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Excerpt

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## BOOK I

## BIRTH AND PARENTAGE

1712

## CHAPTER I

PROEM: FRIEDRICH'S HISTORY FROM THE DISTANCE  
WE ARE AT

ABOUT fourscore years ago, there used to be seen sauntering on the terraces of Sans Souci, for a short time in the afternoon, or you might have met him elsewhere at an earlier hour, riding or driving in a rapid business manner on the open roads or through the scraggy woods and avenues of that intricate amphibious Potsdam region, a highly interesting lean little old man, of alert though slightly stooping figure; whose name among strangers was King *Friedrich the Second*, or Frederick the Great of Prussia, and at home among the common people, who much loved and esteemed him, was *Vater Fritz*,—Father Fred,—a name of familiarity which had not bred contempt in that instance. He is a King every inch of him, though without the trappings of a King. Presents himself in a Spartan simplicity of vesture: no crown but an old military cocked-hat,—generally old, or trampled and kneaded into absolute *softness*, if new;—no sceptre but one like Agamemnon's, a walking-stick cut from the woods, which serves also as a riding-stick (with which he hits the horse 'between the ears,' say authors);—and for royal robes, a mere soldier's blue coat with red facings, coat likely to be old, and sure to

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have a good deal of Spanish snuff on the breast of it ; rest of the apparel dim, unobtrusive in colour or cut, ending in high over-knee military boots, which may be brushed (and, I hope, kept soft with an underhand suspicion of oil), but are not permitted to be blackened or varnished ; Day and Martin with their soot-pots forbidden to approach.

The man is not of godlike physiognomy, any more than of imposing stature or costume : close-shut mouth with thin lips, prominent jaws and nose, receding brow, by no means of Olympian height ; head, however, is of long form, and has superlative gray eyes in it. Not what is called a beautiful man ; nor yet, by all appearance, what is called a happy. On the contrary, the face bears evidence of many sorrows, as they are termed, of much hard labour done in this world ; and seems to anticipate nothing but more still coming. Quiet stoicism, capable enough of what joy there were, but not expecting any worth mention ; great unconscious and some conscious pride, well tempered with a cheery mockery of humour,—are written on that old face ; which carries its chin well forward, in spite of the slight stoop about the neck ; snuffy nose rather flung into the air, under its old cocked-hat,—like an old snuffy lion on the watch ; and such a pair of eyes as no man or lion or lynx of that Century bore elsewhere, according to all the testimony we have. ‘Those eyes,’ says Mirabeau, ‘which, at the bidding of his great soul, fascinated you with seduction or with terror (*portaient, au gré de son âme héroïque, la séduction ou la terreur*).’<sup>1</sup> Most excellent potent brilliant eyes, swift-darting as the stars, steadfast as the sun ; gray, we said, of the azure-gray colour ; large enough, not of glaring size ; the habitual expression of them vigilance and penetrating sense, rapidity resting on depth. Which is an excellent combination ; and gives us the notion of a lambent outer radiance springing from some great inner sea of light and fire in the man. The voice, if

<sup>1</sup> Mirabeau, *Histoire Secrète de la Cour de Berlin*, Lettre 28<sup>m<sup>e</sup></sup> (24 Septembre 1786), p. 128 (in edition of Paris, 1821).

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he speak to you, is of similar physiognomy: clear, melodious and sonorous; all tones are in it, from that of ingenuous inquiry, graceful sociality, light-flowing banter (rather prickly for most part) up to definite word of command, up to desolating word of rebuke and reprobation; a voice 'the clearest and most agreeable in conversation I ever heard,' says witty Dr. Moore.<sup>1</sup> 'He speaks a great deal,' continues the doctor; 'yet those who hear him, regret that he does not speak a good deal more. His observations are always lively, very often just; and few men possess the talent of repartee in greater perfection.'

