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Excerpt

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BOOK XXI

AFTERNOON AND EVENING OF
FRIEDRICH'S LIFE

1763—1786

CHAPTER I

PREFATORY

THE Twelve Hercules-labours of this King have ended here ; what was required of him in World-History is accomplished. There remain to Friedrich Twenty-three Years more of Life, which to Prussian History are as full of importance as ever ; but do not essentially concern European History, Europe having gone the road we now see it in. On the grand World-Theatre the curtain has fallen for a New Act ; Friedrich's part, like everybody's for the present, is played out. In fact, there is, during the rest of his Reign, nothing of World-History to be dwelt on anywhere. America, it has been decided, shall be English ; Prussia be a Nation. The French, as finis of their attempt to cut Germany in Four, find themselves sunk into torpor, abeyance and dry-rot ; fermenting towards they know not what. Towards Spontaneous Combustion in the year 1789, and for long years onwards !

There, readers, there is the next mile-stone for you, in the History of Mankind ! That universal Burning-up, as in hell-fire, of Human Shams. The oath of Twenty-five Million men, which has since become that of all men whatsoever, 'Rather than live longer under lies, we will die !'—that is

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the New Act in World-History. New Act,—or, we may call it New *Part*; Drama of World-History, Part Third. If Part *Second* was 1,800 years ago, this I reckon will be Part *Third*. This is the truly celestial-infernal Event: the strangest we have seen for a thousand years. Celestial in one part; in the other, infernal. For it is withal the breaking-out of universal mankind into Anarchy, into the faith and practice of *No-Government*,—that is to say (if you will be candid), into unappeasable Revolt against Sham-Governors and Sham-Teachers,—which I do charitably define to be a Search, most unconscious, yet in deadly earnest, for true Governors and Teachers. That is the one fact of World-History worth dwelling on at this day; and Friedrich cannot be said to have had much hand farther than that.

Nor is the progress of a French or European world, all silently ripening and rotting towards such issue, a thing one wishes to dwell on. Only when the Spontaneous Combustion breaks out; and, many-coloured, with loud noises, envelopes the whole world in anarchic flame for long hundreds of years: then has the Event come; there is the thing for all men to mark, and to study and scrutinise as the strangest thing they ever saw. Centuries of it yet lying ahead of us; several sad Centuries, sordidly tumultuous, and good for little! Say Two Centuries yet,—say even Ten of such a process: before the Old is completely burnt out, and the New in any state of sightliness? Millennium of Anarchies;—abridge it, spend your heart's-blood upon abridging it, ye Heroic Wise that are to come! For it is the consummation of All the Anarchies that are and were;—which I do trust always means the death (temporary death) of them! Death of the Anarchies: or a world once more built wholly on Fact better or worse; and the lying jargonizing professor of Sham-Fact, whose name is Legion, who as yet (oftenest little conscious of himself) goes tumulting and swarming from shore to shore, become a species extinct, and well *known* to be gone down to Tophet!—

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There were bits of Anarchies before, little and greater : but till that of France in 1789, there was none long memorable ; all were pygmies in comparison, and not worth mentioning separately. In 1772 the Anarchy of Poland, which had been a considerable Anarchy for about three hundred years, got itself extinguished,—what we may call extinguished ;—decisive surgery being then first exercised upon it : an Anarchy put in the sure way of extinction. In 1775, again, there began, over seas, another Anarchy much more considerable,—little dreaming that *it* could be called an Anarchy ; on the contrary, calling itself Liberty, Rights of Man ; and singing boundless Io-Pæans to itself, as is common in such cases ; an Anarchy which has been challenging the Universe to show the like ever since. And which has, at last, flamed-up as an independent Phenomenon, unexampled in the hideously *suicidal* way ;—and does need much to get burnt out, that matters may begin anew on truer conditions. But neither the *Partition of Poland*, nor the *American War of Independence* have much general importance, or, except as precursors of 1789, are worth dwelling on in History. From us here, so far as Friedrich is concerned with them, they may deserve some transient mention, more or less : but World-History, eager to be at the general Funeral-pile and ultimate Burning-up of Shams in this poor World, will have less and less to say of small tragedies and premonitory symptoms.

