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Excerpt

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THE CONSTITUTION

BOOK FIRST

THE FEAST OF PIKES

CHAPTER I

IN THE TUILERIES

THE victim having once got his stroke-of-grace, the catastrophe can be considered as almost come. There is small interest now in watching his long low moans: notable only are his sharper agonies, what convulsive struggles he may make to cast the torture off from him; and then finally the last departure of life itself, and how he lies extinct and ended, either wrapt like Cæsar in decorous mantle-folds, or unseemly sunk together, like one that had not the force even to die.

Was French Royalty, when wrenched forth from its tapestries in that fashion, on that Sixth of October 1789, such a victim? Universal France, and Royal Proclamation to all the Provinces, answers anxiously, *No*. Nevertheless one may fear the worst. Royalty was beforehand so decrepit, moribund, there is little life in it to heal an injury. How much of its strength, which was of the imagination merely, has fled; Rascality having looked plainly in the King's face, and not died! When the assembled crows can pluck up their scarecrow, and say to it, Here shalt thou stand and not there; and can treat with it, and make it, from an infinite, a quite finite

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Constitutional scarecrow,—what is to be looked for? Not in the finite Constitutional scarecrow, but in what still unmeasured, infinite-seeming force may rally round it, is there thenceforth any hope. For it is most true that all available Authority is *mystic* in its conditions, and comes ‘by the grace of God.’

Cheerfuller than watching the death-struggles of Royalism will it be to watch the growth and gambollings of Sansculottism; for, in human things, especially in human society, all death is but a death-birth: thus if the sceptre is departing from Louis, it is only that, in other forms, other sceptres, were it even pike-sceptres, may bear sway. In a prurient element, rich with nutritive influences, we shall find that Sansculottism grows lustily, and even frisks in not ungraceful sport: as indeed most young creatures are sportful; nay, may it not be noted further, that as the grown cat, and cat species generally, is the cruelest thing known, so the merriest is precisely the kitten, or growing cat?

But fancy the Royal Family risen from its truckle-beds on the morrow of that mad day: fancy the Municipal inquiry, ‘How would your Majesty please to lodge?’—and then that the King’s rough answer, ‘Each may lodge as he can, I am well enough,’ is congéed and bowed away, in expressive grins, by the Townhall Functionaries, with obsequious upholsterers at their back; and how the Château of the Tuileries is repainted, regarnished into a golden Royal Residence; and Lafayette with his blue National Guards lies encompassing it, as blue Neptune (in the language of poets) does an island, woingly. Thither may the wrecks of rehabilitated Loyalty gather, if it will become Constitutional; for Constitutionalism thinks no evil; Sansculottism itself rejoices in the King’s countenance. The rubbish of a Menadic Insurrection, as in this ever-kindly world all rubbish can and must be, is swept aside; and so again, on clear arena, under new conditions, with something even of a new stateliness, we begin a new course of action.

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Arthur Young has witnessed the strangest scene : Majesty walking unattended in the Tuileries Gardens ; and miscellaneous tricolor crowds, who cheer it, and reverently make way for it : the very Queen commands at lowest respectful silence, regretful avoidance.¹ Simple ducks, in those royal waters, quackle for crumbs from young royal fingers : the little Dauphin has a little railed garden, where he is seen delving, with ruddy cheeks and flaxen curled hair ; also a little hutch to put his tools in, and screen himself against showers. What peaceable simplicity ! Is it peace of a Father restored to his children ? Or of a Taskmaster who has lost his whip ? Lafayette and the Municipality and universal Constitutionalism assert the former, and do what is in them to realise it. Such Patriotism as snarls dangerously and shows teeth, Patrollotism shall suppress ; or far better, Royalty shall soothe down the angry hair of it, by gentle pattings ; and, most effectual of all, by fuller diet. Yes, not only shall Paris be fed, but the King's hand be seen in that work. The household goods of the Poor shall, up to a certain amount, by royal bounty, be disengaged from pawn, and that insatiable *Mont de Piété* shall disgorge ; rides in the city with their *Vive-le-Roi* need not fail : and so, by substance and show, shall Royalty, if man's art can popularise it, be popularised.²

Or, alas, is it neither restored Father nor diswhipped Taskmaster that walks there ; but an anomalous complex of both these, and of innumerable other heterogeneities : reducible to no rubric, if not to this newly-devised one : *King Louis Restorer of French Liberty* ? Man indeed, and King Louis like other men, lives in this world to make rule out of the ruleless ; by his living energy, he shall force the absurd itself to become less absurd. But then if there be no living energy ; living passivity only ? King Serpent, hurled into its unexpected watery dominion, did at least bite, and assert credibly that he was there : but as for the poor King Log, tumbled hither and thither as thousand-fold chance and other will than

¹ Arthur Young's *Travels*, i. 264-280.² *Deux Amis*, iii. c. 10.

