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A Brief History of the War of the Spanish Succession

A.J. Grant

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To whom would his dominions pass at his death? It was certain at least that Spain would not be able to determine the point for herself. She displayed every mark of a weak and decaying power. The confusion of her finances was as bad as that of France, and her resources far less, for the system of taxation in Spain had for some time past crushed the industrial and commercial life of the country as completely as if it had been designed for that end, and no Colbert had arisen to give her industries a new impulse. The monarchy of Spain had, like that of France, tried to crush out all local and provincial liberties; but it had been directed with far less vigor and intelligence. Local and provincial feeling still subsisted in great strength, but they had no constitutional outlets, and hence there was a constant danger of secret and revolutionary movements against the Crown. The upper classes and the countless ecclesiastics were privileged and exempt from taxation. The complete success of the Counter-Reformation in Spain, though it had corresponded to the temper and wishes of the people, had depressed all thought and speculation, and kept the country in the old, and now ruinous, routine. The vast wealth of the Church, its innumerable monastic establishments, and its encouragement of mendicancy were among the chief causes of the poverty of the country. The thoughts and the imagination of the people were turned to the past: hardly an effort was made to adapt the government or occupations of the country to the changing needs of the age. The population had alarmingly decreased. It was estimated that in the days of Charles V there had been twenty millions of inhabitants in the peninsula; but in the year 1700 the estimate was between six and seven millions. The former estimate was probably too high, the latter too low; but that the decrease in the population was really very great does not admit of doubt. The army had sunk in the reign of Charles II to an ill-paid and ill-equipped force of about twenty thousand men; and during the whole course of the war, which was about to break out, Spain, once so fertile in great captains, did not produce a single soldier of note. The dignity, the courage, the heroic fibre of the people were still there; but the political effectiveness of Spain as a State had departed. She had been called "a colossus stuffed with clouts" by an English observer in the days of Queen Elizabeth, and the estimate was at last generally seen to be true...

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