Curious how the busy and continually watchful and speculating Friedrich, busied about his dangers from Austrian encroachments, from Russian-Turk Wars, Bavarian Successions, and other troubles and anarchies close by, saw nothing to dread in France ; nothing to remark there, except carelessly, from time to time, its beggarly decaying condition, so strangely sunk in arts, in arms, in finance ; oftenest an object of pity to him, for he still has a love for France ;—and reads not the least sign of that immeasurable, all-engulfing *French Revolution* which was in the wind ! Neither Voltaire nor he have

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the least anticipation of such a thing. Voltaire and he see, to their contentment, Superstition visibly declining: Friedrich rather disapproves the heat of Voltaire's procedures on the *Infâme*. 'Why be in such heat? Other nonsense, quite equal to it, will be almost sure to follow. Take care of your own skin!' Voltaire and he are deeply alive, especially Voltaire is, to the horrors and miseries which have issued on mankind from a Fanatic Popish Superstition, or Creed of Incredibilities,—which (except from the throat outwards, from the bewildered tongue outwards) the orthodox themselves cannot believe, but only pretend and struggle to believe. This Voltaire calls '*The Infamous*'; and this—what name can any of us give it? The man who believes in falsities is very miserable. The man who cannot believe them, but only struggles and pretends to believe; and yet, being armed with the power of the sword, industriously keeps menacing and slashing all round, to compel every neighbour to do like him: what is to be done with such a man? Human Nature calls him a Social Nuisance; needing to be handcuffed, gagged and abated. Human Nature, if it be in a terrified and imperilled state, with the sword of this fellow swashing round it, calls him 'infamous,' and a Monster of Chaos. He is indeed the select Monster of that region; the Patriarch of all the Monsters, little as he dreams of being such. An Angel of Heaven the poor caitiff dreams himself rather, and in cheery moments is conscious of being:—Bedlam holds in it no madder article. And I often think he will again need to be tied up (feeble as he now is in comparison, disinclined though men are to manacled and tying); so many helpless infirm souls are wandering about, not knowing their right-hand from their left, who fall a prey to him. '*L'Infâme*,' I also name him,—knowing well enough how little he, in his poor muddled, drugged and stupefied mind, is conscious of deserving that name. More signal enemy to God, and friend of the Other Party, walks not the Earth in our day.

Anarchy in the shape of religious slavery was what Voltaire

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^{1763]} and Friedrich saw all round them. Anarchy in the shape of Revolt against Authorities was what Friedrich and Voltaire had never dreamed of as possible, and had not in their minds the least idea of. In one, or perhaps two places you may find in Voltaire a grim and rather glad forethought, not given out as prophecy, but felt as interior assurance in a moment of hope, How these priestly Sham Hierarchies will be pulled to pieces, probably on the sudden, once people are awake to them. Yes, my much-suffering M. de Voltaire, be pulled to pieces; or go aloft, like the awakening of Vesuvius, one day,—Vesuvius awakening after ten centuries of slumber, when his crater is all grown grassy, bushy, copiously ‘tenanted by wolves’ I am told; which, after premonitory grumblings, heeded by no wolf or bush, he will hurl bodily aloft, ten acres at a time, in a very tremendous manner.¹ A thought like this, about the Priestly Sham-Hierarchies, I have found somewhere in Voltaire: but of the Social and Civic Sham-Hierarchies (which are likewise accursed, if they knew it, and indeed are junior copartners of the Priestly; and, in a sense, sons and products of them, and cannot escape being partakers of their plagues), there is no hint in Voltaire, though Voltaire stood at last only fifteen years from the Fact (1778-1793); nor in Friedrich, though he lived almost to see the Fact beginning.

Friedrich’s History being henceforth that of a Prussian King, is interesting to Prussia chiefly, and to us little otherwise than as the Biography of a distinguished fellow-man. Friedrich’s Biography, his Physiognomy as he grows old, quietly on his own harvest-field, among his own People: this has still an interest, and for any feature of this we shall be eager enough; but this withal is the most of what we now want. And not very much even of this; Friedrich the unique King not having as a man any such depth and singularity, tragic, humorous, devotionally pious, or other, as to authorise much painting in that aspect. Extreme brevity beseems us in these circumstances: and indeed there are,—as has already

¹ First modern Eruption of Vesuvius, A.D. 1631, after long interval of rest.

