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Excerpt

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THE BASTILLE
BOOK FIRST
DEATH OF LOUIS XV

CHAPTER I

LOUIS THE WELL-BELOVED

PRESIDENT HÉNAULT, remarking on royal Surnames of Honour how difficult it often is to ascertain not only why, but even when, they were conferred, takes occasion, in his sleek official way, to make a philosophical reflection. ‘The Surname of *Bien-aimé* (Well-beloved),’ says he, ‘which Louis xv. bears, will not leave posterity in the same doubt. This Prince, in the year 1744, while hastening from one end of his kingdom to the other, and suspending his conquests in Flanders that he might fly to the assistance of Alsace, was arrested at Metz by a malady which threatened to cut short his days. At the news of this, Paris, all in terror, seemed a city taken by storm: the churches resounded with supplications and groans; the prayers of priests and people were every moment interrupted by their sobs: and it was from an interest so dear and tender that this Surname of *Bien-aimé* fashioned itself,—a title higher still than all the rest which this great Prince has earned.’¹

So stands it written; in lasting memorial of that year

¹ *Abrégé Chronologique de l’Histoire de France* (Paris, 1775), p. 701.

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1744. Thirty other years have come and gone; and 'this great Prince' again lies sick; but in how altered circumstances now! Churches resound not with excessive groanings; Paris is stoically calm: sobs interrupt no prayers, for indeed none are offered; except Priests' Litanies, read or chanted at fixed money-rate per hour, which are not liable to interruption. The shepherd of the people has been carried home from Little Trianon, heavy of heart, and been put to bed in his own Château of Versailles: the flock knows it, and heeds it not. At most, in the immeasurable tide of French Speech (which ceases not day after day, and only ebbs towards the short hours of night), may this of the royal sickness emerge from time to time as an article of news. Bets are doubtless depending; nay, some people 'express themselves loudly in the streets.'¹ But for the rest, on green field and steeped city, the May sun shines out, the May evening fades; and men ply their useful or useless business as if no Louis lay in danger.

Dame Dubarry, indeed, might pray, if she had a talent for it; Duke d'Aiguillon too, Maupeou and the Parlement Maupeou: these, as they sit in their high places, with France harnessed under their feet, know well on what basis they continue there. Look to it, D'Aiguillon; sharply as thou didst, from the Mill of St. Cast, on Quiberon and the invading English; thou, 'covered if not with glory yet with meal!' Fortune was ever accounted inconstant: and each dog has but his day.

Forlorn enough languished Duke d'Aiguillon, some years ago; covered, as we said, with meal; nay with worse. For La Chalotais, the Breton Parlementeer, accused him not only of poltroonery and tyranny, but even of *concuSSION* (official plunder of money); which accusations it was easier to get 'quashed' by backstairs Influences than to get answered: neither could the thoughts, or even the tongues, of men be tied. Thus, under disastrous eclipse, had this grand-nephew

¹ *Mémoires de M. le Baron Besenval* (Paris, 1805), ii. 59-90.

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of the great Richelieu to glide about; unworshipped by the world; resolute Choiseul, the abrupt proud man, disdaining him, or even forgetting him. Little prospect but to glide into Gascony, to rebuild Châteaux there,¹ and die inglorious killing game! However, in the year 1770, a certain young soldier, Dumouriez by name, returning from Corsica, could see 'with sorrow, at Compiègne, the old King of France, on foot, with doffed hat, in sight of his army, at the side of a magnificent phaeton, doing homage to the—Dubarry.'²

