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Charlotte Blennerhassett

Excerpt

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MADAME DE STAËL.

CHAPTER I.

The Necker family—James Necker goes to Paris—The Economists—Necker's attention directed to Public Affairs—His marriage—Mademoiselle Curchod under the parental roof—Her visit to Lausanne—Gibbon, Moulton, and J. J. Rousseau—Mademoiselle Curchod at Ferney—Goes to Paris—The Neckers first friends—Madame Necker's friendship for Buffon—Gibbon in Paris—Birth of Anne Germaine Necker, April 22, 1766—Influence of the social atmosphere in Paris upon Madame Necker—Literary importance of the Necker *salon*—Madame Necker a mother to the poor.

THE excitable and jealous patriotism of the French, so often serving as an example to other nations, and not unfrequently as a useful incentive to the extension of their own strength, has nevertheless been powerless to prevent the direction of the State from falling into the hands of foreigners.

In this, the principal share fell to the Italians; to Concini, under Louis XIII.; and to Cardinal Mazarin, who added so much to the brilliancy and glory of the French crown during the next reign, although retaining all the typical attributes of his own nationality.

Berwick, an Englishman, fought the battles of Louis

XIV. The Scotchman, Law, managed the finances of the Regent. The Revolution accepted help from Thomas Payne, an Englishman ; from Marat, a native of Neuenburg ; from the Prussian Anacharsis Clootz ; from the German Prince of Hessen Rheinfels ; from Buonaparte, the Corsican. Stofflet, a Suabian, fought in the cause of the Vendée ; and Lückner, a native of the Upper Palatinate, in that of Louis XIV. The German element preserved its own individuality less than any other, on foreign soil, from the field-marshal Maurice de Saxe down to the author Grimm, in whose praise it is cited that he had become quite French. The same cannot be said of his friend and contemporary, James Necker, the Genevan, who at a moment of direst need undertook the financial direction of the affairs of the French government, and who, ten years later, further undertook to save it from utter destruction, on the eve of the most dreadful storm that hitherto had burst upon a European nation.

Necker never entirely lost the traces of his German origin, dating only a generation back, and it is recognizable in the merits and good qualities as well as in the failures and mistakes to which the miscarriage in 1789 of this enormous double task must be ascribed.

The Necker family was of Irish descent, and this is equivalent to saying that they claimed noble blood, although drawing a line at those royal honours which float in the fanciful brain of every true Irish Celt, as a fragment of his stolen birthright.

All traces of the family disappeared from Ireland

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE NECKERS IN SWITZERLAND.

3

in the time of Queen Mary, to appear again in Pomerania, where members of it filled offices in the Church.

The son of Martin Necker, a preacher in the parish of Wartenburg, not far from Pyritz, became an advocate at Küstrin. His son, named Charles Frederic, born in 1685, soon relinquished a similar narrow line of existence, although it had originally been his own choice, and first accompanied a young Count Bernstorff, a godchild of George I., to the Geneva university, subsequently visiting the various capitals of Europe with him. About the year 1724 he arrived in London with his pupil, and there the King rewarded his exertions with a yearly salary of 100*l.*, on condition that he should organize a school at Geneva for young Englishmen. To this Necker consented, and shortly afterwards the Grand Council of the university conferred the honorary title of Professor of Law upon him. In 1726 he married a sister of Gautier, the Chief Secretary and a Member of Council, who belonged to a refugee Huguenot family, tracing its origin through the Gallatins and Tuderts to Jacques Cœur, the great financier of the fifteenth century. In the same year he obtained the privileges of a citizen, and being, as the decree expressed it, "priceless by reason of his services," was elected shortly afterwards to the High Council, became a member of the reformed Consistory in 1742, and at the same date published a treatise on the "Constitutional Law of the High Council of the German Nation," a translation of which appeared simultaneously in Frankfort and Leipzig in 1764.

B 2

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Although Necker had specially notified that the pamphlet contained “nothing that could be displeasing to princes,” the High Council of the Republic thought it wiser to decline the dedication, in consideration of its monarchical surroundings. It nevertheless assured the author of its special goodwill.

The proceeds of his school enabled him to become possessed of a country-place, to which he gave the name of “Germanie” in memory of his native land.

