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Excerpt

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No. I

THE PRESENT TIME

[1ST FEBRUARY 1850]

THE Present Time, youngest-born of Eternity, child and heir of all the Past Times with their good and evil, and parent of all the Future, is ever a 'New Era' to the thinking man; and comes with new questions and significance, however commonplace it look: to know *it*, and what it bids us do, is ever the sum of knowledge for all of us. This new Day, sent us out of Heaven, this also has its heavenly omens;—amid the bustling trivialities and loud empty noises, its silent monitions, which, if we cannot read and obey, it will not be well with us! No;—nor is there any sin more fearfully avenged on men and Nations than that same, which indeed includes and presupposes all manner of sins: the sin which our old pious fathers called 'judicial blindness';—which we, with our light habits, may still call misinterpretation of the Time that now is; disloyalty to its real meanings and monitions, stupid disregard of these, stupid adherence active or passive to the counterfeits and mere current semblances of these. This is true of all times and days.

But in the days that are now passing-over us, even fools are arrested to ask the meaning of them; few of the generations of men have seen more impressive days. Days of endless calamity, disruption, dislocation, confusion worse confounded: if they are not days of endless hope too, then they are days of utter despair. For it is not a small hope that will suffice, the ruin being clearly, either in action or in prospect, universal. There must be a new world, if there is to be any world at all! That human things in our

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Europe can ever return to the old sorry routine, and proceed with any steadiness or continuance there; this small hope is not now a tenable one. These days of universal death must be days of universal newbirth, if the ruin is not to be total and final! It is a Time to make the dullest man consider; and ask himself, Whence *he* came? Whither he is bound? —A veritable ‘New Era,’ to the foolish as well as to the wise.

Not long ago, the world saw, with thoughtless joy which might have been very thoughtful joy, a real miracle not heretofore considered possible or conceivable in the world,—a Reforming Pope. A simple pious creature, a good country-priest, invested unexpectedly with the tiara, takes up the New Testament, declares that this henceforth shall be his rule of governing. No more finesse, chicanery, hypocrisy, or false or foul dealing of any kind: God’s truth shall be spoken, God’s justice shall be done, on the throne called of St. Peter: an honest Pope, Papa, or Father of Christendom, shall preside there. And such a throne of St. Peter; and such a Christendom, for an honest Papa to preside in! The European populations everywhere hailed the omen; with shouting and rejoicing, leading-articles and tar-barrels; thinking people listened with astonishment,—not with sorrow if they were faithful or wise; with awe rather as at the heralding of death, and with a joy as of victory beyond death! Something pious, grand and as if awful in that joy, revealing once more the Presence of a Divine Justice in this world. For, to such men it was very clear how this poor devoted Pope would prosper, with his New Testament in his hand. An alarming business, that of governing in the throne of St. Peter by the rule of veracity! By the rule of veracity, the so-called throne of St. Peter was openly declared, above three-hundred years ago, to be a falsity, a huge mistake, a pestilent dead carcass, which this Sun was weary of. More than three hundred years ago, the throne of

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St. Peter received peremptory judicial notice to quit; authentic order, registered in Heaven's chancery and since legible in the hearts of all brave men, to take itself away,—to begone, and let us have no more to do with *it* and its delusions and impious deliriums;—and it has been sitting every day since, it may depend upon it, at its own peril withal, and will have to pay exact damages yet for every day it has so sat. Law of veracity? What this Popedom had to do by the law of veracity, was to give-up its own foul galvanic life, an offence to gods and men; honestly to die, and get itself buried!

Far from this was the thing the poor Pope undertook in regard to it;—and yet, on the whole, it was essentially this too. “Reforming Pope?” said one of our acquaintance, often in those weeks, “Was there ever such a miracle? About to break-up that hugh imposthume too, by ‘curing’ it? Turgot and Necker were nothing to this. God is great; and when a scandal is to end, brings some devoted man to take charge of it in hope, not in despair!”—But cannot he reform? asked many simple persons;—to whom our friend in grim banter would reply: “Reform a Popedom,—hardly. A wretched old kettle, ruined from top to bottom, and consisting mainly now of foul *grime* and *rust*: stop the holes of it, as your antecessors have been doing, with temporary putty, it may hang-together yet a while; begin to hammer at it, solder at it, to what you call mend and rectify it,—it will fall to sherds, as sure as rust is rust; go all into nameless dissolution,—and the fat in the fire will be a thing worth looking at, poor Pope!”— —So accordingly it has proved. The poor Pope, amid felicitations and tar-barrels of various kinds, went on joyfully for a season: but he had awakened, he as no other man could do, the sleeping elements; mothers of the whirlwinds, conflagrations, earthquakes. Questions not very soluble at present, were even sages and heroes set to solve them, began everywhere with new emphasis to be asked. Questions which all official men

