

LOUIS KOSSUTH, THE HUNGARIAN PATRIOT.

ENGLISHMEN are wont to boast of the age of their liberal institutions, even as they are proud of their ancestry and their old castles and their grandfathers' clocks. They are too apt to think that the essential principles of constitutional government, which have been theirs for centuries, were first recognized and developed in their own history. They point to the Magna Charta not only as the basis of their own liberties, but as the foundation of all that personal freedom of the subject which is so largely enjoyed the world over. This is only partly true.

Only seven years after the Great Charta was wrested from King John at Runnymede, the Golden Bull was proclaimed by the Hungarian Parliament, and the king was forced to give his consent to its provisions, the last of which was that "if the king should despise the laws of his country, then the magnates and freemen should be entitled to resist the authority of such a king without thereby incurring the penalties of high treason." This was only the confirmation of rights which the Hungarian nation had enjoyed from the earliest days of its government. The doctrine that kings held their power by Divine right, and that resistance to them was a crime, was held in England as late as the seventeenth century, but never succeeded in getting a foothold in Hungary.

When the barbarous tribes who came from the Steppes of Asia and laid the first foundation of the Hungarian nation, started upon their expedition of colonizing conquest, they made a solemn agreement that their king should be elected, that he should be bound by a compact to respect their rights, and that "if he should break the contract he should be deposed and cursed and banished." Through all the subsequent stages of Hungarian history, in the midst of civil dissensions and of foreign wars, this principle of the responsibility of their kings to the people and the right of the people to hold them accountable for their use of power, and to depose and banish them in case of its abuse, was never for one moment relinquished.

It was not until the time of Cromwell that the people of England could hold their king to an equal responsibility, but no king ever ascended the Hungarian throne who did not recognize his responsibility to her parliament and subject himself to all the attendant conditions. Thus while England's Declaration of Rights became fact in 1215, some seven years before the Hungarians openly secured similar liberties, the spirit and temper of the people were so much more in harmony with the principles involved, that these liberties at once became recognized and recognizable, never more to be disowned or disputed; while in England it was many tardy years before the national mind grasped and retained the precious rights that should have been theirs before, and several solemn verifications of the Charter were required before the English kings accepted the will of the people.

The Bulla Aurea, or Golden Bull, of the

Hungarians was wrung from Andreas II. in 1222. He was a weak, extravagant, and over-ambitious king. In trying to extend his domain he brought distress upon the country. Business was prostrated, and finances became so disarranged that he was obliged to sell crown lands to maintain the military establishment. He made favorites of foreigners and treated the native aristocracy with contempt. At last, unwilling to endure further exactions, the nobility determined to put an end to the royal prerogatives and forced this document from the king. It is interesting in these last enlightened days of the nineteenth century, to notice some of the enactments of this great charter, promulgated in the early days of the thirteenth. The comparison is only a comparison and not a contrast, and is not to the disadvantage of the earlier law to any extent. Personal freedom was secured to all, it being rendered illegal to imprison or punish any one who had not been summoned



"Still they say it is I who inspired the people of Hungary. No! A thousand times, No! It is they who inspired me."
— LOUIS KOSSUTH.

and convicted by the ordinary tribunals. The nobility were to be exempt from taxation, but were required to do military service at their own expense. They could not be compelled to serve in an aggressive war nor on other than Hungarian territory. Persons could dispose of their estates by will without interference from the king. Foreigners were excluded from holding office unless naturalized. While the nobility were carefully protected from oppression by the king, ample safeguards were placed between the nobility and the people.

The reader can scarcely fail to be struck with the singular coincidence of two countries so little known to each other, as were England and Hungary, having obtained within seven years of each other, through the weakness of their monarchs, the great charters of their liberties. The Hungarians were at that time doubtless superior to the English in enlightened notions of freedom, of civil rights and of political privileges.

The Hungarians are the descendants of a war-like race of Tartars who inhabited the vast

plains lying between the frozen regions of Siberia and the genial valleys of China. It was a defence against the inroads of these Tartars that the great wall of China was built about 200 B.C. These two peoples were constantly at war with each other until finally the Chinese gained the mastery, when a large body of Tartars, unwilling to submit to the conquerors and having assumed the name of Magyars, started westward in search of a new home, and finally after much wandering took possession of the valleys along the Danube to which they gave the name of Hungary.

From the time the Magyars became established in Hungary the neighboring nations were filled with alarm and astonishment and not without cause. The terror of their arms soon spread all over Europe to France and Italy, and the potentates were forced to conciliate them with gifts of the most costly and magnificent character. These predatory expeditions ceased early in the tenth century under the rule of Geisa and his enlightened and devoted wife Sarolta, and the attention of the people was diverted from the arts of war and directed to the pursuits of peace. For many years the nation prospered and increased in wealth and knowledge. Their kings were generally wise and patriotic. With an occasional exception, their lives were unstained by the violence, oppression and crime which so often marks the early history of the nations. They were solicitous for the welfare and happiness of the people rather than their own advancement. They firmly upheld the dignity of the Hungarian crown and the independence of the nation and maintained order and contentment at home by judicious laws and prudent regulations. In short, a horde of wandering barbarians were in the course of a century, transformed into a civilized and christian nation not behind the foremost in its views of civil liberty and tolerance and with more true ideas of just government than the more civilized nations of Europe. During the latter part of the fourteenth century Hungary was recognized as the most powerful country in Europe. For many years it maintained this position, chiefly by the sagacity of its kings and the bravery of its soldiers. Amongst these notables were John Hunyadi, the ablest commander of the time, but for whose skill and foresight the Turks would have swept over the whole of Europe; and Matthias Corvinus, the best king that ever sat on the throne of Hungary, who knew so well how to maintain and adorn his exalted position that he would seem one of those rare instances where fortune awarded a crown to one whom nature had formed to wear it worthily.

Unfortunately in the sixteenth century the accidental drowning of Louis II left Hungary without a king. The Diet elected John Zapolya, the governor of the Provinces and commander of the army, to the throne; some Hungarian magnates, bribed by Austrian gold, proclaimed for Ferdinand of Hapsburg the ruling house in Austria then as now. For eleven years the rivals contested for the throne and the country was drenched in blood. Each contestant asked for assistance from the Sultan of Turkey and it was granted to Zapolya. Peace was at last concluded by dividing the country, giving each a portion to rule over. Thus the Hapsburgs got a foothold on the throne of Hungary that