He appears to have taken no small interest in the welfare of his adopted country, and it was whilst endeavouring to calm the excitement arising out of an election in the church of St. Peter’s, then disturbed by violent disputes, that in 1762 he suddenly fell lifeless to the ground.* He had reached the age of seventy-seven years, and left two sons behind him, Louis and James.

Louis Necker, the elder of the two, born in 1730, and doctor of law, originally followed the same path as his father had done. He first accompanied one of the counts of Lippe Detmold to the university of Turin, was afterwards tutor to the Baron von Wasenaër, of an old Netherland family, and went with him in that capacity to the Utrecht university. Being appointed professor of natural history in the university of his native town, he busied himself with

* Senebier, *Histoire Littéraire de Genève*, 1786, iii. 90. Galiffe, *Notice Généalogiques sur les Familles Genevoises*, ii. and iv. Dr. J. Hermann, Oberlehrer, *Zur Geschichte der Familie Necker*, Berlin, 1886.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

JAMES AND LOUIS NECKER.

5

several works for the Encyclopædia, and carried on his father's school, but after his first wife's death found himself obliged to leave Geneva, in consequence of some legal disputes. He gave up his professorship, and went to Marseilles, where he assumed the surname of de Germanie, and with the help of his brother, James Necker, started a banking business, which in a few years enabled him to retire into private life, and go back to Paris with two million livres. There, through their common love of physical science, he became the friend of Benjamin Franklin, and there also he married a Mademoiselle de Hauteville.

This second marriage proved childless, but a son of the first marriage entered the French army, and a daughter married and settled in Geneva, where in 1804, and in the same year as his brother, Louis Necker died.*

A very different career, comprising all the changes and chances of human greatness, and their inevitable disappointments, was allotted to James Necker, born September 30th, 1732, the younger son of Frederic Charles.

Victor de Bonstetten, his friend in later years, speaks of a characteristic trait in his early youth in Geneva, which was otherwise undistinguished by any special event. It had been related to him, that when young Necker played with his companions he always

* *The Necker Family*, by C——r, and *Jacob Necker*, by A. W. Schlegel. Both notices printed in the newspaper *The Contemporaries*. 1816-1817 and 1818-1819.

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managed that the forms of government of which he had read should be represented in miniature, and thus he obtained an opportunity of framing laws for them.*

In the Switzerland of that date young and old busied themselves with politics; and the various cantons each represented various forms of government, and of political theories in miniature. This appears all the more surprising when we remember the apathy prevalent throughout the length and breadth of Germany, their next-door neighbour. This was so complete, that in 4700 letters—interchanged from 1722-1756 between the Gottscheds and half the rest of the world—politics with the exception of one or two casual allusions are barely mentioned.† Notwithstanding the almost universal interest taken by the Swiss in public affairs, the second half of the eighteenth century was a period of decadence in the history of Switzerland. A number of small states divided the land, from the monarchy of the Prince Bishops down to the absolute democracy of the small cantons in the mountains; but the aristocracy, nevertheless, prevailed in public life; whilst even the democracy in the small cantons did not hesitate to have their dependants.

Besides the thirteen cantons, there were three smaller communities, represented in the Diet by the name of the united towns. Amongst these, the

* Bonstetten, *Letters to Frederike Brun*, published by Matthison, i. 205.

† Danzel, *Gottsched and his Times*, p. 279.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

GENEVA.

7

republic of Geneva enjoyed the most flourishing industrial development; whilst the aristocratic families in Berne, Lucerne, Freiburg, Solothurn, were already in a state of decline.

In 1760 the Swiss secured themselves an intellectual centre by the formation of the Helvetic society on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Basle university. At its head came Iselin, with Geszner, Hirzel, and Schinz, from Zurich; later on they were joined by Bodmer, Lavater, Pestalozzi, and Bonstetten.

Encouragement of patriotism and civil virtue, as well as the furtherance of the public welfare, was their ostensible aim; politics were insensibly added as the times grew stormier. In like manner Geneva took up a special position from an intellectual stand-point. The historian J. von Müller calls it “comparatively the most enlightened town to be met with far and wide.”

