

Roman Empire 531

Chapter 531: Trifles

Things often have two sides. While the agricultural crisis led to a sharp drop in agricultural product prices, making life harder for farmers, it improved the lives of workers.

The reduced cost of living directly stimulated industrial development. Labor conflicts also decreased, with the most notable example being the reduction in protests by the people of Paris, which dropped by a fifth compared to the same period last year.

From this perspective, the world's focus had shifted from agriculture to industry, with the major European powers all developing with industry as the core.

Due to the butterfly effect, the domestic market in the fragmented United States shrank rapidly, preventing it from leading in this industrial revolution. Thus, the birthplace of the Second Industrial Revolution remained in Europe.

Austria was the first to experience this industrial revolution, marked by Vienna becoming the “City that Never Sleeps” and heralding the dawn of the electric age.

The spread of electricity was faster than anyone could have imagined. Once Vienna set the precedent, Paris and London quickly followed suit.

Though somewhat irrational, as they followed public opinion without fully considering practical circumstances, this trend played a crucial role in advancing electrical technology.

After London and Paris completed their urban lighting networks, electric technology became a symbol of modern urbanization. The difference between large and small cities could be seen simply by looking at the streetlights.

Power stations sprang up around cities, and rows of power lines became symbols of civilization, with thick black smoke telling the story of the Industrial Age's glory.

At the Vienna Palace, Franz was out hunting with his family. Archduke Karl's suggestion had proven quite practical—having a hunting ground on their own estate was indeed very convenient.

In terms of land area alone, the Vienna Palace was already the largest royal palace in the world. However, if measured by building area, it remained relatively modest.

Franz was not an emperor who indulged in excessive luxury so he would not build vast palace complexes. Vienna was the private domain of the House of Habsburg, with most of the land being royal property, so the cost of expanding the palace wasn't particularly high.

However, with the expansion of the palace came an increase in the difficulty of defending it, so naturally, the Royal Guard had to be expanded as well. Franz would never admit that this was done to enlarge his personal armed forces, though that's exactly what it was.

These were minor issues, as the Royal Guard was entirely under the emperor's control, with no ties to the government. Theoretically, it could have been expanded to a million troops if he so desired.

Obviously, that wasn't feasible, as Franz wasn't that wealthy. Even though as emperor he received a share of profits, and the royal annuity was the largest on the European continent, it was through frugality that Franz managed to expand the Royal Guard to the size of a division.

This served as his final line of defense, ensuring that the emperor's greatest power lay in having a personal armed force, ready to launch a coup if necessary.

From this perspective, the Austrian government was in a precarious position, constantly under the watchful eye of an emperor who might upend the status quo at any moment if they overstepped their bounds.

This lesson was learned from the Vienna Revolution, leading Franz to quietly strengthen his control over the military, particularly the forces in the capital which he kept firmly in hand.

Any political force attempting to meddle with the military would face disastrous consequences. Despite Austria's outward calm, there was an underlying tension filled with potential for conflict.

“Bang, bang, bang...”

After a series of gunshots, only empty shells were left on the ground. Franz's marksmanship remained as consistent as ever. Even though the prey was over 200 meters away, he missed every single one, each shot landing outside the target.

Franz didn't feel any frustration at not hitting the prey. As an emperor who cherished life, he couldn't bear to kill, so he graciously let the animals go.

At first, a few little ones believed this explanation, looking at him with admiration. But as they grew older, they stopped mentioning it.

This wasn't unusual. Most new recruits on the battlefield had similar skills. Hitting an enemy accurately from 200 meters away usually required either a sharpshooter's skill or a stroke of luck.

Being able to effectively hit a moving target within 200 meters was a sign of an elite unit. Aside from the issue of the gun itself, the recoil was too strong, making bullets prone to deviation.

Given the current technology, there wasn't yet a solution to this problem. Reducing the recoil even slightly would significantly increase the cost.

Seeing Maximilian standing motionless, Archduke Karl walked up to him and gave him a smack on the head, “Maximilian, don't stand there looking like a corpse. You need to show some energy when you're out hunting.

You should learn from Franz in this regard. He always returns empty-handed every time, but he's still very happy.”

As Archduke Karl grew older, he became more willful, and even Archduchess Sophie found it hard to restrain him. When something didn't sit right with him, he didn't hesitate to express his displeasure physically.

Franz realized that if he didn't intervene soon, Maximilian might take another beating. It wasn't that Archduke Karl had high expectations. In fact, he didn't expect anything from Maximilian at all. He just didn't want to see his beloved son lose his way.

After hesitating for a moment, Franz decisively chose to ignore the situation. If he gets a beating, so be it. A father disciplining his son is nobody else's business. Maximilian hadn't been disciplined enough when he was younger, so now was the time to make up for it.

Ever since being forcibly sent back to the country, Maximilian had fallen into a state of self-isolation, constantly talking about returning to Mexico. After being examined by doctors, it was determined that he didn't have a mental illness, just psychological issues.

Archduchess Sophie had tried many methods to help him overcome his psychological trauma, but none had worked. In the end, it was physical discipline that proved effective. The pain snapped Maximilian out of his self-imposed numbness.

Franz had no objections to Karl disciplining Maximilian. He had been spoiled as a child, so it was only natural that he needed to make up for it now. But why did they have to drag him into it?