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wished, and almost hoped, to postpone till Doomsday. Doomsday itself *had* come; that was the terrible truth!—

For, sure enough, if once the law of veracity be acknowledged as the rule for human things, there will not anywhere be want of work for the reformer; in very few places do human things adhere quite closely to that law! Here was the Papa of Christendom proclaiming that such was actually the case;—whereupon all over Christendom such results as we have seen. The Sicilians, I think, were the first notable body that set-about applying this new strange rule sanctioned by the general Father; they said to themselves, We do not by the law of veracity belong to Naples and these Neapolitan Officials; we will, by favour of Heaven and the Pope, be free of these. Fighting ensued; insurrection, fiercely maintained in the Sicilian Cities; with much bloodshed, much tumult and loud noise, vociferation extending through all newspapers and countries. The effect of this, carried abroad by newspapers and rumour, was great in all places; greatest perhaps in Paris, which for sixty years past has been the City of Insurrections. The French People had plumed themselves on being, whatever else they were not, at least the chosen ‘soldiers of liberty,’ who took the lead of all creatures in that pursuit, at least; and had become, as their orators, editors and litterateurs diligently taught them, a People whose bayonets were sacred, a kind of Messiah People, saving a blind world in its own despite, and earning for themselves a terrestrial and even celestial glory very considerable indeed. And here were the wretched downtrodden populations of Sicily risen to rival them, and threatening to take the trade out of their hand.

No doubt of it, this hearing continually of the very Pope’s glory as a Reformer, of the very Sicilians fighting divinely for liberty behind barricades,—must have bitterly aggravated the feeling of every Frenchman, as he looked around him, at home, on a Louis-Philippism which had become the scorn of all the world. “*Ichabod*; is the glory departing from us?

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Under the sun is nothing baser, by all accounts and evidences, than the system of repression and corruption, of shameless dishonesty and unbelief in anything but human baseness, that we now live under. The Italians, the very Pope, have become apostles of liberty, and France is— —what is France!—We know what France suddenly became in the end of February next; and by a clear enough genealogy, we can trace a considerable share in that event to the good simple Pope with the New Testament in his hand. An outbreak, or at least a radical change and even inversion of affairs hardly to be achieved without an outbreak, everybody felt was inevitable in France: but it had been universally expected that France would as usual take the initiative in that matter; and had there been no reforming Pope, no insurrectionary Sicily, France had certainly not broken-out then and so, but only afterwards and otherwise. The French explosion, not anticipated by the cunningest men there on the spot scrutinising it, burst-up unlimited, complete, defying computation or control.

Close following which, as if by sympathetic subterranean electricities, all Europe exploded, boundless, uncontrollable; and we had the year 1848, one of the most singular, disastrous, amazing, and, on the whole, humiliating years the European world ever saw. Not since the irruption of the Northern Barbarians has there been the like. Everywhere immeasurable Democracy rose monstrous, loud, blatant, inarticulate as the voice of Chaos. Everywhere the Official holy-of-holies was scandalously laid bare to dogs and the profane:—Enter, all the world, see what kind of Official holy it is. Kings everywhere, and reigning persons, stared in sudden horror, the voice of the whole world bellowing in their ear, “Begone, ye imbecile hypocrites, histrios not heroes! Off with you, off!”—and, what was peculiar and notable in this year for the first time, the Kings all made haste to go, as if exclaiming, “We *are* poor histrios, we sure enough;—did you want heroes? Don’t kill us; we couldn’t help it!” Not one of them