“After a long servitude,” he says, “Calvin introduced the shadow of political freedom by the powerful rule of the Protestant clergy, and succeeding generations brought it still further to perfection. Envied by more than one neighbour, this town was an immense industrial centre, and that of a comparatively immense concourse of intellectual people; but when the joys of liberty are the most talked about they are the nearer being lost.” “Never is a native of Geneva put to confusion,” he adds, “by giving his opinion.”*

In his *Reminiscences* Bonstetten confirms this state-

* J. von Müller, *Letters. Complete Works*, xvi. 42, 55.

ment. He tells us that so much was never written for and against aristocracy and democracy in any place as in Geneva. He says, "Aristocracy was in the constitution and in the position of the town, democracy in some of its customs. The whole power of the aristocracy was united in the 'Little Council,' and all the patrician families lived on the hilly portion of the town, whilst the plebeians lived at their feet in the lower town. And yet there was no recognised difference of classes; no real boundaries divided the reigning families from their subordinates. A purely ideal conception of power existed; it therefore came to pass that in no country were the smallest rights more tenaciously adhered to than in this republic. One of these imaginary rights was that of living on the hill. How often I was annoyed by the slighting remarks applied by the inhabitants of the upper town to the residents in the lower town, in whose houses I had occasionally danced.

"This universal jealousy produced universal culture in every class. The women were amiable, the men well-educated, even learned, and education was altogether more advanced than in any of the greater nations.

"As the unusual intellectual cultivation in Geneva sprang from ancient civil and religious controversy, and from a commercial spirit, the character of the Genevese was altogether serious, and more disposed for calculations and accounts than for enjoyment and merriment.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

GENEVA.

9

“Voltaire says of Geneva, ‘*Cité sournoise, où jamais l’on ne rit.*’ The puritanical spirit of the clergy had banished all amusement, especially public plays, from their midst, as doubtful abominations. The serious nature of the Genevese made them all the more vigorous in a dispute, so that even the most insignificant political question produced a storm of words and pamphlets.

“I remember that the greatest praise that could be bestowed in the days of my childhood was commendation for good behaviour. To be well-behaved, meant keeping as quiet as an old grandfather or as stiff as a councillor. My father had recommended me to the notice of Cramer, an excellent man, and then Syndic of the Republic. I saw him first in his kitchen, dining with his wife and servant-girl. The venerable old man wore a wig, too, which reached his stomach like a splendid mane. These good manners thawed by degrees, like ancient glaciers, at the time of Voltaire’s appearance, and he was not entirely innocent of bringing about this result.”* The owner of Ferney subsequently boasted that he had corrupted Geneva; † but in the days of Necker’s youth Bonnet, the great and modest natural philosopher and *savant*, who tried to find a middle path between the philosophical problems of the day and the Christian faith, in the same way as Necker afterwards endeavoured to do, was the most influential man in his native town. Whilst suc-

* Bonstetten, *Reminiscences of Youth*.

† *Voltaire to d’Alembert*, i. 134.

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cessfully pursuing his studies in the atmosphere of patriarchal simplicity and austerity peculiar to Geneva, James Necker, in compliance with his father's wish, was obliged, at the age of sixteen, to give up the university, and went to Paris, there to make his livelihood in mercantile pursuits.

It has been rightly observed that this interruption left a permanent gap in his education.* At first he seemed unlikely to succeed. Far other matters than those connected with money claimed young Necker's interest; he loved his books, eagerly read all the leading literature of the day, and in his leisure moments wrote short pieces for the theatre, more especially comedies in verse, which later on he congratulated himself he had never published.

A mere chance led to the discovery that this merry young fellow, full of jokes and play, was nevertheless possessed of very special talent for the calling he so unwillingly pursued.

His father had placed him with Vernet, the Genevese banker, with whom he stood in friendly relations. The head of the bank lived in the neighbourhood of Paris, and only attended on certain days. During his absence an important business offer came from Holland. Decision was urgent; Necker, who was now eighteen years old, undertook the transaction, and on Vernet's return unfolded not only a carefully-prepared, but a suitable, scheme, to which he gave his entire approval.

* Madame de Charrière, *Lettres, Mémoires*. *Revue Suisse*, p. 777.