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happened in different parts of this Enterprise (Nature herself, in her silent way, being always something of an Artist in such things),—other circumstances, which leave us no choice as to that of detail. Available details, if we wished to give them, of Friedrich's later Life, are not forthcoming: masses of incondite marine-stores, tumbled out on you, dry-rubbish shot with uncommon diligence for a hundred years, till, for Rubbish-Pelion piled on Rubbish-Ossa, you lose sight of the stars and azimuths; whole mountain continents, seemingly all of cinders and sweepings (though fragments and remnants do lie hidden, could you find them again):—these are not details that will be available! Anecdotes there are in quantity; but of uncertain quality; of doubtful authenticity, above all. One recollects hardly any Anecdote whatever that seems completely credible, or renders to us the Physiognomy of Friedrich in a convincing manner. So remiss a creature has the Prussian Clio been,—employed on all kinds of loose errands over the Earth and the Air; and as good as altogether negligent of this most pressing errand in her own House. Peace be with her, poor slut; why should we say one other hard word on taking leave of her to all eternity!—

The practical fact is, what we have henceforth to produce is more of the nature of a loose Appendix of Papers, than of a finished Narrative. Loose Papers,—which, we will hope, the reader can, by industry, be made to understand and tolerate: more we cannot do for him. No continuous Narrative is henceforth possible to us. For the sake of Friedrich's closing Epoch, we will visit, for the last time, that dreary imbroglio under which the memory of Friedrich, which ought to have been, in all the epochs of it, bright and legible, lies buried; and will try to gather, as heretofore, and put under labels. What dwells with oneself as human may have some chance to be humanly interesting. In the wildest chaos of marine-stores and editorial shortcomings (provided only the editors speak truth, as these poor fellows do), *this* can be done. Part the living from the dead; pick out what

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has some meaning, leave carefully what has none; you will in some small measure pluck up the memory of a hero, like drowned honour by the locks, and rescue it into visibility.

That Friedrich, on reaching home, made haste to get out of the bustle of joyances and exclamations on the streets; proceeded straight to his music-chapel in Charlottenburg, summoning the Artists, or having them already summoned; and had there, all alone, sitting invisible wrapt in his cloak, Graun's or somebody's grand *Te-Deum* pealed out to him, in seas of melody,—soothing and salutary to the altered soul, revolving many things,—is a popular myth, of pretty and appropriate character; but a myth only, with no real foundation, though it has some loose and apparent.¹ No doubt, Friedrich had his own thoughts on entering Berlin again, after such a voyage through the deeps; himself, his Country still here, though solitary and in a world of wild shipwrecks. He was not without piety; but it did not take the devotional form, and his habits had nothing of the clerical.

What is perfectly known, and much better worth knowing, is the instantaneous practical alacrity with which he set about repairing that immense miscellany of ruin; and the surprising success he had in dealing with it. His methods, his rapid inventions and procedures, in this matter, are still memorable to Prussia; and perhaps might with advantage be better known than they are in some other Countries. To us, what is all we can do with them here, they will indicate that this is still the old Friedrich, with his old activities and promptitudes; which indeed continue unabated, lively in Peace as in War, to the end of his life and reign.

The speed with which Prussia recovered was extraordinary. Within little more than a year (June 1st, 1764), the Coin was all in order again; in 1765, the King had rebuilt, not to mention other things, 'in Silesia 8,000 Houses, in

¹ In *Preuss*, ii, 46, all the details of it.

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Pommern 6,500.’¹ Prussia has been a meritorious Nation; and, however cut and ruined, is and was in a healthy state, capable of recovering soon. Prussia has defended itself against overwhelming odds,—brave Prussia; but the real soul of its merit was that of having merited such a King to command it. Without this King, all its valours, disciplines, resources of war, would have availed Prussia little. No wonder Prussia has still a loyalty to its great Friedrich, to its Hohenzollern Sovereigns generally. Without these Hohenzollerns, Prussia had been, what we long ago saw it, the unluckiest of German Provinces; and could never have had the pretension to exist as a Nation at all. Without this particular Hohenzollern, it had been trampled out again, after apparently succeeding. To have achieved a Friedrich the Second for King over it, was Prussia’s grand merit.