Much lay therein! Thereby, for one thing, could D'Aiguillon postpone the rebuilding of his Château, and rebuild his fortunes first. For stout Choiseul would discern in the Dubarry nothing but a wonderfully dizen'd Scarlet-woman; and go on his way as if she were not. Intolerable: the source of sighs, tears, of pettings and poutings; which would not end till 'France' (La France, as she named her royal valet) finally mustered heart to see Choiseul; and with that 'quivering in the chin (*tremblement du menton*)' natural in such case,³ faltered out a dismissal: dismissal of his last substantial man, but pacification of his scarlet-woman. Thus D'Aiguillon rose again, and culminated. And with him there rose Maupeou, the banisher of Parlements; who plants you a refractory President 'at Croe in Combrailles on the top of steep rocks, inaccessible except by litters,' there to consider himself. Likewise there rose Abbé Terray, dissolute Financier, paying eightpence in the shilling,—so that wits exclaim in some press at the playhouse, 'Where is Abbé Terray, that he might reduce us to two-thirds!' And so have these individuals (verily by black-art) built them a Domdaniel, or enchanted Dubarrydom; call it an Armida-Palace, where they dwell pleasantly; Chancellor Maupeou 'playing blind-man's-buff' with the scarlet Enchantress; or gallantly presenting her with dwarf Negroes;

¹ Arthur Young, *Travels during the years 1787-88-89* (Bury St. Edmunds, 1792), i. 44.

² *La Vie et les Mémoires du Général Dumouriez* (Paris, 1822), i. 141.

³ Besenval, *Mémoires*, ii. 21.

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—and a Most Christian King has unspeakable peace within doors, whatever he may have without. ‘My Chancellor is a scoundrel ; but I cannot do without him.’¹

Beautiful Armida-Palace, where the inmates live enchanted lives ; lapped in soft music of adulation ; waited on by the splendours of the world ;—which nevertheless hangs wondrously as by a single hair. Should the Most Christian King die ; or even get seriously afraid of dying ! For, alas, had not the fair haughty Chateauroux to fly, with wet cheeks and flaming heart, from that Fever-scene at Metz, long since ; driven forth by sour shavelings ? She hardly returned, when fever and shavelings were both swept into the background. Pompadour too, when Damiens wounded Royalty ‘slightly, under the fifth rib,’ and our drive to Trianon went off futile, in shrieks and madly shaken torches,—had to pack, and be in readiness : yet did not go, the wound not proving poisoned. For his Majesty has religious faith ; believes, at least in a Devil. And now a third peril ; and who knows what may be in it ! For the Doctors look grave ; ask privily, If his Majesty had not the small-pox long ago ?—and doubt it may have been a false kind. Yes, Maupeou, pucker those sinister brows of thine, and peer out on it with thy malign rat-eyes : it is a questionable case. Sure only that man is mortal ; that with the life of one mortal snaps irrevocably the wonderfulest talisman, and all Dubarrydom rushes off, with tumult, into infinite Space ; and ye, as subterranean Apparitions are wont, vanish utterly,—leaving only a smell of sulphur !

These, and what holds of these, may pray,—to Beelzebub, or whoever will hear them. But from the rest of France there comes, as was said, no prayer ; or one of an *opposite* character, ‘expressed openly in the streets.’ Château or Hôtel, where an enlightened Philosophism scrutinises many things, is not given to prayer : neither are Rossbach victories, Terray Finances, nor, say only ‘sixty thousand *Lettres de Cachet*’

¹ Dulaure, *Histoire de Paris* (Paris, 1824), vii. 328.

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(which is Maupeou's share), persuasives towards that. O Hénault! Prayers? From a France smitten (by black-art) with plague after plague, and lying now, in shame and pain, with a Harlot's foot on its neck, what prayer can come? Those lank scarecrows, that prowl hunger-stricken through all highways and byways of French Existence, will they pray? The dull millions that, in the workshop or furrowfield, grind foredone at the wheel of Labour, like haltered gin-horses, if blind so much the quieter? Or they that in the Bicêtre Hospital, 'eight to a bed,' lie waiting their manumission? Dim are those heads of theirs, dull stagnant those hearts: to them the great Sovereign is known mainly as the great Regrater of Bread. If they hear of his sickness, they will answer with a dull *Tant pis pour lui*; or with the question, Will he die?