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turned round, and stood upon his Kingship, as upon a right he could afford to die for, or to risk his skin upon ; by no manner of means. That, I say, is the alarming peculiarity at present. Democracy, on this new occasion, finds all Kings *conscious* that they are but Playactors. The miserable mortals, enacting their High Life Below Stairs, with faith only that this Universe may perhaps be all a phantasm and hypocrisis, —the truculent Constable of the Destinies suddenly enters : “ Scandalous Phantasms, what do *you* here ? Are ‘ solemnly constituted Impostors ’ the proper Kings of men ? Did you think the Life of Man was a grimacing dance of apes ? To be led always by the squeak of your paltry fiddle ? Ye miserable, this Universe is not an upholstery Puppet-play, but a terrible God’s Fact ; and you, I think,—had not you better begone ! ” They fled precipitately, some of them with what we may call an exquisite ignominy,—in terror of the treadmill or worse. And everywhere the people, or the populace, take their own government upon themselves ; and open ‘ kinglessness,’ what we call *anarchy*,—how happy if it be anarchy *plus* a street-constable !—is everywhere the order of the day. Such was the history, from Baltic to Mediterranean, in Italy, France, Prussia, Austria, from end to end of Europe, in those March days of 1848. Since the destruction of the old Roman Empire by inroad of the Northern Barbarians, I have known nothing similar.

And so, then, there remained no King in Europe ; no King except the Public Haranguer, haranguing on barrel-head, in leading-article ; or getting himself aggregated into a National Parliament to harangue. And for about four months all France, and to a great degree all Europe, rough-ridden by every species of delirium, except happily the murderous for most part, was a weltering mob, presided over by M. de Lamartine at the Hôtel-de-Ville ; a most eloquent fair-spoken literary gentleman, whom thoughtless persons took for a prophet, priest and heaven-sent evangelist, and whom a wise Yankee-friend of mine discerned to be properly ‘ the first

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stump-orator in the world, standing too on the highest stump, —for the time.’ A sorrowful spectacle to men of reflection, during the time he lasted, that poor M. de Lamartine ; with nothing in him but melodious wind and *soft sowder*, which he and others took for something divine and not diabolic ! Sad enough : the eloquent latest impersonation of Chaos-come-again ; able to talk for itself, and declare persuasively that *it* is Cosmos ! However, you have but to wait a little, in such cases ; all balloons do and must give-up their gas in the pressure of things, and are collapsed in a sufficiently wretched manner before long.

And so in City after City, street-barricades are piled, and truculent, more or less murderous insurrection begins ; populace after populace rises, King after King capitulates or absconds ; and from end to end of Europe Democracy has blazed-up explosive, much higher, more irresistible and less resisted than ever before ; testifying too sadly on what a bottomless volcano, or universal powder-mine of most inflammable mutinous chaotic elements, separated from us by a thin earth-rind, Society with all its arrangements and acquirements everywhere, in the present epoch, rests ! The kind of persons who excite or give signal to such revolutions,—students, young men of letters, advocates, editors, hot inexperienced enthusiasts, or fierce and justly bankrupt desperadoes, acting everywhere on the discontent of the millions and blowing it into flame,—might give rise to reflections as to the character of our epoch. Never till now did young men, and almost children, take such a command in human affairs. A changed time since the word *Senior* (Seigneur, or *Elder*) was first devised to signify ‘lord,’ or superior ;—as in all languages of men we find it to have been ! Not an honourable document this either, as to the spiritual condition of our epoch. In times when men love wisdom, the old man will ever be venerable, and be venerated, and reckoned noble : in times that love something else than wisdom, and indeed have little or no wisdom, and see little or none to love, the old man will cease

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to be venerated ;—and looking more closely, also, you will find that in fact he has ceased to be venerable, and has begun to be contemptible ; a foolish *boy* still, a boy without the graces, generousities, and opulent strength of young boys. In these days, what of *lordship* or leadership is still to be done, the youth must do it, not the mature or aged man ; the mature man, hardened into sceptical egoism, knows no monition but that of his own frigid cautions, avarices, mean timidities ; and can lead nowhither towards an object that even seems noble. But to return.

