THE

LIFE

OF

NAPOLEON BUONAPARTE;

WITH A

PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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CHAPTER I.

VIEW OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

Review of the State of Europe after the Peace of Versailles.—England—France—Spain—Prussia.—Imprudent Innovations of the Emperor Joseph.—Disturbances in his Dominions.—Russia.—France—Her ancient System of Monarchy—how organized—Causes of its Decay—Decay of the Nobility as a body—The new Nobles—The Country Nobles—The Nobles of the highest Order.—The Church—The higher Orders of the Clergy—The lower Orders—The Commons—Their increase in Power and Importance—Their Claims opposed to those of the Privileged Classes.

When we look back on past events, however important, it is difficult to recall the precise sensations with which we viewed them in their progress, and to recollect the fears, hopes, doubts, and difficulties, for which Time and the course of Fortune have formed a termination, so different probably from that which

we had anticipated. When the rush of the inundation was before our eyes, and in our ears, we were scarce able to remember the state of things before its rage commenced, and when, subsequently, the deluge has subsided within the natural limits of the stream, it is still more difficult to recollect with precision the terrors it inspired when at its height. That which is present possesses such power over our senses and our imagination, that it requires no common effort to recall those sensations which expired with preceding events. Yet, to do this is the peculiar province of history, which will be written and read in vain, unless it can connect with its details an accurate idea of the impression which these produced on men's minds while they were yet in their transit. It is with this view that we attempt to resume the history of France and of Europe, at the conclusion of the American war, a period now only remembered by the more advanced part of the present generation.

The peace concluded at Versailles in 1783, was reasonably supposed to augur a long repose to Europe. The high and emulous tone assumed in former times by the rival nations, had been lowered and tamed by recent circumstances. England, under the guidance of a weak, at least a most unlucky administration, had purchased peace at the expense of her North American Empire, and the resignation of supremacy over her colonies; a loss great in it-

self, but exaggerated in the eyes of the nation, by the rending asunder of the ties of common descent, and exclusive commercial intercourse, and by a sense of the wars waged, and expenses encountered for the protection and advancement of the fair empire which England found herself obliged to surrender. The lustre of the British arms, so brilliant at the Peace of Fontainbleau, had been tarnished, if not extinguished. In spite of the gallant defence of Gibraltar, the general result of the war on land had been unfavourable to her military reputation; and notwithstanding the opportune and splendid victories of Rodney, the coasts of Britain had been insulted, and her fleets compelled to retire into port, while those of her combined enemies rode masters of the Channel. The spirit of the country also had been lowered, by the unequal contest which had been sustained, and by the sense that her naval superiority was an object of invidious hatred to united Europe. This had been lately made manifest, by the armed alliance of the northern nations, which, though termed a neutrality, was, in fact, a league made to abate the pretensions of England to maritime supremacy. There are to be added, to these disheartening and depressing circumstances, the decay of commerce during the long course of hostilities, with the want of credit and depression of the price of land, which are the usual consequences of a transition from war to

peace, ere capital has regained its natural channel. All these things being considered, it appeared the manifest interest of England to husband her exhausted resources, and recruit her diminished wealth, by cultivating peace and tranquillity for a long course of time. William Pitt, never more distinguished than in his financial operations, was engaged in new-modelling the revenue of the country, and adding to the return of the taxes, while he diminished their pressure. It could scarcely be supposed that any object of national ambition would have been permitted to disturb him in a task so necessary.

Neither had France, the natural rival of England, come off from the contest in such circumstances of triumph and advantage, as were likely to encourage her to a speedy renewal of the struggle. It is true, she had seen and contributed to the humiliation of her ancient enemy, but she had paid dearly for the gratification of her revenge, as nations and individuals are wont to do. Her finances, tampered with by successive sets of ministers, who looked no farther than to temporary expedients for carrying on the necessary expenses of government, now presented an alarming prospect; and it seemed as if the wildest and most enterprising ministers would hardly have dared, in their most sanguine moments, to have recommended either war itself, or any measures of which war might be the consequence.

Spain was in a like state of exhaustion. She had been hurried into the alliance against England, partly by the consequences of the family alliance betwixt her Bourbons and those of France, but still more by the eager and engrossing desire to possess herself once more of Gibraltar. The Castilian pride, long galled by beholding this important fortress in the hands of heretics and foreigners, highly applauded the war, which gave a chance of its recovery, and seconded, with all the power of the kingdom, the gigantic efforts made for that purpose. All these immense preparations, with the most formidable means of attack ever used on such an occasion, had totally failed, and the kingdom of Spain remained at once stunned and mortified by the failure, and broken down by the expenses of so huge an undertaking. An attack upon Algiers, in 1784-5, tended to exhaust the remains of her military ardour. Spain, therefore, relapsed into inactivity and repose, dispirited by the miscarriage of her favourite scheme, and possessing neither the means nor the audacity necessary to meditate its speedy renewal.

Neither were the sovereigns of the late belligerent powers of that ambitious and active character which was likely to drag the kingdoms which they swayed into the renewal of hostilities. The classic eye of the historian Gibbon saw Arcadius and Honorius, the weakest and most indolent of the Roman Empe-

rors, slumbering upon the thrones of the House of Bourbon; and the just and loyal character of George III. precluded any effort on his part to undermine the peace which he signed unwillingly, or to attempt the resumption of those rights which he had formally, though reluctantly, surrendered. His expression to the ambassador of the United States, was a trait of character never to be omitted or forgotten;—"I have been the last man in my dominions to accede to this peace, which separates America from my kingdoms—I will be the first man, now it is made, to resist any attempt to infringe it."