Yes, will he die? that is now, for all France, the grand question, and hope; whereby alone the King's sickness has still some interest.

CHAPTER II

REALISED IDEALS

SUCH a changed France have we; and a changed Louis. Changed, truly; and further than thou yet seest!—To the eye of History many things, in that sick-room of Louis, are now visible, which to the Courtiers there present were invisible. For indeed it is well said, 'in every object there is inexhaustible meaning; the eye sees in it what the eye brings means of seeing.' To Newton and to Newton's Dog Diamond, what a different pair of Universes; while the painting on the optical retina of both was, most likely, the same! Let the Reader here, in this sick-room of Louis, endeavour to look with the mind too.

Time was when men could (so to speak) of a given man, by nourishing and decorating him with fit appliances, to the

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due pitch, *make* themselves a King, almost as the Bees do; and what was still more to the purpose, loyally obey him when made. The man so nourished and decorated, thenceforth named royal, does verily bear rule; and is said, and even thought, to be, for example, 'prosecuting conquests in Flanders,' when he lets himself like luggage be carried thither: and no light luggage; covering miles of road. For he has his unblushing Chateauroux, with her handboxes and rouge-pots, at his side; so that, at every new station, a wooden gallery must be run up between their lodgings. He has not only his *Maison-Bouche*, and *Valetaille* without end, but his very Troop of Players, with their pasteboard coulisses, thunder-barrels, their kettles, fiddles, stage-wardrobes, portable larders (and chaffering and quarrelling enough); all mounted in wagons, tumbrils, second-hand chaises,—sufficient not to conquer Flanders, but the patience of the world. With such a flood of loud jingling appurtenances does he lumber along, prosecuting his conquests in Flanders: wonderful to behold. So nevertheless it was and had been: to some solitary thinker it might seem strange; but even to him inevitable, not unnatural.

For ours is a most fictile world; and man is the most fin-gent plastic of creatures. A world not fixable; not fathomable! An unfathomable Somewhat, which is *Not we*; which we can work with, and live amidst,—and model, miraculously in our miraculous Being, and name World.—But if the very Rocks and Rivers (as Metaphysic teaches) are, in strict language, *made* by those outward Senses of ours, how much more, by the Inward Sense, are all Phenomena of the spiritual kind: Dignities, Authorities, Holies, Unholies! Which inward Sense, moreover, is not permanent like the outward ones, but for ever growing and changing. Does not the Black African take of Sticks and Old Clothes (say, exported Mon-mouth-Street cast-clothes) what will suffice, and of these, cunningly combining them, fabricate for himself an Eidolon (Idol, or *Thing Seen*), and name it *Mumbo-Jumbo*; which he can thenceforth pray to, with upturned awestruck eye, not

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without hope? The white European mocks; but ought rather to consider; and see whether he, at home, could not do the like a little more wisely.

So *it was*, we say, in those conquests of Flanders, thirty years ago: but so it no longer is. Alas, much more lies sick than poor Louis: not the French King only, but the French Kingship; this too, after long rough tear and wear, is breaking down. The world is all so changed; so much that seemed vigorous has sunk decrepit, so much that was not is beginning to be! —Borne over the Atlantic, to the closing ear of Louis, King by the Grace of God, what sounds are these; muffled ominous, new in our centuries? Boston Harbour is black with unexpected Tea: behold a Pennsylvanian Congress gather; and ere long, on Bunker Hill, DEMOCRACY announcing, in rifle-volleys death-winged, under her Star Banner, to the tune of Yankee-doodle-doo, that she is born, and, whirlwind-like, will envelope the whole world!

Sovereigns die and Sovereignties: 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,

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—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 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

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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 men prize their *Credo*, and raise stateliest Temples for it, and reverend Hierarchies, and give it the title 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 Eleventh, with the leaden Virgin

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in their hatband, 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?

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 Shakspeare and Era of Shakspeare, 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 Macchiavelism? Alas, of these ages World-History can