

THE MAGNA CHARTA AND THE "NECESSARY DEVIL"

Today, the fifteenth of June, 1915, was the seven hundredth anniversary of one of the most important milestones in British history, the signing by King John of the Magna Charta, which laid the foundations of English political and personal liberty. In normal times this would have been celebrated by pageants and festivities of many kinds, but now we celebrate it in a much sterner yet none the less real fashion. It is safe to say that but for the Great Charter and the principles it guaranteed and embodies England would never have held the traditional position of Champion of the Freedom in Europe.

John Lackland, from whom we got our charter, was probably the worst king that ever reigned in England. Avaricious, cowardly, a blusterer, a profligate, a tyrant, no one could have expected that from his reign we would date the birth of the free English nation. But his very crimes drove the component parts of the nation together. Normans and Saxons, the Church, the Nobles and the Commons, all at last were forced to forget their mutual jealousies and to stand side by side in the great cause of freedom. John was "the necessary devil", the role which Mr. Stead—when he sought to bring about "the United States of Europe"—used to accord to the sultan of Turkey, the role, in fact which Germany and the Kaiser fill today. A force which by its very hatefulness led all men of good will to unite against it.

There are critics who have pointed out that many of those who framed the charter and forced the King to sign it were tyrants themselves. This does not detract from its value. It is there, nevertheless, and succeeding generations of Britons have successfully based their claims of freedom upon this foundation. It is, of course, a mistake to suppose that the principles of the Charter originated among the men of King John's reign. Stephen Langton found a Charter in St. Paul's which had been signed by Henry I a hundred years before, and it in its turn was based upon laws, customs and principles which dated back to the dim beginnings of Saxon history. To the Great Charter, however, we owe their firm establishment in the face of the world. So, when the freedom which we expect comes at length to a distracted Europe, we can look back with gratitude to the stately churchmen and haughty barons who forced the signature from the tyrant John Lackland that morning on the Isle of Runnymede seven hundred years ago.