Franz had always avoided talking about those glorious battle records. Times were different now, and there was a group of little ones watching.

In the end, Franz still didn't muster the courage to defend himself. In the face of reality, any argument seemed weak and pointless.

Franz didn't resent his brother Maximilian. Aside from being a bit too idealistic, Maximilian was a good person, certainly better than the ambitious schemers around. Even his idealism could serve as a cautionary tale.

If nothing else happened, Maximilian's story would likely become a legend within the House of Habsburg, serving as a lesson for future generations.

Seeing his second son laugh, Franz shot him a glare, as if to say, "What are you laughing at? Do you need a reminder to behave?"

Feeling Franz's murderous gaze, little Peter immediately covered his mouth with his small hands. From his years of experience, he knew that if he continued, the thickness of his homework book would surely increase again.

Franz was a reasonable man and usually didn't resort to physical punishment. His most common method of discipline was assigning extra homework. A dedicated tutor would supervise, and only when the work was completed could they go out and play.

This kind of punishment was more effective than a beating. A spanking might hurt for a little while, but as they were his own children, he couldn't bring himself to be too harsh. Increasing their workload, however, could last a long time. Peter had personally experienced the misery of being stuck with extra homework for an entire month.

The men were on one side, while the women stayed elsewhere. Hunting was a bloody affair, so it was best for them to handle it, avoiding disturbing the ladies.

Since Franz didn't intervene, the other two brothers didn't dare to step in. Whenever Archduke Karl lost his temper, Franz was the only one exempt from punishment. The other brothers often faced it together. From a distance, the two of them, still on horseback, shot Maximilian a look that said, "Sorry, nothing we can do."

Maximilian, seemingly rattled, nearly fell off his horse. Grabbing the reins in a panic, he stammered, "I-I understand."

The best cure for a troubled mind is time. Not hearing the usual, “I want to go back to Mexico,” or “The people of Mexico need me,” Franz nodded in satisfaction.

Recently, Franz had been deeply concerned about Maximilian’s condition. Being an emperor wasn’t easy, especially with the number of flawed members of the Habsburgs.

This was the result of his efforts to maintain order. Otherwise, there might have been another brother who was homosexual. Franz couldn’t fathom how they had been educated. He strongly suspected that something was wrong with the education these brothers had received in the original timeline.

It turned out that education could indeed change a person. Maximilian had been too close in age to Franz, so by the time Franz ascended the throne, Maximilian was already an idealist, beyond saving.

The other two younger brothers were different. Under Franz’s influence, they received a strict aristocratic education. While no extraordinary talents had emerged, their overall abilities surpassed the average nobleman, making them high-level elites in society.

Currently, their main responsibility was managing the House of Habsburg’s external relations and receptions, essentially ensuring good relations with the European royal families. Whenever there were weddings, funerals, or other important events that required a royal presence, they were the ones sent to handle the social duties.

Overall, Franz was quite satisfied with this arrangement. The work in this area had been handled without any major issues, reducing his workload and allowing him to focus on more important matters.

As long as they didn’t do anything reckless, every member of the royal family had a role to play. Even the unsuccessful Maximilian still served as a link between the Habsburgs and the Belgian royal family.

“Your Majesty, the Empress has requested your presence.”

Franz nodded, “Understood. Please tell the Empress that we’ll be there shortly.”

Noticing Archduke Karl’s stern expression, Franz rode forward and said, “Alright, Father, it’s about time. Perhaps we should head back for the meal.”

Archduke Karl’s anger flared up quickly but also subsided just as fast. After hearing Franz’s words, he nodded and gave Maximilian another slap on the back, saying, “What are you standing around for? Let’s go!”

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Looking at the group of ladies who were chatting and laughing, Franz curiously asked, “What’s going on? Why is everyone so happy?”

Empress Helen smiled slightly, “Charlotte is pregnant.”

Everyone’s faces lit up with joy, even Maximilian, who usually wore the same expression, showed a smile.

Adding a new member to the family was always good news, especially for the royal family. The butterfly effect was significant. In the original timeline, Emperor Maximilian I had met an early death without any heirs, but now that he had lived a few more years, things had changed.

It made sense when you thought about it. Princess Charlotte was still relatively young. In the original timeline, she was only 27 years old when Maximilian died, so now she was just in her early thirties.

In this era, she could be considered an older mother, but it wasn't too much of a concern. With Maximilian I still alive, Princess Charlotte had not descended into madness, and her health had remained good.

This news didn't have much of an impact on Austria. Unless it was Empress Helen who was pregnant, the public wouldn't be overly concerned.

But for Mexico, thousands of miles away, the situation was different. It should be noted that although Maximilian I had returned to the country in disgrace, he had never announced his abdication.

Shortly after the Austrian army withdrew, Mexico descended into civil war, with various factions fighting bloodily, leaving no one with the time or concern to check whether the deposed emperor had abdicated.

Seeing Maximilian in poor spirits, the Habsburgs naturally didn't press the issue, and the question of abdication was shelved.

Now, if the child in Charlotte's womb was a boy, he would be the legitimate heir to the Mexican throne. The previous heir chosen by Maximilian I didn't have sufficient legitimacy.

Franz cut off his wandering thoughts. It didn't really matter anymore. Mexico was a mess—who would want to jump into that fire pit?