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978-1-107-65297-2 - The French Revolution: A History by Thomas Carlyle
Abridged and Edited by A. H. R. Ball

Excerpt

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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

DEATH OF LOUIS XV

FRANCE IN 1774

SOVEREIGNS die and Sovereignities: how all dies, and is for a Time only; is a “Time-phantasm, yet reckons itself real”! The Merovingian Kings, slowly wending on their bullock-carts through the streets of Paris, with their long hair flowing, have all wended slowly on,—into Eternity. Charlemagne sleeps at Salzburg, with truncheon grounded; only Fable expecting that he will awaken. Charles the Hammer, Pepin Bow-legged, where now is their eye of menace, their voice of command? Rollo and his shaggy Northmen cover not the Seine with ships; but have sailed off on a longer voyage. The hair of Towhead (*Tête d’étoupes*) now needs no combing; Iron-cutter (*Taillefer*) cannot cut a cobweb; shrill Fredegonda, shrill Brunhilda have had out their hot life-scold, and lie silent, their hot life-frenzy cooled. Neither from that black Tower de Nesle descends now darkling the doomed gallant, in his sack, to the Seine waters; plunging into Night: for Dame de Nesle now cares not for this world’s gallantry, heeds not this world’s scandal; Dame de Nesle is herself gone into Night. They are all gone; sunk,—down, down, with the tumult they made; and the rolling and the trampling of ever new generations passes over them; and they hear it not any more for ever.

And yet withal has there not been realised somewhat? Consider (to go no further) these strong Stone-edifices, and what they hold! Mud-Town of the Borderers (*Lutetia Parisiorum* or *Barisiorum*) has paved itself, has spread over all the Seine Islands, and far and wide on each bank, and become City of Paris, sometimes boasting to be “Athens

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of Europe”, and even “Capital of the Universe”. Stone towers frown aloft; long-lasting, grim with a thousand years. Cathedrals are there, and a Creed (or memory of a Creed) in them; Palaces, and a State and Law. Thou seest the Smoke-vapour; *unextinguished* Breath as of a thing living. Labour’s thousand hammers ring on her anvils: also a more miraculous Labour works noiselessly, not with the Hand but with the Thought. How have cunning workmen in all crafts, with their cunning head and right-hand, tamed the Four Elements to be their ministers; yoking the Winds to their Sea-chariot, making the very Stars their Nautical Timepiece;—and written and collected a *Bibliothèque du Roi*; among whose Books is the Hebrew Book! A wondrous race of creatures: *these* have been realised, and what of Skill is in these: call not the Past Time, with all its confused wretchednesses, a lost one.

Observe, however, that of man’s whole terrestrial possessions and attainments, unspeakably the noblest are his Symbols, divine or divine-seeming; under which he marches and fights, with victorious assurance, in this life-battle: what we can call his Realised Ideals. Of which realised Ideals, omitting the rest, consider only these two: his Church, or spiritual Guidance; his Kingship, or temporal one. The Church: what a word was there; richer than Golconda and the treasures of the world! In the heart of the remotest mountains rises the little Kirk; the Dead all slumbering round it, under their white memorial-stones, “in hope of a happy resurrection”:—dull wert thou, O Reader, if never in any hour (say of moaning midnight, when such Kirk hung spectral in the sky, and Being was as if swallowed up of Darkness) it spoke to thee—things unspeakable, that went into thy soul’s soul. Strong was he that had a Church, what we can call a Church: he stood thereby, though “in the centre of Immensities, in the conflux of Eternities”, yet manlike towards God and man; the vague shoreless Universe had become for him a firm city, and dwelling which he knew. Such virtue was in Belief; in these words, well spoken: *I believe*. Well might

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men prize their *Credo*, and raise stateliest Temples for it, and reverend Hierarchies, and give it the tithe of their substance; it was worth living for and dying for.

