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CHARLES XII.'S TREATMENT OF LIEUTENANT-GENERAL BARON PEIKEL.

By CHARLES DALTON, Esq.,

Editor of "English Army Lists and Commission Registers, 1661-1714."

BARON PEIKEL (or Pykul) has been mistaken by several writers for his kinsman the better-known Count Patkul, the famous Livonian patriot, who was executed, after being mercilessly broken on the wheel, at a village near Casimir, in Great Poland, October 10th, 1707, by order of Charles XII. The confusion occasioned by the similarity in names may also be traced to the remarkable fact that both Peikel and Patkul held the rank of lieut.-general in the Polish Army; and the former succeeded the latter in command of the Saxon contingent which fought on the side of Augustus, King of Poland, against Charles XII. Fate decreed that both Peikel and Patkul should fall into the hands of the iron-hearted King of Sweden, and after a long imprisonment be executed within a few months of each other. Here the parallel between these two Livonian patriots stops, as Peikel was neither a great commander nor a diplomatist, but he possessed one remarkable talent which alone makes him intrinsically interesting and worthy of a niche in the Temple of Fame. Baron Peikel claimed, and was allowed by impartial and trustworthy witnesses, to have discovered the secret of making gold!

The Province of Livonia, which had been a bone of contention between the northern countries of Europe for centuries, was ceded by Poland to Sweden in 1660. The confiscation of Livonian estates, and the heavy taxes imposed by Charles XI., alienated the Livonian nobility and people from Sweden and Swedish rule. The sympathies of the conquered province were with Poland, and thus it came to pass that when Russia and Poland engaged in war with Sweden, in 1700, some of the leading Livonian noblemen were found ranged against Charles XII., whose proclamation summoning them to return to their allegiance was treated with open defiance. Prominent among the Livonian revolvers was Baron Peikel, who sided with Augustus II., King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. Passing over the fluctuating fortunes of the Polish arms under Augustus the Strong (who was deposed in 1704, but re-elected some years later to the Polish Crown), we find that a battle was fought near Warsaw, in the summer of 1705, between the Saxons and Poles on one side, and the Swedes on the other. In this engagement the Saxons are said to have fought well, but not being supported by the Poles, who fled on the first discharge, had to retire. The loss on both sides was

equal. General Bond (the Swedish commander) was killed, and Baron Peikel (the Saxon general) was taken prisoner.¹ Peikel and several other Saxon officers taken on this occasion were sent to Stockholm, where they suffered a rigorous imprisonment.

In November, 1706, a treaty was concluded between Charles XII. and Augustus II. The cessation of hostilities only hastened Peikel's doom. He was tried by the Advocate Fiscal in Stockholm as a traitor to his country, and being found guilty was sentenced to death. On the face of the evidence against Peikel, this sentence was doubtless a just one. But the prisoner had a strong argument in his favour against his condemnation, as appears from a contemporary MS. :—

“Peikul (*sic*) happened to be born in Poland about three miles from the Livonian border, and this fact was used against him in a law-suit he had with an uncle for a considerable estate. After going through all the Livonian Courts it was, as is customary, brought to the King for decision, for to him is the last appeal in all civil causes. The King gave judgment against Peikul for this only reason because he was an alien and not his natural-born subject. However, this determination, unjust as it was, afterwards was brought as a good argument for Peikul against the King, when his Majesty condemned him as a natural-born subject of Sweden. But it seems, though his being born out of the King's dominions proved a good reason for depriving him of his estate, it proved ineffectual to the saving of his life.”²

The sympathy of the Queen of Sweden (who was acting as Regent of the Kingdom during her grandson's absence with the army), her ineffectual efforts to obtain a pardon for Peikel, the condemned nobleman's extraordinary offers to the Queen and Senate for filling the Swedish Treasury, then at a very low ebb, provided his life were spared, and the remarkable proof he gave before witnesses of his ability to perform what he promised, are fully and graphically detailed by the British Envoy³ at Stockholm in his official letters to the Right Hon. Robert Harley, Secretary of State :—

Mr. Robert Jackson to the Secretary of State.

6
“Stockholm, January 5th, 1707.”

“An order is now come from the King to suffer all the Saxon officers now prisoners in Sweden to go where they please, except one Lieutenant-General Pykull (*sic*), a native of Liefland [Livonia], who was taken about two years ago in Poland, and in November last was condemned here as a traitor for serving against this Crown, which sentence the King not only

¹Luttrell's "Brief Relation of State Affairs," Vol. V., p. 581.

