Spain. The war with America, fought during her reign, ended disastrously for Spain, and the last of her transoceanic possessions were lost to her infant son. It was the end of his proud ancestors' boast that the sun never set on his dominions. All Austria mourned with Spain.

Then came the startling tragedy of the assassination of Empress Elizabeth in Switzerland. While boarding a steamer on the lake of Geneva she was stabbed to death by an Italian anarchist named Luigi Luccheni. It was a senseless murder, inasmuch as the empress had never exercised the slightest influence over politics, either directly or indirectly. Down to the very day of her death it was notorious that she had no influence whatever over her husband. With her death vanished the last personal hold that Francis Joseph had over his Hungarian subjects, for Empress Elizabeth was the only member of the emperor's household for whom the chivalrous Magyars had any regard.

Thus tragically stripped by fate of brother, son and wife and bereft as well of the love of his people, Francis Joseph now became a recluse. Thus he has remained for nearly a decade, a broken down old man.

The last time he was called upon to exercise his prerogative as head of the house of Hapsburg was when his cousin, the Archduchess Louise Antoinette of Tuscany, the wife of the present king of Saxony, left her husband and children to run off with a French music teacher, who has since abandoned her.

Then the stricken old emperor from his castle of Schoenbrunn issued a wrathful, imperial decree forbidding the erring princess further to bear the name or arms of Hapsburg and depriving her of all her princely titles. More annoying to the countess of Montignoso, as she now styles herself, undoubtedly was the fact that the imperial exchequer and privy purse of Hapsburg has been closed to her for good.

Even as the imperial throne of Hapsburg has proven but a seat of tragedy to its last incumbent, so the succession to the throne looms up as but another source of distress.

Who Accepts the Heritage?

Under the old Hungarian law the throne by right should go to one of Francis Joseph's daughters, as it did in the glorious days of Maria Theresa, but that has been done away with. The next heir to the throne is Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Este, a son of Francis Joseph's dead brother, Charles Louis. But the prince of Este, unfortunately for his rights of succession, married a morganatic wife, the Countess Chotek, so that his children cannot succeed him on the throne. Therefore it is believed that he will renounce the crown in favor of his young nephew, Archduke Charles Louis.

So much is certain: whoever inherits the throne inherits with it a full cup of grief, hatred and unhappiness, for such is the latter day lot of all reigning princes of Hapsburg.