Neither was that an inconsiderable moment when wild armed men first raised their Strongest aloft on the buckler-throne, and, with clanging armour and hearts, said solemnly: Be thou our Acknowledged Strongest! In such Acknowledged Strongest (well-named King, *Kön-ning*, Can-ning, or Man that was Able) what a Symbol shone now for them,—significant with the destinies of the world! A Symbol of true Guidance in return for loving Obedience; properly, if he knew it, the prime want of man. A Symbol which might be called sacred; for is there not, in reverence for what is better than we, an indestructible sacredness? On which ground, too, it was well said there lay in the Acknowledged Strongest a divine right; as surely there might in the Strongest, whether Acknowledged or not,—considering *who* it was that made him strong. And so, in the midst of confusions and unutterable incongruities (as all growth is confused), did this of Royalty, with Loyalty environing it, spring up; and grow mysteriously, subduing and assimilating (for a principle of Life was in it); till it also had grown world-great, and was among the main Facts of our modern existence. Such a Fact, that Louis XIV, for example, could answer the expostulatory Magistrate with his “*L’État c’est moi* (The State? I am the State)”; and be replied to by silence and abashed looks. So far had accident and forethought; had your Louis Elevenths, with the leaden Virgin in their hat-band, and torture-wheels and conical *oubliettes* (man-eating!) under their feet; your Henri Fourths, with their prophesied social millennium, “when every peasant should have his fowl in the pot”; and on the whole, the fertility of this most fertile Existence (named of Good and Evil)—brought it, in the matter of the Kingship. Wondrous! Concerning which may we not again say, that in the huge mass of Evil, as it rolls and swells, there is ever some Good working imprisoned; working towards deliverance and triumph?

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How such Ideals do realise themselves; and grow, wondrously, from amid the incongruous ever-fluctuating chaos of the Actual: this is what World-History, if it teach anything, has to teach us. How they grow; and, after long stormy growth, bloom out mature, supreme; then quickly (for the blossom is brief) fall into decay; sorrowfully dwindle; and crumble down, or rush down, noisily or noiselessly disappearing. The blossom is so brief; as of some centennial Cactus-flower, which after a century of waiting shines out for hours! Thus from the day when rough Clovis, in the Champ de Mars, in sight of his whole army, had to cleave retributively the head of that rough Frank, with sudden battle-axe, and the fierce words, "It was thus thou clavest the vase" (St Remi's and mine) "at Soissons", forward to Louis the Grand and his *L'État c'est moi*, we count some twelve hundred years: and now this the very next Louis is dying, and so much dying with him!—Nay, thus too, if Catholicism, with and against Feudalism (but *not* against Nature and her bounty), gave us English a Shakespeare and Era of Shakespeare, and so produced a blossom of Catholicism—it was not till Catholicism itself, so far as Law could abolish it, had been abolished here.

But of those decadent ages in which no Ideal either grows or blossoms? When Belief and Loyalty have passed away, and only the cant and false echo of them remains; and all Solemnity has become Pageantry; and the Creed of persons in authority has become one of two things: an Imbecility or a Machiavellism? Alas, of these ages World-History can take no notice; they have to become compressed more and more, and finally suppressed in the Annals of Mankind; blotted out as spurious,—which indeed they are. Hapless ages: wherein, if ever in any, it is an unhappiness to be born. To be born, and to learn only, by every tradition and example, that God's Universe is Belial's and a Lie; and "the Supreme Quack" the hierarch of men! In which mournfulest faith, nevertheless, do we not see whole generations (two, and sometimes even three successively)

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live, what they call living; and vanish,—without chance of reappearance?

In such a decadent age, or one fast verging that way, had our poor Louis been born. Grant also that if the French Kingship had not, by course of Nature, long to live, he of all men was the man to accelerate Nature. The Blossom of French Royalty, cactus-like, has accordingly made an astonishing progress. In those Metz days, it was still standing with all its petals, though bedimmed by Orleans Regents and *Roué* Ministers and Cardinals; but now, in 1774, we behold it bald, and the virtue nigh gone out of it.

Disastrous indeed does it look with those same “realised ideals”, one and all! The Church, which in its palmy season, seven hundred years ago, could make an Emperor wait barefoot, in penance-shirt, three days, in the snow, has for centuries seen itself decaying; reduced even to forget old purposes and enmities, and join interest with the Kingship: on this younger strength it would fain stay its decrepitude; and these two will henceforth stand and fall together. Alas, the Sorbonne still sits there, in its old mansion; but mumbles only jargon of dotage, and no longer leads the consciences of men: not the Sorbonne; it is *Encyclopédies*, *Philosophie*, and who knows what nameless innumerable multitude of ready Writers, profane Singers, Romancers, Players, Disputators, and Pamphleteers, that now form the Spiritual Guidance of the world. The world’s Practical Guidance too is lost, or has glided into the same miscellaneous hands. Who is it that the King (*Ableman*, named also *Roi*, *Rex*, or Director) now guides? His own huntsman and prickers: when there is to be no hunt, it is well said, “*Le Roi ne fera rien* (To-day his Majesty will do *nothing*)”. He lives and lingers there, because he is living there, and none has yet laid hands on him.