²Extracted from "A short narrative of the life and death of John Reinhold Count Patkul, a native of Livonia, etc., translated out of High Dutch MS. by Viscount Molesworth, 1717." (Somers's Tracts by Scott, Vol. XIII., pp. 873-892.)

³Mr. Robert Jackson was appointed British Agent to Sweden, February 9th, 1703. He succeeded Mr. John Robinson as Envoy, whom Queen Anne appointed Bishop of Bristol, from which diocese he was translated to the See of London in 1713.

lately confirmed, but gave also at the same time express order for his execution as on the 7th instant; but the Queen-Mother and all the Royal family here having interceded for him, and not yet got his Majesty's answer, her Majesty has therefore by her own authority reprieved him for a month, yet it is thought his pardon will not be granted at last."¹

Mr. Robert Jackson to the Secretary of State.

6

"Stockholm, January 30th, 1707.

"The King has renewed his former orders for the execution of Lieutenant-General Pykull, not having thought fit to hearken to the Queen-Mother's intercession on that gentleman's behalf."

Mr. Robert Jackson to the Secretary of State.

6

"Stockholm, February 9th, 1707.

"The Saxon Lieutenant-General Peikel was beheaded on Monday last; he chose to be executed with an axe (though it be esteemed very dishonourable in this country) rather than with a sword, by reason of the unskilfulness of the executioner. There was no other crime laid to his charge in the Fiscal's accusation than that he, being a native of Liefland, presumed in disobedience to his Majesty's avocatoria² to serve his enemy, wherefore it was thought here that the King's neither hearkening to the many high intercessions made on his behalf, nor the advantageous proposals he made to save his life, proceeded from the knowledge his Majesty must have of some other crimes of a blacker nature. But the morning Peikel suffered he told the divines which assisted him, and administered the Sacrament to him, that having heard of a report spread as if he had been one who had particularly encouraged King Augustus to begin this war, on the prospect of the Lieflanders, his countrymen, revolting from Sweden; and also of another that he had been engaged in a design upon the King of Sweden's person, he therefore took that opportunity to declare in that solemn manner that all such reports were false, and that he never had acted anything against his Swedish Majesty's person, or Kingdom, contrary to the principles of a man of honour. And since his one crime was that he was born in the Swedish dominions, he could not allow to have deserved death merely for that reason. But he added that it having pleased God some time ago to bring him wonderfully to the knowledge of a great secret in Nature, whereby he could not only himself have lived in the greatest happiness, but likewise have been capable of doing much good in the world. Yet he nevertheless suffered his ambition to prevail against his reason, which led him to accept the command of those troops amongst which he was taken prisoner, and for that he said he had justly incurred the punishment which was to be inflicted on him. The secret he speaks of was making gold to a prodigious

¹ This and the succeeding letters from Mr. Jackson are copied from the originals in the S.P. Sweden at the Public Record Office.

² Royal Proclamation for all the King of Sweden's subjects to return out of foreign service.

advantage; and he actually gave such proofs to the archiater at the Court, as well as some other knowing persons, of his profound knowledge in chemistry, that nobody now doubts of his having been able to perform what he pretended, and also proposed in case the King would have given him his life; and for your Honour's curiosity I shall presume in my next humble account to send your Honour an extract of the said proposals (whereby, if he could have fulfilled his promise, would have arose a yearly revenue of five hundred thousand ducats¹ to this Crown), and also an authentic relation of an experiment of his having had that secret performed by the Advocate Fiscal, and one Colonel Hugo Hamilton, a native of Ireland, who is Commandant of this city, and had the custody of Monsr. Peikel during his imprisonment, which papers being but lately come to my hands I have not yet had time to translate them."

Mr. Robert Jackson to the Secretary of State.

6

"Stockholm, February 16th, 1707.

"Having in my last presumed to mention several things relating to the lately executed Baron Peikel, I therefore now further presume to transmit, along with this, the translation of his proposals together with Colonel Hamilton's relation of the experiment he made, both which papers I humbly take the liberty to beg may be managed with a little secrecy for fear of injuring some persons here, who are thought to have employed themselves too much in favour of the said Baron."

Translation of the extract of Lieut.-General Peikel's proposals to the Queen and Senate.