The acute historian whom we have already quoted seems to have apprehended, in the character and ambition of the northern potentates, those causes of disturbance which were not to be found in the western part of the European Republic. But Catherine, the Semiramis of the north, had her views of extensive dominion chiefly turned towards her eastern and southern frontier, and the finances of her immense, but comparatively poor and unpeopled empire, were burthened with the expenses of a luxurious court, requiring at once to be gratified with the splendour of Asia and the refinements of Europe. The strength of her empire also, though immense, was unwieldy, and the empire had not been uniformly fortunate in its wars with the more prompt, though less numerous armies of the King of Prussia, her neighbour. Thus

Russia, no less than other powers in Europe, seemed more desirous of reposing her gigantic strength, than of adventuring upon new and hazardous conquests. Even her views upon Turkey, which circumstances seemed to render more flattering than ever, she was contented to resign, in 1784, when only half accomplished; a pledge, not only that her thoughts were sincerely bent upon peace, but that she felt the necessity of resisting even the most tempting opportunities for resuming the course of victory which she had, four years before, pursued so successfully.

Frederick of Prussia himself, who had been so long, by dint of genius and talent, the animating soul of the political intrigues in Europe, had run too many risks, in the course of his adventurous and eventful reign, to be desirous of encountering new hazards in the extremity of life. His empire, extended as it was, from the shores of the Baltic to the frontiers of Holland, consisted of various detached portions, which it required the aid of time to consolidate into a single kingdom. And, accustomed to study the signs of the times, it could not have escaped Frederick, that sentiments and feelings were afloat, connected with, and fostered by, the spirit of unlimited investigation, which he himself had termed philosophy, such as might soon call upon the sovereigns to arm in a common cause, and ought to prevent them, in the meanwhile, from wasting their strength

in mutual struggles, and giving advantage to a common enemy.

If such anticipations occupied and agitated the last years of Frederick's life, they had not the same effect upon the Emperor Joseph II., who, without the same clear-eyed precision of judgment, endeavoured to tread in the steps of the King of Prussia, as a reformer, and as a conqueror. It would be unjust to deny to this prince the praise of considerable talents, and inclination to employ them for the good of the country which he ruled. But it frequently happens, that the talents, and even the virtues of sovereigns, exercised without respect to time and circumstances, become the misfortune of their government. It is particularly the lot of princes, endowed with such personal advantages, to be confident in their own abilities, and, unless educated in the severe school of adversity, to prefer favourites, who assent to and repeat their opinions, to independent counsellors, whose experience might correct their own hasty conclusions. And thus, although the personal merits of Joseph II. were in every respect acknowledged, his talents in a great measure recognized, and his patriotic intentions scarcely disputable, it fell to his lot, during the period we treat of, to excite more apprehension and discontent among his subjects, than had he been a prince content to rule by a minister, and wear out an indolent life in the forms and pleasures of a court. Accordingly, the Emperor, in many of

his schemes of reform, too hastily adopted, or at least too incautiously and peremptorily executed, had the misfortune to introduce fearful commotions among the people, whose situation he meant to ameliorate, while in his external relations he rendered Austria the quarter from which a breach of European peace was most to be apprehended. It seemed, indeed, as if the Emperor had contrived to reconcile his philosophical professions with the exercise of the most selfish policy towards the United Provinces, both in opening the Scheldt, and in dismantling the barrier towns, which had been placed in their hands as a defence against the power of France. By the first of these measures the Emperor gained nothing but the paltry sum of money for which he sold his pretensions, and the shame of having shown himself ungrateful for the important services which the United Provinces had rendered to his ancestors. But the dismantling of the Dutch barrier was subsequently attended by circumstances alike calamitous to Austria, and to the whole continent of Europe.

In another respect, the reforms carried through by Joseph II. tended to prepare the public mind for future innovations, made with a ruder hand, and upon a much larger scale. The suppression of the religious orders, and the appropriation of their revenues to the general purposes of government, had in it something to flatter the feelings of those of the re-

formed religion; but, in a moral point of view, the seizing upon the property of any private individual, or public body, is an invasion of the most sacred principles of public justice, and such spoliation cannot be vindicated by urgent circumstances of state-necessity, or any plausible pretext of state-advantage whatsoever, since no necessity can vindicate what is in itself unjust, and no public advantage can compensate a breach of public faith. Joseph was also the first Catholic sovereign who broke through the solemn degree of reverence attached by that religion to the person of the Sovereign Pontiff. The Pope's fruitless and humiliating visit to Vienna furnished the shadow of a precedent for the conduct of Napoleon to Pius VII.

Another and yet less justifiable cause of innovation, placed in peril, and left in doubt and discontent, some of the fairest provinces of the Austrian dominions, and those which the wisest of their princes had governed with peculiar tenderness and moderation. The Austrian Netherlands had been in a literal sense dismantled and left open to the first invader, by the demolition of the barrier fortresses; and it seems to have been the systematic purpose of the Emperor to eradicate and destroy that love and regard for their prince and his government, which in time of need proves the most effectual moral substitute for moats and ramparts. The history of the