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his might direct, how happy for him that he was indeed wooden; and, doing nothing, could also see and suffer nothing! It is a distracted business.

For his French Majesty, meanwhile, one of the worst things is, that he can get no hunting. Alas, no hunting henceforth; only a fatal being-hunted! Scarcely, in the next June weeks, shall he taste again the joys of the game-destroyer; in next June, and never more. He sends for his smith-tools; gives, in the course of the day, official or ceremonial business being ended, a 'few strokes of the file, *quelques coups de lime*.¹ Innocent brother mortal, why wert thou not an obscure substantial maker of locks; but doomed in that other far-seen craft, to be a maker only of world-follies, unrealities; things self-destructive, which no mortal hammering could rivet into coherence!

Poor Louis is not without insight, nor even without the elements of will; some sharpness of temper, spurting at times from a stagnating character. If harmless inertness could save him, it were well; but he will slumber and painfully dream, and to *do* aught is not given him. Royalist Antiquarians still show the rooms where Majesty and suite, in these extraordinary circumstances, had their lodging. Here sat the Queen; reading,—for she had her library brought hither, though the King refused his; taking vehement counsel of the vehement uncounselled; sorrowing over altered times; yet with sure hope of better: in her young rosy Boy has she not the living emblem of hope? It is a murky, working sky; yet with golden gleams—of dawn, or of deeper meteoric night? Here again this chamber, on the other side of the main entrance, was the King's: here his Majesty breakfasted, and did official work; here daily after breakfast he received the Queen; sometimes in pathetic friendliness; sometimes in human sulkiness, for flesh is weak; and when questioned about business, would answer: 'Madame, your business is with the children.' Nay, Sire, were it not better you, your

¹ *Le Château des Tuileries, ou récit etc.*, par Roussel (in *Hist. Parl.* iv. 195-219).

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Majesty's self, took the children? So asks impartial History; scornful that the *thicker* vessel was not also the stronger; pity-struck for the porcelain-clay of humanity rather than for the tile-clay,—though indeed *both* were broken!

So, however, in this Medicean Tuileries, shall the French King and Queen now sit for one-and-forty months; and see a wild-fermenting France work out its own destiny, and theirs. Months bleak, ungenial, of rapid vicissitude; yet with a mild pale splendour, here and there: as of an April that were leading to leafiest Summer; as of an October that led only to everlasting Frost. Medicean Tuileries, how changed since it was a peaceful Tile-field! Or is the ground itself fate-stricken, accursed; an Atreus' Palace; for that Louvre window is still nigh, out of which a Capet, whipt of the Furies, fired his signal of the Saint Bartholomew! Dark is the way of the Eternal as mirrored in this world of Time: God's way is in the sea, and His path in the great deep.

CHAPTER II

IN THE SALLE DE MANÉGE

To believing Patriots, however, it is now clear that the Constitution will march, *marcher*,—had it once legs to stand on. Quick, then, ye Patriots, bestir yourselves, and make it; shape legs for it! In the *Archevêché*, or Archbishop's Palace, his Grace himself having fled; and afterwards in the Riding-hall, named Manége, close on the Tuileries: there does a National Assembly apply itself to the miraculous work. Successfully, had there been any heaven-scaling Prometheus among them; not successfully, since there was none! There, in noisy debate, for the sessions are occasionally 'scandalous,' and as many as three speakers have been seen in the Tribune at once,—let us continue to fancy it wearing the slow months.

Tough, dogmatic, long of wind is Abbé Maury; Ciceronian

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pathetic is Cazalès. Keen-trenchant, on the other side, glitters a young Barnave; abhorrent of sophistry; shearing, like keen Damascus sabre, all sophistry asunder,—reckless what else he shear with it. Simple seemest thou, O solid Dutch-built Pétion; if solid, surely dull. Nor lifegiving is that tone of thine, livelier polemical Rabaut. With ineffable serenity sniffs great Sieyes, aloft, alone; his Constitution ye may babble over, ye may mar, but can by no possibility mend: is not Polity a science he has exhausted? Cool, slow, two military Lameths are visible, with their quality sneer, or demi-sneer; they shall gallantly refund their Mother's Pension, when the Red Book is produced; gallantly be wounded in duels. A Marquis Toulangeon, whose Pen we yet thank, sits there; in stoical meditative humour, oftenest silent, accepts what Destiny will send. Thouret and Parliamentary Duport produce mountains of Reformed Law; liberal, Anglomanic; available and unavailable. Mortals rise and fall. Shall goose Gobel, for example,—or Göbel, for he is of Strasburg German breed,—be a Constitutional Archbishop?

