

I recently learned of Kaiser Wilhelm the II's medical abuse as a child due to his condition: Erb's Palsy. This caused his left arm to be significantly weaker and smaller than his right. Learning of this abuse, which was an endeavor by his father, Frederick the 3rd, to make him stronger, I was fascinated at how this disability was seen as a political and dynastic failure. I wondered how far these barbaric childhood treatments on the young prince had affected him into his adulthood and reign, which was marked by insecurities and the effect on his psyche in general as he led the world into the First World War. I hope this story gives a flavour of that.

## His Right Arm Raised

He was born into a palace, a palace of silks and oils. But the rooms always smelled faintly of iron.

When the boy, small and pale as a lily, commanded his arms to rise, wave at the neat rows of soldiers passing beneath the ornate, crystalline windows,

only his right obeyed. He caught a glimpse of his mother, eyes like a hawk, staring at him through a small window cut into the door. She flinched. A hollow cheeked matron, her skin clinging to her facebones like old parchment beckoned the boy, 'The doctors await you, boy. Best not keep them waiting.' A pause. 'They don't like to be kept'. He shuddered, goosebumps slowly rising like frost across a windowpane. The doctors. The boy didn't know if they were really doctors: the doctors from stories always wanted to help cure some unknown ailment with potions and herbs. These doctors didn't use herbs.

A short march later, the boy, flanked by the matron and a guard with his mother following a few dozen yards behind, reached the corridor. This part of the palace was deep underground with sterile white walls pressing in on him from either side, as if they were trying to swallow him whole. The guard suddenly wheeled around, standing to attention with his rifle at his side- they were here. The door was hard to spot, unless you were looking for it. It lay in shadow, blending into the wall on either side of it, and instead of a doorknob it had three iron bolts, each of them looking like it would take two hefty men to lift. He'd never seen them lifted, as it was always opened outwards, from the inside. The matron rapped one, two, three times on the steel entrance. A few seconds later, a groan, soft at first then swelling louder, arose from inside the room as the door ever so slowly inched open, revealing what lay inside. The boy shut his eyes. He couldn't go in, to the machines, and the bath and all the horrors laying in wait on the other side of the entrance. He couldn't.

He stopped, on the threshold of the room, steadied himself on the metal walls. A nudge on his back, the matron, getting more insistent the longer he stood, right arm holding himself steady, his breath getting shallower, quicker, more panicked. Not unkindly, the matron spoke, 'They only wish to make you stronger, make you better.' She paused. 'Go forward, child,' she insisted sternly, her hand pushing harder now. And he did.

As he stumbled over the threshold, bony-faced matron prowling behind him, he kept his eyes down, away from the doctors with faces carved from ice and stone, away from the steel bathtub, slaughtered hare waiting, as if standing at attention, its tongue lolling out like a grotesque salute. He glanced up, almost not of his own volition, as he swallowed deeply. The air tasted of metal. One of the doctors, the big man with a white rag tied around his face, grasped the boy's wrist and gestured towards the large grey basin that acted as the bathtub. Another doctor, another face shielded with white, turned a knob above it. After a few seconds, water began to sputter out. The boy could guess its temperature. As the matron stood over him, commanding him to undress, he reached out a finger toward the now steady stream. As soon as his finger contacted the liquid, he flinched back, his finger feeling as though bitten clean through by frost.

Before the tub had reached its maximum, the doctor who had turned the knob began to squeeze the hare. Squeeze, harder and harder until its life juices ran

wild. They streaked the once-pristine steel, staining the water a deep crimson. The boy stared. He couldn't stop himself. Just as he couldn't stop the bony-faced, withered matron as she lifted him up, and then down. Down. His toes reached the icy surface first, curling up like dead spiders. Then, his ankles, shins, knees, thighs. He gasped, hyperventilating as he reached the bottom, his head poking out of the water like a soldier's arm, raised in glacial salute. The matron, noticing his panicked breathing, spoke, almost warmly, but not quite, 'The hare is one of the strongest of beasts, boy. You shall take on his strength; your arm will be fixed.' As if she could read his answering stare she said, stepping closer, voice sharper, 'You know why, boy. Your father's orders.' She lost the warmth now; the warmth that had never reached her eyes. She stepped back, nodding to one of the doctors. The boy's pupils dilated as he shivered. They were preparing it, the machine. The arm machine. The stretcher.

He stepped out of the tub, his body stained with a tinge of red, the matron commanding him forward. Struggling to get over the rim with just one arm, frozen muscles trembling, he noticed what he had not before. A window, cut into the space just behind the tub that lay in a shadowy corner of the room. Not even big enough to fit a full face in, he still recognised the grey eyes on the other side of that invisible barrier. They belonged to his mother. Then, as soon as he noticed, they receded back. Away. Away from him.

Stumbling out of the bloody water, the boy's blood ran colder than the bath. It was ready. The stretcher. He took a few involuntary steps backwards, turned to look for his mother again in the window. He couldn't see her. He heard the matron's disappointed sigh behind him. He knew what she thought. What they all thought. What they knew. He was weak. He was weak and he knew it. He was too weak to stop them, too fragile, too small. Even his whimpers, sharp and desperate, could not stop them. Too weak as the doctors strapped him to the chair, forced his arm into the cold embrace of the stretcher. Too weak as they turned the wheel, inch by inch. The stretcher held him fast, biting into his left arm, and still the wheel turned, dragging him closer to what lay beyond. He screamed. Screamed as the wheel creaked, screamed as the doctor adjusted the straps. Screams ripped out of him as the matron watched on. Screaming. Yet it continued. It always did.

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The man, pale as frost on old marble, stood over the map, troops poised on the borders of France and Belgium, right arm gesturing to the small assembled group of men in pristine grey uniforms. 'The orders, Your Majesty?' one of the generals asked. The man paused. They would listen to him; they had to now. France, Belgium, Britain, Russia, his own family- all of them. They had to. Now.

Still, he hesitated.

An aide watched from the corner of the room, eyes darting from man to man as they spoke. The aide cleared his throat.

'Erm, Your Excellency, Kaiser, Sir,' he said, seeming to shrink away when the man turned his steely gaze onto him.

'Er, thirteen-hundred hours, Your Majesty'.

1300 hours. The parade. Stepping past his generals, the man, whose collar was noticeably higher on his left-hand side, began to stride up the ornate, carved marble steps. He walked past the crystalline windows, slightly frosty despite the July heat, past the magnificent oil paintings of his ancestors, his left arm tucked behind his back. Finally, he stepped out onto the balcony.

Immediately, 20,000 heels clicked in unison. 20,000 hands raised in salute.

20,000 obedient stares from his grey-clad army. Then, the noise hit him.

Thousands, no tens of thousands of civilians lined the plaza, waving banners, singing, beating drums. He was their saviour. Momentarily, he shut his eyes and let the noise of the crowd wash over him. He felt on top of the world, the commander of a pure people, his right arm raised in triumph. Then - the familiar feeling. Tingling down his left side. His left arm spasmed uncontrollably.

He froze. They couldn't notice. They wouldn't. Not today.

By Finbar Steven, 14

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