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978-1-108-06706-5 - Madame Tussaud's: Memoirs and Reminiscences of France:

Forming an Abridged History of the French Revolution

Marie Tussaud Edited by Francis Hervé

Excerpt

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MEMOIRS
AND
REMINISCENCES,
&c.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS—MADAME TUSSAUD'S FAMILY—
M. CURTIUS—PRINCE DE CONTI—HIS HONOURABLE CON-
DUCT—VOLTAIRE—ROUSSEAU—DR. FRANKLIN—MIRA-
BEAU—LA FAYETTE—ADVANCEMENT OF CHILDREN—
CONVERSAZIONE—DISPUTES OF AUTHORS—DESCRIPTION
OF VOLTAIRE—OF ROUSSEAU—OF FRANKLIN—OF LA
FAYETTE—HIS ENTHUSIASM—ACCOUNT OF MIRABEAU—
MODELLING, THE TASTE OF THE DAY.

THE recollections of an individual, for many years the companion of the unfortunate Elizabeth, sister to Louis the Sixteenth, and of one who moved, both before and since the downfall of the royal family, amongst the most conspicuous characters of France, cannot fail to excite, even at this distant period, much interest in the public mind; for few events

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

in history have ever caused so intense and permanent a sensation throughout Europe, as the French Revolution of 1789, nor has there ever been an epoch which has so powerfully exhibited the bad passions of men, yet producing some few instances of the most exalted virtue,—as if to redeem, as it were, the honour of human nature, outraged, as she had been, by the enormity and multiplicity of crimes which were constantly being perpetrated.

The interesting records of this short but exciting period, teem with examples of the most diabolical ferocity, and the most devoted heroism, which are, in fact, as numerous and as prominently marked as those which figure throughout the whole of the Roman history. France, like Rome, then had her Neros, her Caligulas, and her Domitians; but so, also, had she her victims, as great as a Regulus or a Mutius Scævola; for, where shall we find more devotion to a cause than was displayed by those royalists who, with calm decision, formed a rampart with their persons, purposely sacrificing themselves, to gain time for the monarch and his family to escape from their infuriated pursuers?

It is now nearly half a century since the commencement of the Revolution, yet still we seek

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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS.

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with avidity every detail that can add to our information concerning that extraordinary event; and even at this day, new works are continually appearing, both in this country and in France, still endeavouring to throw some new light upon a period so pregnant with horrors, the results of political fanaticism. But such is the keen desire to obtain even the minutest particulars of times which presented such a theatre of appalling scenes, that every volume treating on those days of terror is still sought and read with eagerness.

But those individuals who were personal witnesses of the revolutionary operations, and who were of an age of sufficient maturity to regard them with an impartial and moralising eye, are now speedily disappearing from the vale of life; which enhances the value of those who yet remain amongst us, and we the more anxiously catch their accents, descriptive of catastrophes of the most sanguinary nature, of which we read, and at which we marvel, but which appear to us far better accredited when we hear them recounted from the lips of one who was actually a spectator, and sufferer from those decrees which deluged France with misery and blood.

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4 MADAME TUSSAUD'S PARENTAGE.

There are few persons, perhaps, now existing, who can give a more accurate account of all that transpired in the Revolution than the subject of our biography; her reminiscences being clear, her observations ever acute, and circumstances having brought her in contact with almost every remarkable character who figured in the revolutionary annals.

Madame Tussaud was born at Berne, in Switzerland, in the year 1760; her father (who died prior to her birth) was of the military profession, and his name was Joseph Grosholtz, which is as renowned in Germany as Percy in England, Montmorency in France, or Vicomti in Italy. He was aide-de-camp to General Wurmser, with whom M. Grosholtz served during the seven years' war, and was so mutilated with wounds, that his forehead was laid bare, and his lower jaw shot away, and supplied by a silver plate. He espoused a widow named Marie Walter, who had seven sons, the daughter of a Swiss clergyman, justly celebrated for her fine person, and who lived to the age of ninety, and whose family were remarkable for their longevity, her mother living to a hundred and four, and her grandmother to a hundred and eleven.

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M. CURTIUS.

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They were of a highly respectable class, and their husbands were members of the Diet, or Parliament, of Switzerland.

About two months after the decease of her husband, Madame Grosholtz gave birth to a girl, the subject of the present Memoirs. For the first six years she remained with her mother, who at length yielded to the entreaties of her brother, M. Curtius, who resided at Paris, but came to Switzerland for the purpose of taking charge of Madame Grosholtz and family, and of conveying them to the French capital. As this event had so important a bearing on the subsequent pursuits through life of Madame Tussaud, a digression is requisite, to state some particulars respecting her uncle, who afterwards assumed towards her the character of a father, both in regard to tenderness and authority,—legally adopting her, in fact, as his child.