Alone of all men there, Mirabeau may begin to discern clearly whither all this is tending. Patriotism, accordingly, regrets that his zeal seems to be getting cool. In that famed Pentecost-Night of the Fourth of August, when new Faith rose suddenly into miraculous fire, and old Feudality was burnt up, men remarked that Mirabeau took no hand in it; that, in fact, he luckily happened to be absent. But did he not defend the *Veto*, nay *Veto Absolu*; and tell vehement Barnave that six hundred irresponsible senators would make of all tyrannies the insupportablest? Again, how anxious was he that the King's Ministers should have seat and voice in the National Assembly;—doubtless with an eye to being Minister himself! Whereupon the National Assembly decides, what is very momentous, that no Deputy shall be Minister; he, in his haughty stormful manner, advising us to make it, 'no Deputy called Mirabeau.'¹ A man of perhaps inveterate

¹ *Moniteur*, Nos. 65, 86 (29th September, 7th November, 1789).

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Feudalisms; of stratagems; too often visible leanings towards the Royalist side: a man suspect; whom Patriotism will unmask! Thus, in these June days, when the question, *Who shall have right to declare war?* comes on, you hear hoarse Hawkers sound dolefully through the streets, ‘Grand Treason of Count Mirabeau, price only one sou’;—because he pleads that it shall be not the Assembly, but the King! Pleads; nay prevails: for in spite of the hoarse Hawkers, and an endless Populace raised by them to the pitch even of ‘*Lanterne*,’ he mounts the Tribune next day; grim-resolute; murmuring aside to his friends that speak of danger: ‘I know it: I must come hence either in triumph or else torn in fragments’: and it was in triumph that he came.

A man stout of heart; whose popularity is not of the populace ‘*pas populacière*’; whom no clamour of unwashed mobs without doors, or of washed mobs within, can scare from his way! Dumont remembers hearing him deliver a Report on Marseilles; ‘every word was interrupted on the part of the *Côté Droit* by abusive epithets; calumniator, liar, assassin, scoundrel (*scélérat*): Mirabeau pauses a moment, and, in a honeyed tone, addressing the most furious, says: “I wait, Messieurs, till these amenities be exhausted.”’¹ A man enigmatic, difficult to unmask! For example, whence comes his money? Can the profit of a Newspaper, sorely eaten into by Dame Le Jay; can this, and the eighteen francs a day your National Deputy has, be supposed equal to this expenditure? House in the Chaussée d’Antin; Country-house at Argenteuil; splendours, sumptuosities, orgies;—living as if he had a mint! All saloons, barred against Adventurer Mirabeau, are flung wide-open to King Mirabeau, the cynosure of Europe, whom female France flutters to behold,—though the Man Mirabeau is one and the same. As for money, one may conjecture that Royalism furnishes it; which if Royalism do, will not the same be welcome, as money always is to him?

‘Sold,’ whatever Patriotism thinks, he cannot readily be:

¹ Dumont, *Souvenirs*, p. 278.

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the spiritual fire which is in that man ; which shining through such confusions is nevertheless Conviction, and makes him strong, and without which he had no strength,—is not buyable nor saleable ; in such transference of barter, it would vanish and not *be*. Perhaps ‘paid and not sold, *payé pas vendu*’: as poor Rivarol, in the unhappier converse way, calls himself ‘sold and not paid’! A man travelling, comet-like, in splendour and nebulosity, his wild way ; whom telescopic Patriotism may long watch, but, without higher mathematics, will not make out. A questionable, most blamable man ; yet to us the far notablest of all. With rich munificence, as we often say, in a most blinkard, bespectacled, logic-chopping generation, Nature has gifted this man with an eye. Welcome is his word, there where he speaks and works ; and growing ever welcomer ; for it alone goes to the heart of the business : logical cobwebbery shrinks itself together ; and thou seest a *thing*, how it is, how it may be worked with.