Just about threescore and ten years ago,<sup>2</sup> his speakings and his workings came to finis in this World of Time; and he vanished from all eyes into other worlds, leaving much inquiry about him in the minds of men;—which, as my readers and I may feel too well, is yet by no means satisfied. As to his speech, indeed, though it had the worth just ascribed to it and more, and though masses of it were deliberately put on paper by himself, in prose and verse, and continue to be printed and kept legible, what he spoke has pretty much vanished into the inane; and except as record or document of what he did, hardly now concerns mankind. But the things he did were extremely remarkable; and cannot be forgotten by mankind. Indeed, they bear such fruit to the present hour as all the Newspapers are obliged to be taking note of, sometimes to an unpleasant degree. Editors vaguely account this man the 'Creator of the Prussian Monarchy'; which has since grown so large in the world, and troublesome to the Editorial mind in this and other countries. He was indeed the first who, in a highly public manner, notified its creation; announced to all men that it was, in very deed, created; standing on its feet there, and would go a great way, on the impulse it had got from him and others. As it

<sup>1</sup> Moore, *View of Society and Manners in France, Switzerland, and Germany* (London, 1779), ii. 246.

<sup>2</sup> A. D. 1856,—17th August 1786.

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has accordingly done ; and may still keep doing to lengths little dreamt of by the British Editor in our time ; whose prophesyings upon Prussia, and insights into Prussia, in its past, or present or future, are truly as yet inconsiderable, in proportion to the noise he makes with them ! The more is the pity for him,—and for myself too in the Enterprise now on hand.

It is of this Figure, whom we see by the mind's eye in those Potsdam regions, visible for the last time seventy years ago, that we are now to treat, in the way of solacing ingenuous human curiosity. We are to try for some Historical Conception of this Man and King ; some answer to the questions, 'What was he, then ? Whence, how ? And what did he achieve and suffer in the world ?'—such answer as may prove admissible to ingenuous mankind, especially such as may correspond to the Fact (which stands there, abstruse indeed, but actual and unalterable), and so be sure of admissibility one day.

An Enterprise which turns out to be, the longer one looks at it, the more of a formidable, not to say unmanageable nature ! Concerning which, on one or two points, it were good, if conveniently possible, to come to some preliminary understanding with the reader. Here, flying on loose leaves, are certain incidental utterances, of various date : these, as the topic is difficult, I will merely label and insert, instead of a formal Discourse, which were too apt to slide into something of a Lamentation, or otherwise take an unpleasant turn.

1. *Friedrich then, and Friedrich now*

This was a man of infinite mark to his contemporaries ; who had witnessed surprising feats from him in the world ; very questionable notions and ways, which he had contrived to maintain against the world and its criticisms. As an original man has always to do ; much more an original ruler

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of men. The world, in fact, had tried hard to put him down, as it does, unconsciously or consciously, with all such; and after the most conscious exertions, and at one time a dead-lift spasm of all its energies for Seven Years, had not been able. Principalities and powers, Imperial, Royal, Czarish, Papal, enemies innumerable as the sea-sand, had risen against him, only one helper left among the world's Potentates (and that one only while there should be help rendered in return); and he led them all such a dance as had astonished mankind and them.

No wonder they thought him worthy of notice. Every original man of any magnitude is;—nay, in the long-run, who or what else is? But how much more if your original man was a king over men; whose movements were polar, and carried from day to day those of the world along with them. The Samson Agonistes,—were his life passed like that of Samuel Johnson in dirty garrets, and the produce of it only some bits of written paper,—the Agonistes, and how he will comport himself in the Philistine mill; this is always a spectacle of truly epic and tragic nature. The rather, if your Samson, royal or other, is not yet blinded or subdued to the wheel; much more if he vanquish his enemies, *not* by suicidal methods, but march out at last flourishing his miraculous fighting implement, and leaving their mill and them in quite ruinous circumstances. As this King Friedrich fairly managed to do.

For he left the world all bankrupt, we may say; fallen into bottomless abysses of destruction; he still in a paying condition, and with footing capable to carry his affairs and him. When he died, in 1786, the enormous Phenomenon since called FRENCH REVOLUTION was already growling audibly in the depths of the world; meteoric-electric coruscations heralding it, all round the horizon. Strange enough to note, one of Friedrich's last visitors was Gabriel Honoré Riquetti, Comte de Mirabeau. These two saw one another; twice, for half an hour each time. The last of the old Gods and the

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first of the modern Titans;—before Pelion leapt on Ossa; and the foul Earth taking fire at last, its vile mephitic elements went up in volcanic thunder. This also is one of the peculiarities of Friedrich, that he is hitherto the last of the Kings; that he ushers-in the French Revolution, and closes an Epoch of World-History. Finishing-off forever the trade of King, think many; who have grown profoundly dark as to Kingship and him.