The nobles, in like manner, have nearly ceased either to guide or misguide; and are now, as their master is, little more than ornamental figures. It is long since they have done with butchering one another or their king: the Workers, protected, encouraged by Majesty, have ages ago

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built walled towns, and there ply their crafts; will permit no Robber Baron to “live by the saddle”, but maintain a gallows to prevent it. Ever since that period of the *Fronde*, the Noble has changed his fighting sword into a court rapier; and now loyally attends his king as ministering satellite; divides the spoil, not now by violence and murder, but by soliciting and finesse. These men call themselves supports of the throne: singular gilt-paste-board *caryatides* in that singular edifice! For the rest, their privileges every way are now much curtailed. That Law authorising a Seigneur, as he returned from hunting, to kill not more than two Serfs, and refresh his feet in their warm blood and bowels, has fallen into perfect desuetude,—and even into incredibility; for if Deputy Lapoule can believe in it, and call for the abrogation of it, so cannot we. No Charolois, for these last fifty years, though never so fond of shooting, has been in use to bring down slaters and plumbers, and see them roll from their roofs; but contents himself with partridges and grouse. Close-viewed, their industry and function is that of dressing gracefully and eating sumptuously. As for their debauchery and depravity, it is perhaps unexampled since the era of Tiberius and Commodus. Nevertheless, one has still partly a feeling with the lady Maréchale: “Depend upon it, Sir, God thinks twice before damning a man of that quality”. These people, of old, surely had virtues, uses; or they could not have been there. Nay, one virtue they are still required to have (for mortal man cannot live without a conscience): the virtue of perfect readiness to fight duels.

Such are the shepherds of the people: and now how fares it with the flock? With the flock, as is inevitable, it fares ill, and ever worse. They are not tended, they are only regularly shorn. They are sent for, to do statute-labour, to pay statute-taxes; to fatten battlefields (named “bed of honour”) with their bodies, in quarrels which are not theirs; their hand and toil is in every possession of man; but for themselves they have little or no possession. Untaught, un-comforted, unfed; to pine stagnantly in thick obscuratation,

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in squalid destitution and obstruction: this is the lot of the millions; *peuple taillable et corvéable à merci et miséricorde*. In Brittany they once rose in revolt at the first introduction of Pendulum Clocks; thinking it had something to do with the *Gabelle*. Paris requires to be cleared out periodically by the Police; and the horde of hunger-stricken vagabonds to be sent wandering again over space—for a time. “During one such periodical clearance”, says Lacretelle, “in May, 1750, the Police had presumed withal to carry off some reputable people’s children, in the hope of extorting ransoms for them. The mothers fill the public places with cries of despair; crowds gather, get excited; so many women in distraction run about exaggerating the alarm: an absurd and horrid fable rises among the people; it is said that the doctors have ordered a Great Person to take baths of young human blood for the restoration of his own, all spoiled by debaucheries. Some of the rioters”, adds Lacretelle, quite coolly, “were hanged on the following days”: the Police went on. O ye poor naked wretches! and this, then, is your inarticulate cry to Heaven, as of a dumb tortured animal, crying from uttermost depths of pain and debasement? Do these azure skies, like a dead crystalline vault, only reverberate the echo of it on you? Respond to it only by “hanging on the following days”?—Not so: not for ever! Ye are heard in Heaven. And the answer too will come, —in a horror of great darkness, and shakings of the world, and a cup of trembling which all the nations shall drink.

Remark, meanwhile, how from amid the wrecks and dust of this universal Decay new Powers are fashioning themselves, adapted to the new time and its destinies. Besides the old Noblesse, originally of Fighters, there is a new recognised Noblesse of Lawyers; whose gala-day and proud battle-day even now is. An unrecognised Noblesse of Commerce; powerful enough, with money in its pocket. Lastly, powerfulest of all, least recognised of all, a Noblesse of Literature; without steel on their thigh, without gold in their purse, but with the “grand thaumaturgic faculty of Thought” in their head. French Philo-

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sophism has arisen; in which little word how much do we include! Here, indeed, lies properly the cardinal symptom of the whole widespread malady. Faith is gone out; Scepticism is come in. Evil abounds and accumulates; no man has Faith to withstand it, to amend it, to begin by amending himself; it must even go on accumulating. While hollow languor and vacuity is the lot of the Upper, and want and stagnation of the Lower, and universal misery is very certain, what other thing is certain? That a Lie cannot be believed! Philosophism knows only this: her other belief is mainly, that in spiritual supersensual matters no Belief is possible. Unhappy! Nay, as yet the Contradiction of a Lie is some kind of Belief; but the Lie with its Contradiction once swept away, what will remain? The five unsatiated Senses will remain, the sixth insatiable Sense (of vanity); the whole *dæmonic* nature of man will remain,—hurled forth to rage blindly without rule or rein; savage itself, yet with all the tools and weapons of civilisation: a spectacle new in History.

