

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-62347-7 - Life and Times of Stein or Germany and Prussia in the Napoleonic Age:

Volume I

J. R. Seeley

Excerpt

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PART I.

BEFORE THE CATASTROPHE.

Tausend Ritter wohlgewappnet
Hat der Heil'ge Geist erwählt
Seinen Willen zu erfüllen
Und Er hat sie muthbeseelt.

HEINE.

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CHAPTER I.

STEIN'S EARLY YEARS.

NOTHING is so well known to English tourists as the ruined castles that are scattered over the banks of the Rhine where those banks are most mountainous and picturesque. Of the former owners of these castles, most of us are content to believe that they were the robber-knights whose adventures have furnished so much material to romancers, and have given almost all of us amusement in Anne of Geierstein, if not in Götz von Berlichingen. Whether those knights left any descendants behind them who still own the ruins of the castles in which they passed their war-like lives, and if so what is the position of their descendants in our modern society, and what part they have played in German history since the misrule of the Middle Ages came to an end, are inquiries which the tourist has commonly neither time to enter upon, nor means to prosecute.

One of these ruined castles, not precisely on the Rhine but on the Lahn which runs into the Rhine just above Coblenz, is called the Burg Stein, and was inhabited by the ancestors of the statesman whose life I am about to write. In this instance

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at least that turbulent knighthood produced a descendant to whom, as these pages will show, Germany owes a debt which she has acknowledged but tardily, and Europe one which has been left unacknowledged.

The scenery of the river Lahn is very like that of the Rhine. Its banks are as lofty and as richly clothed with wood, and the hills confine the stream as closely. The railway from Coblenz after entering the valley brings you first to the Baths of Ems, so well known to tourists, and since July, 1870, so well known to history. After Ems the next notable station is Nassau. This is now a very quiet country town, with a Water-cure Establishment, and besides that only one conspicuous building. A handsome family mansion strikes the eye, built in the latter part of the 17th century, standing in the midst of outbuildings with a pleasant garden behind it and approached from the street through a line of railings and a court adorned with a few trees. On the left hand of the old 17th century façade, as you enter, is a somewhat singular tower adjoining the house and rising a little above it. This is the house which the Minister vom Stein inherited and in which he spent a good deal of his life. The tower was built by him to commemorate the War of Liberation.

This house stands in the very middle of the town of Nassau, and though not a palace, is so much larger and handsomer than any other dwelling house in the town, that you recognize at once that the Stein of the day must always have been what we should call the squire of Nassau. Here then

we see a specimen of the course pursued by the great knightly families of this region. Their castles stand in ruins on the hill-side; the owners have descended from their eminence and isolation, entered the towns in which common men live, built themselves handsome houses in a more modern style, and taken up a somewhat different social position, which we might describe by saying that the knight has turned into the squire. For before this handsome town-house was built, the family of Stein had lived on the hill-side in the Burg Stein. It was not till this castle, like so many others, had been sacked in the Thirty Years War, that the family abandoned it and came down to live in the valley.

The town of Nassau stands on the right bank of the Lahn, that is to say, the bank which to a tourist coming from Coblenz is on the left hand. The hills behind it are lofty, but do not present a striking appearance as their ascent is gradual, and therefore they recede as fast as they rise. But on the other side of the river stands out commandingly a single hill, towering high above the town and clothed with wood. On the summit of it stands, what in this region is so common, the ruined keep of an old castle. Is this the Burg Stein? No, but it bears another name much more famous in history. It is the Schloss Nassau, the original seat of the family which first checked the ascendancy of Spain, which filled the whole 17th century, the heroic age of Protestantism, with its renown, which gave a king to England and afterwards a royal dynasty to the Netherlands, and which at the same time in its

elder branch maintained an eminent place—though it did not run altogether an honourable career—among the sovereign houses of Germany, until the duchy of Nassau in 1866 was swallowed up by Prussia. As the family of Stein descended from the mountain to inhabit the handsome house just described in Nassau, so did the House of Nassau itself leave its dismantled keep upon the top of the hill and go to occupy palaces at Wiesbaden and at the Hague.

But the traveller whose object is the Burg Stein, when he has issued from the railway station and learned that the commanding tower above him is not that but the Schloss Nassau, is at a loss, for no other castle is anywhere to be seen. On inquiry he learns that the Burg Stein is not visible immediately from this point, but that it is quite near and stands on a projection from the side of the same hill which the Schloss Nassau crowns. Already where he stands he can be made to observe lower down on the hill-side the peaked top of a new erection which he is informed covers the statue, quite recently set up there, of the Baron vom Stein. Let the tourist then, leaving the railway station, cross the river by the bridge and he will find himself immediately at the foot of the great hill. A winding path to the right leads up the side of it through the thick wood. In a minute or two he will reach the statue, where it stands upon a bare projection commanding a good view of the river and the town. This statue was recently inaugurated by the Emperor in person and a panegyric upon Stein delivered by the eminent historian Heinrich v. Sybel. If, after looking at the

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statue and the rich view of the river beyond it, you turn round and look at the hill itself, you will see high above you, as before, the Schloss Nassau, but below it and immediately above your station, you will now see another ruin. Here then at last is the Burg Stein.