The French Revolution may be said to have, for about half a century, quite submerged Friedrich, abolished him from the memories of men; and now on coming to light again, he is found defaced under strange mud-incrustations, and the eyes of mankind look at him from a singularly changed, what we must call oblique and perverse, point of vision. This is one of the difficulties in dealing with his History;—especially if you happen to believe both in the French Revolution and in him; that is to say, both that Real Kingship is eternally indispensable, and also that the destruction of Sham Kingship (a frightful process) is occasionally so.

On the breaking-out of that formidable Explosion, and Suicide of his Century, Friedrich sank into comparative obscurity; eclipsed amid the ruins of that universal earthquake, the very dust of which darkened all the air, and made of day a disastrous midnight. Black midnight, broken only by the blaze of conflagrations;—wherein, to our terrified imaginations, were seen, not men, French and other, but ghastly portents, stalking wrathful, and shapes of avenging gods. It must be owned the figure of Napoleon was titanic; especially to the generation that looked on him, and that waited shuddering to be devoured by him. In general, in that French Revolution, all was on a huge scale; if not greater than anything in human experience, at least more grandiose. All was recorded in bulletins, too, addressed to the shilling-gallery; and there were fellows on the stage with such a breadth of sabre, extent of whiskerage, strength of windpipe, and com-

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mand of men and gunpowder, as had never been seen before. How they bellowed, stalked and flourished about; counterfeiting Jove's thunder to an amazing degree! Terrific Drawcansir figures, of enormous whiskerage, unlimited command of gunpowder; not without sufficient ferocity, and even a certain heroism, stage-heroism, in them; compared with whom, to the shilling-gallery, and frightened excited theatre at large, it seemed as if there had been no generals or sovereigns before; as if Friedrich, Gustavus, Cromwell, William Conqueror and Alexander the Great were not worth speaking of henceforth.

All this, however, in half a century is considerably altered. The Drawcansir equipments getting gradually torn off, the natural size is seen better; translated from the bulletin style into that of fact and history, miracles, even to the shilling-gallery, are not so miraculous. It begins to be apparent that there lived great men before the era of bulletins and Agamemnon. Austerlitz and Wagram shot away more gunpowder,—gunpowder probably in the proportion of ten to one, or a hundred to one; but neither of them was tenth-part such a beating to your enemy as that of Rossbach, brought about by strategic art, human ingenuity and intrepidity, and the loss of 165 men. Leuthen, too, the battle of Leuthen (though so few English readers ever heard of it) may very well hold up its head beside any victory gained by Napoleon or another. For the odds were not far from three to one; the soldiers were of not far from equal quality; and only the General was consummately superior, and the defeat a destruction. Napoleon did indeed, by immense expenditure of men and gunpowder, overrun Europe for a time: but Napoleon never, by husbanding and wisely expending his men and gunpowder, defended a little Prussia against all Europe, year after year for seven years long, till Europe had enough, and gave-up the enterprise as one it could not manage. So soon as the Drawcansir equipments are well torn off, and the shilling-gallery got to silence, it will be found that there were great kings before Napoleon,—and likewise an Art of War, grounded on

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veracity and human courage and insight, not upon Draw-cansir rodomontade, grandiose Dick-Turpinism, revolutionary madness, and unlimited expenditure of men and gunpowder. 'You may paint with a very big brush, and yet not be a great painter,' says a satirical friend of mine! This is becoming more and more apparent, as the dust-whirlwind, and huge uproar of the last generation, gradually dies away again.

2. *Eighteenth Century*

One of the grand difficulties in a History of Friedrich is, all along, this same, That he lived in a Century which has no History and can have little or none. A Century so opulent in accumulated falsities,—sad opulence descending on it by inheritance, always at compound interest, and always largely increased by fresh acquirement on such immensity of standing capital;—opulent in that bad way as never Century before was! Which had no longer the consciousness of being false, so false had it grown; and was so steeped in falsity, and impregnated with it to the very bone, that—in fact the measure of the thing was full, and a French Revolution had to end it. To maintain much veracity in such an element, especially for a king, was no doubt doubly remarkable. But now, how extricate the man from his Century? How show the man, who is a Reality worthy of being seen, and yet keep his Century, as a Hypocrisy worthy of being hidden and forgotten, in the due abeyance?