Unhappily our National Assembly has much to do : a France to regenerate ; and France is short of so many requisites, short even of cash. These same Finances give trouble enough ; no choking of the Deficit ; which gapes ever, *Give, give!* To appease the Deficit we venture on a hazardous step, sale of the Clergy’s Lands and superfluous Edifices ; most hazardous. Nay, given the sale, who is to buy them, ready-money having fled? Wherefore, on the 19th day of December, a paper-money of ‘*Assignats*,’ of Bonds secured, or *assigned*, on that Clerico-National Property, and unquestionable at least in payment of that,—is decreed : the first of a long series of like financial performances, which shall astonish mankind. So that now, while old rags last, there shall be no lack of circulating medium : whether of commodities to circulate thereon, is another question. But, after all, does not this Assignat business speak volumes for modern science? Bankruptcy, we may say, was come, as the *end* of all Delusions needs must come : yet how gently, in softening diffusion, in mild succession, was it hereby made to

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fall ;—like no all-destroying avalanche ; like gentle showers of a powdery impalpable snow, shower after shower, till all was indeed buried, and yet little was destroyed that could not be replaced, be dispensed with ! To such length has modern machinery reached. Bankruptcy, we said, was great ; but indeed Money itself is a standing miracle.

On the whole, it is a matter of endless difficulty, that of the Clergy. Clerical property may be made the Nation's, and the Clergy hired servants of the State ; but if so, is it not an altered Church ? Adjustment enough, of the most confused sort, has become unavoidable. Old landmarks, in any sense, avail not in a new France. Nay literally, the very Ground is new divided ; your old particoloured *Provinces* become new uniform *Departments* Eighty-three in number ;—whereby, as in some sudden shifting of the Earth's axis, no mortal knows his new latitude at once. The Twelve old Parlements too, what is to be done with them ? The old Parlements are declared to be all 'in permanent vacation,'—till once the new equal-justice, of Departmental Courts, National Appeal-Court, of elective Justices, Justices of Peace, and other Thouret-and-Duport apparatus be got ready. They have to sit there, these old Parlements, uneasily waiting ; as it were, with the rope round their neck ; crying as they can, *Is there none to deliver us ?* But happily the answer being, *None, none*, they are a manageable class, these Parlements. They can be bullied, even, into silence ; the Paris Parlement, wiser than most, has never whimpered. They will and must sit there, in such vacation as is fit ; their Chamber of Vacation distributes in the interim what little justice is going. With the rope round their neck, their destiny may be succinct ! On the 13th of November 1790, Mayor Bailly shall walk to the Palais de Justice, few even heeding him ; and with municipal seal stamp and a little hot wax, seal up the Parliamentary Paper-rooms,—and the dread Parlement of Paris pass away, into Chaos, gently as does a Dream ! So shall the Parlements perish, succinctly ; and innumerable eyes be dry.

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Not so the Clergy. For, granting even that Religion were dead ; that it had died, half-centuries ago, with unutterable Dubois ; or emigrated lately to Alsace, with Necklace-Cardinal Rohan ; or that it now walked as goblin *revenant*, with Bishop Talleyrand of Autun ; yet does not the Shadow of Religion, the Cant of Religion, still linger ? The Clergy have means and material : means, of number, organisation, social weight ; a material, at lowest, of public ignorance, known to be the mother of devotion. Nay withal, is it incredible that there might, in simple hearts, latent here and there like gold-grains in the mud-beach, still dwell some real Faith in God, of so singular and tenacious a sort that even a Maury or a Talleyrand could still be the symbol for it ?—Enough, the Clergy has strength, the Clergy has craft and indignation. It is a most fatal business this of the Clergy. A weltering hydra-coil, which the National Assembly has stirred up about its ears ; hissing, stinging ; which cannot be appeased, alive ; which cannot be trampled dead ! Fatal, from first to last ! Scarcely after fifteen months' debating, can a *Civil Constitution of the Clergy* be so much as got to paper ; and then for getting it into reality ? Alas, such Civil Constitution is but an agreement to disagree. It divides France from end to end, with a new split, infinitely complicating all the other splits :—Catholicism, what of it there is left, with the Cant of Catholicism, raging on the one side, and sceptic Heathenism on the other ; both, by contradiction, waxing fanatic. What endless jarring, of Refractory hated Priests, and Constitutional despised ones ; of tender consciences, like the King's, and consciences hot-seared, like certain of his People's : the whole to end in Feasts of Reason and a War of La Vendée ! So deep-seated is Religion in the heart of man, and holds of all infinite passions. If the dead echo of it still did so much, what could not the living voice of it once do ?

Finance and Constitution, Law and Gospel : this surely were work enough ; yet this is not all. In fact, the Ministry,