

## "Charles XII"

*And the Collapse of the Swedish Empire. By R. Nisbet Bain. Heroes of the Nations. G. P. Putnam's Sons.*

THE DIFFICULTIES associated with writing the story of "The Lion of the North" are not slight. They may be seen partly in an opinion by his great descendant, Gustavus III., who said that "Charles XII. was rather extraordinary than great. He certainly had not the true conquering temperament, which simply aims at acquisition of territory. Charles took dominions with one hand, only to give them away with the other. Superior to Alexander, with whom it were an injustice to compare him, he was as much inferior to his rival, Peter, in the qualities which make a great ruler, as he excelled him in those qualities which go to make a great hero." The task, however, of describing the character of such a man was evidently committed to worthy hands. To be sure, the book before us has conspicuous limitations, but in its field it is successful. Only the lines along which the complete biography should be written are attempted, but these are all brought out clearly and interestingly; and in the presentation of facts here made, the erroneous notions for which Voltaire's romantic "*Histoire de Charles XII.*" is mainly responsible have been dissipated.

One hears often that the history of Sweden has been the history of her kings, and Mr. Bain's narrative seems to emphasize still further that familiar verdict. An introductory survey of previous rulers—Charles XI. especially—reveals facts in harmony with this idea. Then, when the records come to 1697-1719, we are told of the boy-king, of the beginnings of the great northern war and Narva, of the king-maker in Poland and the Szeszczyński episode, of Charles's activities as the arbiter of Europe for a few brief years after 1704, of the Russian war from Narva to Pultawa, of the heroic Turkish exile, and so on up to the last venture. In all of these proceedings, the view is one of the king. His marvelous deeds at arms, his obstinate adherence to senseless plans, his career as a soldier and as a diplomat, fill up most of the book. Yet the lines of the larger biography would be clearly mistaken, were we to pass by the suggestion, at least, of other points of view. The meaning of the hero-king's policy was printed in hard characters among his subjects. The portrait is sad, full of heroism and of lessons. Such devotion and such distress go not often together. It has been amply proved, though not in this volume, that from 1709 to 1719 Sweden was rushing to economic ruin at an ever accelerating speed. The life of the king was the prime obstacle in the way of peace, and, for want of that, the nation had been sacrificing and perishing. The Continental policy of its rulers was not built on broad enough foundations, and failure in maintaining it was inevitable. The death of Charles "meant the speedy and complete extinction of Sweden's political greatness, but it was a distinct benefit to the Swedish people."

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