To resuscitate the Eighteenth Century, or call into men's view, beyond what is necessary, the poor and sordid personages and transactions of an epoch so related to us, can be no purpose of mine on this occasion. The Eighteenth Century, it is well known, does not figure to me as a lovely one; needing to be kept in mind, or spoken of unnecessarily. To me the Eighteenth Century has nothing grand in it, except that grand universal Suicide, named French Revolution, by which it terminated its otherwise most worthless existence with at



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least one worthy act;—setting fire to its old home and self; and going up in flames and volcanic explosions, in a truly memorable and important manner. A very fit termination, as I thankfully feel, for such a Century. Century spend-thrift, fraudulent-bankrupt; gone at length utterly insolvent, without real *money* of performance in its pocket, and the shops declining to take hypocrisies and speciosities any farther:—what could the poor Century do, but at length admit, ‘Well, it is so. I am a swindler-century, and have long been; having learned the trick of it from my father and grandfather; knowing hardly any trade but that in false bills, which I thought foolishly might last forever, and still bring at least beef and pudding to the favoured of mankind. And behold it ends; and I am a detected swindler, and have nothing even to eat. What remains but that I blow my brains out, and do at length one true action?’ Which the poor Century did; many thanks to it, in the circumstances.

For there was need once more of a Divine Revelation to the torpid frivolous children of men, if they were not to sink altogether into the ape condition. And in that whirlwind of the Universe,—lights obliterated, and the torn wrecks of Earth and Hell hurled aloft into the Empyrean; black whirlwind, which made even apes serious, and drove most of them mad,—there was, to men, a voice audible; voice from the heart of things once more, as if to say: ‘Lying is not permitted in this Universe. The wages of lying, you behold, are death. Lying means damnation in this Universe; and Beelzebub, never so elaborately decked in crowns and mitres, is *not* God! This was a revelation truly to be named of the Eternal, in our poor Eighteenth Century; and has greatly altered the complexion of said Century to the Historian ever since.

Whereby, in short, that Century is quite confiscate, fallen bankrupt, given up to the auctioneers;—Jew-brokers sorting out of it at this moment, in a confused distressing manner, what is still valuable or saleable. And, in fact, it lies massed up in our minds as a disastrous wrecked inanity, not useful to

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dwell upon ; a kind of dusky chaotic background, on which the figures that had some veracity in them,—a small company, and ever growing smaller as our demands rise in strictness,—are delineated for us.—‘And yet it is the Century of our own Grandfathers?’ cries the reader. Yes, reader! truly. It is the ground out of which we ourselves have sprung ; whereon now we have our immediate footing, and first of all strike down our roots for nourishment ;—and, alas, in large sections of the practical world, it (what we specially mean by *it*) still continues flourishing all round us ! To forget it quite is not yet possible, nor would be profitable. What to do with it, and its forgotten fooleries and ‘Histories,’ worthy only of forgetting ?—Well : so much of it as by nature *adheres* ; what of it cannot be disengaged from our Hero and his operations : approximately so much, and no more ! Let that be our bargain in regard to it.

3. *English Prepossessions*

With such wagonloads of Books and Printed Records as exist on the subject of Friedrich, it has always seemed possible, even for a stranger, to acquire some real understanding of him ;—though practically, here and now, I have to own, it proves difficult beyond conception. Alas, the Books are not cosmic, they are chaotic ; and turn out unexpectedly void of instruction to us. Small use in a talent of writing, if there be not first of all the talent of discerning, of loyally recognising ; of discriminating what is to be written ! Books born mostly of Chaos,—which want all things, even an *Index*,—are a painful object. In sorrow and disgust, you wander over those multitudinous Books : you dwell in endless regions of the superficial, of the nugatory : to your bewildered sense it is as if no insight into the real heart of Friedrich and his affairs were anywhere to be had. Truth is, the Prussian Dryasdust, otherwise an honest fellow, and not afraid of labour, excels all other Dryasdusts yet known ; I have often sorrowfully felt as if there were