In such a France, as in a Powder-tower, where fire unquenched and now unquenchable is smoking and smouldering all round, has Louis XV lain down to die. With Pompadourism and Dubarryism, his Fleur-de-lis has been shamefully struck down in all lands and on all seas; Poverty invades even the Royal Exchequer, and Tax-farming can squeeze out no more; there is a quarrel of twenty-five years' standing with the Parlement; everywhere Want, Dishonesty, Unbelief, and hot-brained Sciolists for state-physicians: it is a portentous hour.

Such things can the eye of History see in this sick-room of King Louis, which were invisible to the Courtiers there. It is twenty years, gone Christmas-day, since Lord Chesterfield, summing up what he had noted of this same France, wrote, and sent off by post, the following words, that have become memorable: "In short, all the symptoms which I have ever met with in History, previous to great Changes and Revolutions in government, now exist and daily increase in France".

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THE NEW AGE

(a) LOUIS XVI

THERE is a stillness, not of unobstructed growth, but of passive inertness, the symptom of imminent downfall. As victory is silent, so is defeat. Of the opposing forces the weaker has resigned itself; the stronger marches on, noiseless now, but rapid, inevitable: the fall and overturn will not be noiseless. How all grows, and has its period, even as the herbs of the fields, be it annual, centennial, millennial! All grows and dies, each by its own wondrous laws, in wondrous fashion of its own; spiritual things most wondrously of all. Inscrutable, to the wisest, are these latter; not to be prophesied of, or understood. If when the oak stands proudest flourishing to the eye, you know that its heart is sound, it is not so with the man; how much less with the Society, with the Nation of men! Of such it may be affirmed even that the superficial aspect, that the inward feeling of full health, is generally ominous. For indeed it is of apoplexy, so to speak, and a plethoric lazy habit of body, that Churches, Kingships, Social Institutions, oftenest die. Sad, when such Institution plethorically says to itself, Take thy ease, thou hast goods laid up;—like the fool of the Gospel, to whom it was answered, Fool, *this night* thy life shall be required of thee!

Is it the healthy peace, or the ominous unhealthy, that rests on France, for these next Ten Years? Over which the Historian can pass lightly, without call to linger: for as yet events are not, much less performances. Time of sunniest stillness;—shall we call it, what all men thought it, the new Age of Gold? Call it at least, of Paper; which in many ways is the succedaneum of Gold. Bank-paper, wherewith you can still buy when there is no gold left; Book-paper, splendid with Theories, Philosophies, Sensibilities,—beautiful art, not only of revealing Thought, but also of so beautifully hiding from us the want of Thought! Paper is made from the *rags* of things that did once exist;

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there are endless excellences in Paper.—What wisest Philosophe, in this halcyon uneventful period, could prophesy that there was approaching, big with darkness and confusion, the event of events? Hope ushers in a Revolution,—as earthquakes are preceded by bright weather. On the Fifth of May, fifteen years hence, old Louis will not be sending for the Sacraments; but a new Louis, his grandson, with the whole pomp of astonished intoxicated France, will be opening the States-General.

Dubarrydom and its D'Aiguillons are gone for ever. There is a young, still docile, well-intentioned King; a young, beautiful and bountiful, well-intentioned Queen; and with them all France, as it were, become young. Maupeou and his Parlement have to vanish into thick night; respectable Magistrates, not indifferent to the Nation, were it only for having been opponents of the Court, descend now unchained from their "steep rocks at Croe in Combrailles" and elsewhere, and return singing praises: the old Parlement of Paris resumes its functions. Instead of a profligate bankrupt Abbé Terray, we have now, for Controller-General, a virtuous philosophic Turgot, with a whole Reformed France in his head. By whom whatsoever is wrong, in Finance or otherwise, will be righted,—as far as possible. Is it not as if Wisdom herself were henceforth to have seat and voice in the Council of Kings? Turgot has taken office with the noblest plainness of speech to that effect; been listened to with the noblest royal trustfulness. It is true, as King Louis objects, "They say he never goes to mass"; but liberal France likes him little worse for that; liberal France answers, "The Abbé Terray always went". Philosophism sees, for the first time, a Philosophe (or even a Philosopher) in office: she in all things will applausively second him; neither will light old Maurepas obstruct, if he can easily help it.

Then how "sweet" are the manners; vice "losing all its deformity"; becoming *decent* (as established things, making regulations for themselves, do); becoming almost a kind of "sweet" virtue! Intelligence so abounds;