"That it having pleased God to bless his study and labour for bringing him to the knowledge of a great secret; and he now laying under sentence of death was willing, in case he could thereby save his life, not only to reveal the said secret to any one person, to be under an oath of secrecy, whomh is Majesty should think proper to appoint, but would likewise oblige himself to make at his own charge this year four hundred thousand ducats for his Majesty; and in case he performed not he then desired no mercy, but that not only the punishment of death might be inflicted upon him by virtue of the sentence lately pronounced against him, but that also there might be added any further punishment, as a just reward, for his demerits in presuming to abuse his Majesty. He further obliged himself to make yearly, so long as he lived, the same quantity of gold for the King's use, his Majesty building only a proper house for carrying on the work, and being at the charge, of providing materials, and maintaining the servants which should be found necessary to be employed therein, the whole charge of which he computed would not amount to twenty thousand ducats yearly.

"When he had performed what he thus proposed two years he then desired to have a reasonable enlargement, but in the meantime to be

¹A gold ducat was equivalent to nine shillings and sixpence.

under the strictest confinement that was possible, and besides he would bind himself by the most solemn oath never to endeavour to make his escape, neither during the time of his confinement nor when he should have his liberty; and for further security he would forthwith dispose of his estate in the Brandenburg country and buy other lands of like value in Sweden and establish his family here.

“And to confirm the probability of his being able to perform what he proposed, he desired that Colonel Hugo Hamilton and the Advocate Fiscal might be commanded to give an account of the experiment they were eye-witnesses to, or rather had themselves performed by his directions, he only having now and then been present during the operation. The whole charge of which operation cost not above twelve crowns and yet produced the weight in gold of forty-nine ducats, and the officers of the Mint attested the gold to be perfectly fine as any they ever saw.

“These proposals were presented along with a petition to the King, January 4th, 1707.”

Translation of Colonel Hugo Hamilton's relation.

“To the Queen's Majesty most humble relation :—

“Whereas Peikel, who lies under the sentence of death, has, in all humility, informed your Majesty of his having the knowledge of making gold and likewise offered to reveal the said secret, agreeable to what I also in all humility lately had the honour to acquaint your Majesty; wherefore in obedience now to your Majesty's most gracious commands that I should in writing give a further humble account of that matter, therefore with the same humble intention for the service and advantage of my most gracious Sovereign as in all humility I formerly represented, I do now, by the oath and duty wherewith I am bound, declare that when Peikel first intimated to me his having that secret I suspected the truth of it a long time, and looked on his making me that confidence as a design he had the better by one means or other to make his escape. Wherefore I also took care to have him the better guarded; but he several times after repeating the matter, and withal offering in my presence to make a proof thereof, to convince me that what he said was a real truth, I thought that such an opportunity of serving my most gracious King ought not to be neglected, and therefore I asked him if he was willing that I might take a second person to be also present, whereto he agreeing I thought none could be more properly employed than the Advocate Fiscal, Thomas Fehman, his accuser, whom, Peikel approving of, I acquainted the said Advocate Fiscal therewith and requested him to be a witness at the operation, who thereupon expressed himself that in case there was any reality in the thing he could not be a faithful subject who would not endeavour to forward so important a work; yet for his own person he was unwilling to be concerned therein lest he should thereby incur too many undeserved censures, however I importuned him till he at length promised to be present. I forthwith permitted Peikel to begin the operation, which he did by dissolving of a powder of mineral antimony and winestone from Montpelier; this was set forty days in

digestion, and afterwards was burnt with a prepared spirit that produced a greyish-coloured metal, which being beaten to powder was likewise set forty days in fermentation ; when that time was expired it was taken out and mixed with powdered common antimony, brimstone, and a little lead, and was afterwards melted in a melting-pot and cast into a pot of brass metal, at the bottom whereof it left a weighty and substantial white metal, which being afterwards again melted in a melting-pot produced the same pure and fine gold that I showed your Majesty ; and lest that any other than the true powder should be conveyed into the said pot, the Advocate Fiscal and I did by ourselves make the experiment, and found that the like quantity of the powder by us weighed produced the same effect as when Peikel was present. I must acknowledge that during this operation I always suspected some deceit would be therein practised, and therefore more narrowly observed everything that Peikel undertook, as did likewise the Advocate Fiscal, whereto we frequently admonished each other. And whereas the best opportunity to practise the deceit seemed to be by conveying gold among the common antimony wherewith the chemical prepared powder was to be mixed, I therefore directed Peikel, the evening before, to weigh the same, but when he was gone I cast it away and took the same quantity of other common antimony, and the effect the virtue of the other powder produced both the Advocate Fiscal and I were witnesses to ; and I do further declare upon my salvation, and the disfavour of my most gracious Master, that I do firmly believe, and do not otherwise know, but he the said Peikel is really possessed of the knowledge he pretends, and this the Advocate Fiscal must likewise, as a faithful servant of his Majesty, confirm whenever he is called upon. It was further between us agreed and resolved on, according to the oath and duty wherewith we are bound, to make a discovery of this affair, whatever sentence Peikel should receive ; that this has thus been transacted I own, but the great secret, which consists in a very small composition, and which he prepared in an hour's time, and is laid at the last melting amongst the other powder, I neither know, nor desire to know, it only having been both our sincere intentions to promote what we judged might conduce to the advantage and service of our most gracious King."