John Christopher Curtius was practising his profession as a medical man at Berne, in Switzerland, when the Prince de Conti happened to be sojourning in that city; and having accidentally seen some performance by M. Curtius, of portraits and anatomical subjects modelled in wax, the Prince

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was struck with the exquisite delicacy and beauty which those ingenious specimens of art displayed, and calling on M. Curtius to compliment him upon his talent, also observed, that, if he would fix his residence in Paris, he might depend upon receiving encouragement and patronage from the most influential characters in the kingdom; the Prince promising his own, and that of the royal family, as also introductions to the principal nobility of France, further stating, that he would charge himself with providing apartments suitable to the purpose desired, and concluded by declaring, that he had no doubt but that M. Curtius might, with application, realise a handsome competence in executing the orders he would receive from the Parisian amateurs.

M. Curtius, delighted that his works should have met with the approbation of a Prince of the blood, and of one so wealthy and powerful as he was at that period, flattered by his promises, at once profited by so favourable an opportunity, and, renouncing the medical profession, proceeded to Paris:

He was not deceived by the Prince, who had already ordered apartments to be prepared for M. Curtius at the Hotel d'Allégre, in the Rue

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M. CURTIUS.

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St. Honoré, where his time was, for a considerable period, wholly occupied in executing orders for his patron, whose liberality and kindness not only equalled, but rather surpassed, his promises.

It was after having practised his profession for some years, and finding the results highly lucrative, that he repaired to Berne, for the purpose of fetching his sister and her family. Marie Grosholtz was but six years old when she accompanied her uncle to Paris, yet Madame Tussaud declares, that she has a perfect recollection of her arrival in that city, and that she remembers, with the utmost distinctness, the circumstances connected with the accession to the throne of Louis the Sixteenth, which happened about eight years after M. Curtius had brought her to the capital.

By that time the house of M. Curtius had become the resort of many of the most talented men in France, particularly as regarded the literati and artists; and amongst those who were frequently in the habit of dining at her uncle's, Madame Tussaud most forcibly remembers Voltaire, Rousseau, Dr. Franklin, Mirabeau, and La Fayette; and although she was very young

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FEMALE PRECOSITY.

when the two former died, every circumstance connected with them made a powerful impression upon her mind. But early reminiscences are often the most permanent, and when the *amour propre* is flattered by a personal compliment, it is for ever remembered and appreciated by a female, even in her days of childhood. Thus Madame Tussaud still well recollects, that, when she was but eight or nine, Voltaire used to pat her on the cheek, and tell her what a pretty little dark-eyed girl she was. Children at that period, in France, were brought forward when much younger than they are at present; marriages frequently took place at thirteen, and sometimes at twelve; a child, therefore, of ten years of age, began to exercise its reasoning faculties, acutely forming observations, and from thence deducing its judgments, in the same manner as would a girl of the present day of sixteen. Of course there could have been no innate difference in their precosity then, and at present; but in those days they had the appearance of being more advanced than they now are, on account of their address and general bearing, having much more the air of self-possession than is now the case, their ideas being prematured by the manner in which

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DISPUTES OF AUTHORS.

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they were elevated, and the mode in which they were received and treated in society.

Independent of these circumstances, there are others which induced the belief that Madame Tussaud must have been a very precocious child. Early accustomed to sit at her uncle's table, she was ever in the habit of hearing the conversation of adults, and persons possessed of superior talent. Full well she remembers the literary discussions which were sometimes conducted with much bitterness by the opposing partisans of the favourite authors of the day; observing, that she never could forget the acrimony displayed between Voltaire and Rousseau in their disputes in the support, perhaps, of some metaphysical theory, in which themselves alone could feel interested, while the reflecting Dr. Franklin would calmly regard them, merely a faint smile sometimes enlivening his countenance, as he coolly contemplated the infuriated disputants; but the young La Fayette was full of fire and animation, listening with eagerness to all that passed; and his features, expressive of his ardent temperament, formed a singular contrast to the philosophic doctor, at whose side he sat; whilst the eloquence of Mirabeau shed a lustre on their

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conversazioni, composed, as they were, of such a nucleus of talent as might justly entitle them to be styled “the feast of reason and the flow of soul.”

One grand source of complaint, which was preferred against Voltaire by Rousseau, was, that he had often advanced different ideas, which were purely original, at M. Curtius's table, and which were intended to form the foundation of a future work, Rousseau ever specifying that such was his object; yet had he the mortification to find that Voltaire would forestal him, by bringing out a volume containing those very opinions which his rival had expressed; and, in fact, the very thoughts and subjects on which he had dilated, and designed as the outlines and substance of his next production. Voltaire, perhaps, scarcely apparently listening to what was said, or taking up the opposite side of the question, would argue with vehemence against the very doctrine which he would soon after publish to the world as his own. Thus, whilst Rousseau was conceiving and projecting materials for his work, and in the simplicity of his heart was proclaiming all his inspirations to his friends, his subtle cotemporary was digesting all he heard, and, as quick in execution as the former in