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SIXPENCE

WHY DID HE DO IT?

BY G. K. CHESTERTON

PERHAPS it would be well if a word were said, to the faithful band of readers, about the change by which this article signed by me has been shifted from the interior of the paper, where I appeared among other odd characters, to the place formerly occupied by an unsigned leader in more official form. I hope nobody will suppose it was done because I desired to see yet another imprint of my name, on a page where I am already sick of the very sight of my initials. It was done because I have a queer feeling, that in these days of what may be a terrible turning-point for a patriot or a good European, I should prefer to make myself more personally responsible for the general direction. But I hope it will be remembered that it is still a signed article, allowing me the liberty which I have tried to allow to other writers of signed articles in this paper; and that my colleagues are quite free to contradict me, as I am free to continue to contradict them. But, as a fact, I have found that we do not, collectively contradict each other very much; and especially not for very long. Distributists can differ about everything except Distributism; but they do not very greatly differ, when once their differences have been explored and explained. I found this to be a fact in the case of Italy and Abyssinia; and I have every reason to think it will prove a fact in the case of Germany and France.

At the time of writing, nothing has happened in the affair anything like so sensational as the act which began it. At the time of reading, from the standpoint of the reader, there may, of course, have been any number of sensations. But I am still facing the fact of Hitler's original breach of a frontier and a treaty; and, after carefully trying to consider all sides of the case, the real question that remains with me is: *Why did he do it at all?* It may be argued

afterwards that the act was technical; that the situation may be found in practice to be tolerable. But nobody does a thing *because* it is tolerable; or may after all be tolerated. Nobody commits a technical assault *because* it is only technical.

It is easy to imagine anybody committing what would actually be called in law a technical assault; say tipping a man's hat over his eyes. He may immediately stand in front of the man and make a magnificent public speech in the public street, saying that the illegality may end a long and wearisome lawsuit; proposing that the man should be provided with a new and more hopeful hat, or even offering to pay for hats all round; he may efface his unfriendly gesture with repeated gestures of friendship. But he had *some* reason for suddenly interfering with somebody's hat; and whether it was a bet or a joke or a signal to some person or persons in the crowd is really a matter of considerable importance to all present.

In short, if Hitler went out of his way to tell us that the small advance-guard in the Rhineland was only symbolic, we have a right to ask him what is symbolised. Now, as it happens, the whole case stands or falls on that first event and the question of what it symbolised. Hitler may be cranky but he is not crazy. He is not literally a lunatic, and nobody could do such a thing in the rigid and terrifying

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tension of international politics just now, unless he were a lunatic or had some definite reason which he has not yet made clear. Now there are about this, as it seems to me, two very unpleasant possibilities. I have always said that there were healthy elements in Hitlerism, and even in Hitler; indeed I rather suspect that Hitler is one of the healthy elements in Hitlerism. I fancy he is a better man than the men around him or behind him; such as the roaring atheist who conducted his educational propaganda or a low Prussian bully like Goering, who shouted down a witness in a court of justice with the schoolboy threat of what he would do to him if he got him outside. But in this case, the first and worst possibility appears. Both the possibilities involve that historic, and almost prehistoric mystery which none of us really knows very much about; the thing that happens from time to time in the deep interior of Germany.

One answer to the question of why Hitler did it is that Hitler did not do it. In part, he may have been pushed from behind by the boiling barbaric passion for expression and expansion, among all those emotional Teutons who are talking once more as we hoped all men had left off talking twenty or thirty years ago; about an anthropological authority derived in some dim prehistoric way from the fact of coming of one particular race; which chose to regard itself not only as a race of gods, but especially as a race of war-gods. The recent outcries coming from this inhuman heresy have been very startling. What is much worse, he may have been pushed by the power that has hitherto pushed all that mere racial excitement into war; the power of the old Prussian military system; the inheritance of Bismarck; who created the Reich merely by pretending that Prussia stood for the unity of all Germans. The whole historic question just now is this: is that old gang-spirit dead or alive? It looks to me very much as if it were alive.

Second, if this is anything like the truth, we have to ask ourselves one very plain question. Did this rushing of the frontier and refusal to retract mean merely this; that Hitler's Germany wanted to show that anything which it had done could not be undone? Did the Reich, or whoever ruled it, mean deliberately to bid for the effect of seeing its lawless act accepted and incorporated in law? In plain words, did it mean two things? "First, I will end by making a peace, but I will begin by breaking a treaty," and "Second, I will try to establish a peace; but I shall have dictated that peace." In short, is there a *Pax Germanica*, claiming to be a *Pax Romana*? This question is open to criticism. But if it is untrue, I repeat my question; "Why did he do it at all?"

NOTES

Monday, March 23, 1936

As the eleventh birthday of G.K.'s WEEKLY occurred during the past week (on March 21) we decided to mark the anniversary with a special number. Readers will welcome the contributions of Mr. Belloc, M. Paul Claudel (the second part of whose essay will appear next week), Mr. Thomas Derrick and others; they will welcome also, we fancy, the larger size of the paper. Were it possible this would be our normal size; for we must admit that the introduction of new features and the extension of those already existing are severely hampered by the small amount of space ordinarily available. But as has been pointed out before, the remedy is in the hands of the readers themselves. If they will help to increase the circulation by showing it to friends, and talking about the paper whenever an opportunity occurs, the greater demand will enable us to add extra pages. If you know, for instance of two friends neither of whom can afford sixpence a week, ask them to spend threepence each a week and share a copy. The birthday present we would welcome most would be an undertaking by every one of our readers to secure at least one new reader during the coming year.

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The successful entry of the German army into the neutral zone and its establishment on the French frontier has been accepted on the Continent as another heavy blow delivered against the power and prestige of this country. It has also been taken, of course, as a correspondingly weighty increase to the power and prestige of Italy. This last point is so obvious that in many quarters the move is openly put down to Italian instigation. Of this there is, of course, no proof. But the maxim of evidence which presumes motive on the part of one who benefits by an action comes strongly into play here. The one obvious beneficiary from the action of the Reich is Italy, and the one obvious loser is England in her capacity of opponent to Italy's African policy and of the initiator of "sanctions" against Italy. To refuse sanctions against Germany and to attempt a continuation of them against Italy would be—it was calculated—impossible. Meanwhile the open defiance of England followed by our giving way to that defiance would further reduce the value of England's voice in European affairs, but to the same extent reduce the pressure against Italy.

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It is possible, of course, to put another interpretation on the affair. All English Policy from the moment of the Armistice has been aimed at the rehabilitation of Prussia. This was only to be expected from the traditional policy followed after every great war, to keep the powers of the Continent at once divided and as nearly as possible in order that this country should hold the balance to its own advantage. The presence of German troops across the Rhine puts the coping stone on such a policy and may therefore be regarded—and is regarded by not a few—as a success for our diplomacy. But this reasoning is too far fetched. The plain facts are too strong. The Government of the Reich took the Treaty of Locarno, England's special achievement, tore it up and threw