(Signed) "HUGO HAMILTON."¹

The refusal of Charles XII. to entertain the proposals made to him by Baron Peikel, or to allow the Queen Regent's intercession to turn him aside from his fixed resolve, does not in any way throw discredit on Peikel's honesty of purpose or belief in his ability to carry out what he had undertaken. Charles's utter recklessness where money was concerned is a matter of history. When this monarch ascended the throne in 1697, at the age of fifteen, he found a full treasury and the country at the height of prosperity. In a few years' time the treasury was well-nigh exhausted, and Sweden was engaged in

¹ The above declaration is endorsed :—"Col. Hugo Hamilton's relation concerning Lt.-General Peikel. From Mr. Jackson's letter of Feb. 16, 1706/7 Recd. March 7." S. P. Sweden

a gigantic struggle with Russia. Any other monarch, at the period in question, would have taken Peikel at his word and put him to the crucial test. Had the promised gold not flowed from Peikel's crucible, Charles could have satisfied his own revengeful spirit by putting Peikel to death in the same barbarous manner that disgraced the execution of the unfortunate Count Patkul. The Lutheran minister who attended Patkul in his last hours, and who wrote a MS. narrative of the Count's chequered career and miserable death, has left on record the following anecdote regarding Baron Peikel, which story, if true, leaves an indelible stain on the character of Charles XII. whose many noble qualities were marred by an implacable spirit which neither knew how to forgive nor how to forget.

“After King Charles had entirely got the better of Augustus (King of Poland), and the latter was forced to comply with everything required of him, Augustus, in order to put the best face he could on a bad matter, made great entertainment for the King of Sweden at a very fine pleasure-house not far distant from Dresden. Peikul's poor lady and children had taken a great journey from Stockholm, on purpose to solicit for her husband's pardon; and King Augustus with his courtiers, as well as several of the King of Sweden's officers, had promised her to make use of the utmost of their interest in his behalf; and had contrived the matter so, that after the usual jollity and good humour, caused by a great feast, she, with her children, should unexpectedly come into the dining-room, and fall at the King of Sweden's feet, imploring his mercy for her husband; to which King Augustus, with all the other noble guests, were to join their intercession. So far matters were well concerted; but the King of Sweden, having by some means or other got an inkling of this design, after he was come to the place appointed for the feast, and being resolved that nothing should prevent his intention, desired leave to retire for a few minutes before dinner, into a private closet, where he called for pen, ink, and paper, and wrote and signed an order which he sent by express for Peikul's immediate execution upon receipt of it. After this he came out to dinner, which being ended, the poor woman and her children came in and flung herself at King Charles's feet, as it had been forecasted, in the midst of the mirth, King Augustus with all the company mixing their intercessions with her tears. The King of Sweden, after some seeming struggle, granted the pardon which was desired, and signed an instrument to that purpose, which by Peikul's friends was presently despatched away. But the King's courier arrived first at Stockholm, and poor Peikul was beheaded about four hours before the second got thither.”¹

¹“A short narrative of the life and death of John Reinhold Count Patkul, a nobleman of Livonia, etc., written by the Lutheran minister who assisted him in his last hours; translated out of High Dutch MS. by Viscount Molesworth, 1717.” (Lord Somers's Tracts by Scott. Vol. XIII., pp. 873-892.)

Voltaire tells us in his "History of Charles XII." that when King Augustus (whose Saxon subjects had been heavily subsidised by the Swedish monarch) heard that Peikel had been executed, he said "he did not wonder that the King of Sweden had so much indifference for the Philosopher's Stone as Charles had found it in Saxony."

Baron Peikel's great secret died with him. By his own showing he had expected the greatest happiness from his chemical discovery, but the path he pursued was not the "golden mean" which Horace recommended when he wrote the lines:—

"Auream quisquis mediocritatem
Diligit, tutus caret obsoleti
Sordibus tecti, caret invidenda
Sobrius aula."