In the Burg Stein itself there is nothing of particular interest. But at first you are puzzled to account for the name. The name leads you to expect a rock, and as yet you have seen no rock but only a large hill covered with trees. Moreover you do not see why the name should have been appropriated in such a marked manner to this particular family. And here let the reader give a moment's attention to the name and title of our hero. If an Englishman ever had occasion to speak of Stein, which indeed scarcely ever happens, he would certainly call him the Baron von Stein, and even German writers constantly fall into the same slight inaccuracy. But his name referred in a more pointed manner to the particular rock on which the family castle stood. His full title was Freiherr vom und zum Stein (of and at the rock), and when this is abbreviated it becomes Freiherr or Baron *vom* Stein, but not *von* Stein. Where then is *the rock*? You will find it if you leave the Burg Stein and pass upward to the Schloss Nassau. One of the windings of the path brings you to a point at which you have the Burg Stein directly below you. And from this point you see at once the meaning of the name. You see now that the castle stands upon a projection of the hill, which on one side is so steep as to be quite perpendicu-

lar, and of course therefore exhibits the naked rock. One side of the castle is indeed quite close to the precipice.

The admirers of Stein have been fond of playing upon his name. I have seen in English books contempt poured upon the well-known description *Des Guten Grundstein, des Bösen Eckstein, der Deutschen Edelstein*, as a specimen of awkward and pointless German wit. To me, I confess, the pun seems as defensible and as natural as a pun can be. But perhaps it is worth noticing how it was partly suggested by the fact that Stein's relation to his name, if I may say so, was particularly intimate. Not only was his family of immemorial antiquity, but the explanation of the name it bore was clear and striking. We might almost say that the massive angularity, which as we shall see in the sequel was his chief characteristic, had really passed to him from the rock on which his family had lived for so many centuries. It was at least plainly connected with the kind of life his ancestors had led, dominating the country from the mountain side. And at any rate the name could never pass into a meaningless appellative, so long as it had an explanation so obvious, so long too as the family continued to live under the very shadow of their name, and looked up continually 'to the rock whence they were hewn.'

Heinrich Friedrich Karl, Freiherr vom und zum Stein, was born Oct. 26th, 1757. That we may look for a moment at his life as a whole, I add here that he died June 29th, 1831. At the time of his birth Germany was convulsed by the Seven

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Years War. It was the time of the alliance between Frederick the Great and Chatham. The battle of Rossbach was fought ten days after. Stein was eight years younger than Goethe and Charles Fox, two years older than Schiller and William Pitt. He was twelve years older than the man who was to be his fate, the author of all his misfortunes and all his glory, Napoleon Buonaparte. He was thrown, as we commonly say, upon the Revolutionary Age, but it is to be observed that the period of his great achievements came late; so that whereas William Pitt, though two years his junior, entered upon his later and less glorious period with the outbreak of the Revolution, and died before Napoleon's power culminated, Stein had achieved nothing of historical importance until Napoleon had reached his zenith and Pitt had died. Properly speaking indeed it is not the Revolutionary Age that he belongs to, but another.

The most active and successful period of his life is comprised within the years 1807 and 1815, and this is the period of the insurrection of Europe against the tyranny of Napoleon. It is a period when the controversies excited by the French Revolution were for the moment at an end, when almost all honest men were united against France, when in England Fox in office had found the impossibility of making peace, and when Sheridan declared enthusiastically in favour of the Spanish insurgents. It is the period in fact of a new Revolution which extended itself over all Europe, for as such the movement against Napoleon, which we are too much in the habit of regarding as purely military, ought to be considered.

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10 LIFE AND TIMES OF STEIN. [PART I.

This Anti-Napoleonic Revolution, its peculiar relation to the earlier Revolution of France, and also its effect upon the subsequent course of affairs in Europe, will be a main subject of this book; for it will be seen that Stein more than any other man is to be regarded as the statesman of it. He may almost be said to have commenced it; he saw it successful in its immediate object of overthrowing Napoleon; afterwards, in the retirement of his old age, he saw it gradually change its character, and before he died, he saw it actually blend itself with the tide of that French Revolution which it had originally been called into existence to oppose, for he saw the Three Days of Paris hailed with emulous sympathy by the patriots of Germany. After this glance at his after-life, and the general character of his work, we must return to Nassau and speak of his family.

Here are the words in which Stein in his old age described his parents and the education they gave him. 'I was born of very honourable parents and educated in the country under the influence of their religious and truly German and knightly example; the ideas of piety, patriotism, the honour of my family and of my order, the duty of devoting my life to public ends and of acquiring by industry and exertion the qualifications necessary for that purpose were deeply impressed on my young mind by their example and precept. My view of the world and of human affairs, I gathered as a boy and youth in the solitude of a country life, from ancient and modern history, and in particular I was attracted by the incidents of the eventful