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X.14 CHARLES XII

- The Spirit of Law - Book X. On the laws in their relation to offensive strength -

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This prince, who made use only of his own forces, brought on his fall by conceiving designs that could be carried out only with a long war, which his kingdom could not sustain.

It was not a state that was in decline which he undertook to overturn, but a rising empire. The Muscovites used the war he was waging against them as a school. At each defeat they came closer to victory ; and while losing beyond their borders, they were learning how to defend themselves at home.

Charles thought he was master of the world in the wastelands of Poland, where he wandered, and where Sweden had a scattered presence, while his principal enemy was girding against him, surrounding him, establishing itself on the Baltic Sea, and destroying or capturing Livonia.

Sweden was like a river whose headwaters were being cut and at the same time diverted in their course.

It was not Pultova that doomed Charles. If he had not been destroyed there, he would have been elsewhere. Accidents of fortune are easily repaired ; but how to stave off events that continually arise from the nature of things ?

But neither nature nor fortune ever opposed him as much as he did himself.

He did not base his actions on the current disposition of things, but on a certain model he had conceived, and still he followed it very badly. He was not Alexander, but he would have been Alexander's best soldier.

Alexander's project succeeded only because it was sensible. The failures of the Persians in their invasions into Greece, the conquests of Agesilaus and the retreat of the ten thousand, had shown just how superior the Greeks were in their manner of fighting and their type of weaponry ; and everybody knew that the Persians were too great to correct themselves.

They could no longer weaken Greece by divisions ; she was then reunited under a chief who could not have had a better means of concealing her servitude from her than to dazzle her by the destruction of her eternal enemies and the expectation of conquering Asia.

An empire cultivated by the most industrious nation on earth, one which tilled the soil out of religious principle, fertile and abundant in all things, offered an enemy all sorts of means of sustenance.

One could judge from the haughtiness of these kings, always vainly mortified by their defeats, that they would precipitate their fall by always giving battle, and that flattery would never allow them to doubt their greatness.

And not only was the project wise, but it was wisely executed. Alexander, in the rapidity of his actions, even in the heat of his passions, possessed, if I dare use this term, a burst of reason that guided him, and which those who have tried to make a romance of his story, and whose mind was more spoiled than his, have been unable to conceal from us.