An accidental merit, thinks the reader? No, reader, you may believe me, it is by no means altogether such. Nay, I rather think, could we look into the Account-Books of the Recording Angel for a course of centuries, no part of it is such! There are Nations in which a Friedrich is, or can be, possible; and again there are Nations in which he is not and cannot. To be practically reverent of Human Worth to the due extent, and abhorrent of Human Want of Worth in the like proportion, do you understand that art at all? I fear, not,—or that you are much forgetting it again! Human Merit, do you really love it *enough*, think you;—human Scoundrelism (brought to the dock for you, and branded as scoundrel), do you even abhor it enough? Without that reverence and its corresponding opposite-pole of abhorrence, there is simply no possibility left. That, my friend, is the outcome and summary of all virtues in this world, for a man or for a Nation of men. It is the supreme strength and glory of a Nation;—without which, indeed, all other strengths, and enormities of bullion and arsenals and warehouses, are no strength. None, I should say;—and are oftenest even the *reverse*.

¹ Rödénbeck, ii. 234, 261.

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Nations who have lost this quality, or who never had it, what Friedrich can they hope to be possible among them? Age after age they grind-down their Friedrichs contentedly under the hoofs of cattle on their highways; and even find it an excellent practice, and pride themselves on Liberty and Equality. Most certain it is, there will no Friedrich come to rule there; by and by, there will none be born there. Such Nations cannot have a King to command them; can only have this or the other scandalous swindling Copper Captain, constitutional Gilt Mountebank, or other the like unsalutary entity by way of King; and the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children in a frightful and tragical manner, little noticed in the Penny Newspapers and Periodical Literatures of this generation. Oh my friends—!—But there is plain business waiting us at hand.

CHAPTER II

REPAIRING OF A RUINED PRUSSIA

THAT of Friedrich's sitting wrapt in a cloud of reflections Olympian-Abysmal, in the music-chapel at Charlottenburg, while he had the Ambrosian Song executed for him there, as the preliminary step, was a loose myth; but the fact lying under it is abundantly certain. Few Sons of Adam had more reason for a piously-thankful feeling towards the Past, a piously-valiant towards the Future. What king or man had seen himself delivered from such strangling imbroglios of destruction, such devouring rages of a hostile world? And the ruin worked by them lay monstrous and appalling all round. Friedrich is now Fifty-one gone; unusually old for his age; feels himself an old man, broken with years and toils; and here lies his Kingdom in haggard slashed condition, worn to skin and bone: How is the King, resourceless, to remedy it? That is now the seemingly impossible problem.

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‘Begin it,—thereby alone will it ever cease to be impossible!’ Friedrich begins, we may say, on the first morrow morning. Labours at his problem, as he did in the march to Leuthen; finds it to become more possible, day after day, month after month, the farther he strives with it.

‘Why not leave it to Nature?’ think many, with the Dismal Science at their elbow. Well; that was the easiest plan, but it was not Friedrich’s. His remaining moneys, 25 million thalers ready for a Campaign which has not come, he distributes to the most necessitous: ‘all his artillery-horses’ are parted into plough-teams, and given to those who can otherwise get none: think what a fine figure of rye and barley, instead of mere windlestraws, beggary and desolation, was realised by that act alone. Nature is ready to do much; will of herself cover, with some veil of grass and lichen, the nakedness of ruin: but her victorious act, when she can accomplish it, is that of getting *you* to go with her handsomely, and change disaster itself into new wealth. Into new wisdom and valour, which are wealth in all kinds; California mere zero to them, zero, or even a frightful *minus* quantity! Friedrich’s procedures in this matter I believe to be little less didactic than those other, which are so celebrated in War: but no Dryasdust, not even a Dryasdust of the Dismal Science, has gone into them, rendered men familiar with them in their details and their results. His Silesian Land-Bank (joint-stock Moneys, lent on security of Land) was of itself, had I room to explain it, an immense furtherance.¹ Friedrich, many tell us, was as great in Peace as in War: and truly, in the economic and material provinces, my own impression, gathered painfully in darkness, and contradiction of the Dismal-Science Doctors, is much to that effect. A first-rate Husbandman (as his Father had been); who not only defended his Nation, but made it rich beyond what seemed possible; and diligently sowed annuals into it, and perennials which flourish aloft at this day.

¹ Preuss, iii. 75; *Œuvres de Frédéric*, vi. 81.