This mad state of matters will of course before long allay itself, as it has everywhere begun to do ; the ordinary necessities of men's daily existence cannot comport with it, and these, whatever else is cast aside, will have their way. Some remounting,—very temporary remounting,—of the old machine, under new colours and altered forms, will probably ensue soon in most countries : the old histrionic Kings will be admitted back under conditions, under 'Constitutions,' with national Parliaments, or the like fashionable adjuncts ; and everywhere the old daily life will try to begin again. But there is now no hope that such arrangements can be permanent ; that they can be other than poor temporary makeshifts, which, if they try to fancy and make themselves permanent, will be displaced by new explosions, recurring more speedily than last time. In such baleful oscillation, afloat as amid raging bottomless eddies and conflicting sea-currents, not steadfast as on fixed foundations, must European Society continue swaying, now disastrously tumbling, then painfully readjusting itself, at ever shorter intervals,—till once the *new* rock-basis does come to light, and the weltering deluges of mutiny, and of need to mutiny, abate again !

For universal *Democracy*, whatever we may think of it, has declared itself as an inevitable fact of the days in which we live ; and he who has any chance to instruct, or lead, in his days, must begin by admitting that : new street-barricades, and

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new anarchies, still more scandalous if still less sanguinary, must return and again return, till governing persons everywhere know and admit that. Democracy, it may be said everywhere, is here :—for sixty years now, ever since the grand or *First French Revolution*, that fact has been terribly announced to all the world ; in message after message, some of them very terrible indeed ; and now at last all the world ought really to believe it. That the world does believe it ; that even Kings now as good as believe it, and know, or with just terror surmise, that they are but temporary phantasm Playactors, and that Democracy is the grand, alarming, imminent and indisputable Reality : this, among the scandalous phases we witnessed in the last two years, is a phasis full of hope : a sign that we are advancing closer and closer to the very Problem itself, which it will behove us to solve or die ;—that all fighting and campaigning and coalitioning in regard to the *existence* of the Problem, is hopeless and superfluous henceforth. The gods have appointed it *so* ; no Pitt, nor body of Pitts or mortal creatures can appoint it otherwise. Democracy, sure enough, is here : one knows not how long it will keep hidden underground even in Russia ;—and here in England, though we object to it resolutely in the form of street-barricades and insurrectionary pikes, and decidedly will not open doors to it on those terms, the tramp of its million feet is on all streets and thoroughfares, the sound of its bewildered thousandfold voice is in all writings and speakings, in all thinkings and modes and activities of men : the soul that does not now, with hope or terror, discern *it*, is not the one we address on this occasion.

What *is* Democracy ; this huge inevitable Product of the Destinies, which is everywhere the portion of our Europe in these latter days ? There lies the question for us. Whence comes it, this universal big black Democracy ; whither tends it ; what is the meaning of it ? A meaning it must have, or it would not be here. If we can find the right meaning of it, we may, wisely submitting or wisely resisting and controlling,

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still hope to live in the midst of it ; if we cannot find the right meaning, if we find only the wrong or no meaning in it, to live will not be possible !—The whole social wisdom of the Present Time is summoned, in the name of the Giver of Wisdom, to make clear to itself, and lay deeply to heart with an eye to strenuous valiant practice and effort, what the meaning of this universal revolt of the European Populations, which calls itself Democracy, and decides to continue permanent, may be.

Certainly it is a drama full of action, event fast following event ; in which curiosity finds endless scope, and there are interests at stake, enough to rivet the attention of all men, simple and wise. Whereat the idle multitude lift-up their voices, gratulating, celebrating sky-high ; in rhyme and prose announcement, more than plentiful, that *now* the New Era, and long-expected Year One of Perfect Human Felicity has come. Glorious and immortal people, sublime French citizens, heroic barricades ; triumph of civil and religious liberty—O Heaven ! one of the inevitablest private miseries, to an earnest man in such circumstances, is this multitudinous efflux of oratory and psalmody, from the universal foolish human throat ; drowning for the moment all reflection whatsoever, except the sorrowful one that you are fallen in an evil, heavy-laden, long-eared age, and must resignedly bear your part in the same. The front wall of your wretched old crazy dwelling, long denounced by you to no purpose, having at last fairly folded itself over, and fallen prostrate into the street, the floors, as may happen, will still hang-on by the mere beam-ends, and coherency of old carpentry, though in a sloping direction, and depend there till certain poor rusty nails and wormeaten dovetailings give way :—but is it cheering, in such circumstances, that the whole household burst-forth into celebrating the new joys of light and ventilation, liberty and picturesqueness of position, and thank God that now they have got a house to their mind ? My dear household, cease singing and psalmodying ; lay aside your fiddles, take out