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Julia Pardoe

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The Court and Reign of Francis the First, King of France

This two-volume work by the historian Julia Pardoe (1804–62) was published in 1849. (Her bestselling account of life in Turkey and her biography of Marie de Medici are both also reissued in the Cambridge Library Collection.) Pardoe began writing poetry and novels, but later turned to non-fiction, especially travel narratives and historical biography. In this work, she attempts to remove the accretions of myth which have clung to Francis I and to his court. Noting the tendency of French historians to glorify the monarchs of the distant past, she observes: ‘it is only by reference to the more confidential records and correspondence of the period’ that the modern historian can arrive at ‘a just estimate of the character and motives of the sovereign’. Volume 1 begins with Francis’ accession and its historical context, discusses his Italian wars, and ends with the death of Bayard in 1524.

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VOLUME 1

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BY MISS PARDOE.

AUTHOR OF "LOUIS XIV." "THE CITY OF THE SULTAN," ETC.



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TO

MY BELOVED FATHER,

THE PROTECTOR OF MY INFANCY,

THE GUIDE OF MY GIRLHOOD,

AND

THE FRIEND OF MY RIPER YEARS,

These Volumes

ARE VERY AFFECTIONATELY

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P R E F A C E.



IN attempting a record of the Court and Reign of Francis I, I did not for a moment seek to blind myself to the extreme difficulty of the task which I was about to undertake. The successor of Louis XII. has been so universally quoted as the most chivalrous Monarch who ever filled an European throne, that those who are only superficially acquainted with his history cannot fail to anticipate a succession of brilliant actions, generous self-sacrifices, refined gallantries, and noble feats of arms. Time and truth have, however, alike tended to place his character in a less elevated point of view; and the truth may well be said to have been born of time, for it is only of late years that any French historian has been permitted to allow that a sovereign of France could err.

Who, that is acquainted with the anecdote, can have forgotten the caution given by the Cardinal de Richelieu to an honest and conscientious chronicler, whose zeal had betrayed him into sundry animadversions on a crowned head long laid in the royal mausoleum of St. Denis?

“Sir;” said the minister sternly to the scholar, whom he had summoned to his presence; “you must revise your work. You have been guilty of treason; you have dared to vilify a king.”

“ I have only recorded well-authenticated facts, your Eminence.”

“ Perhaps so; but those facts were not your property. The person and fame of a monarch are alike sacred.”

“ *Monseigneur* will permit me to remind him that Louis XI. has been dead two centuries.”

“ And what of that, Sir?” retorted the Cardinal sharply; “ Understand that it is treason to discuss the actions of a king who has only been dead two centuries.”

Upon the principle here educed, most of the ancient French historians appear to have scrupulously acted; and thus it is only by a reference to the more confidential records and correspondence of the period, that a modern writer can hope to arrive at a just estimate of the character and motives of the sovereign whom he seeks to portray “ in his habit as he lived.”

There can be little doubt that much of the *prestige* which attaches to the name of Francis I. may be attributed to this circumstance. To the great mass of readers, alike French and English, he is necessarily known only through the medium of the old and well-tutored chroniclers, or rather, through the modern histories which have been compiled exclusively upon their authority; and thus, thanks to the timid and time-serving policy of those writers, the “divinity that doth hedge a king” has protected his renown throughout the lapse of centuries. For this impunity Francis I. is consequently mainly indebted to the scarcity of familiar chronicles during an age in which, the whole of Europe being almost perpetually in a state of warfare, few cared to register the mere domestic events of the period. Fortunately, however, for the after-labourers in the same vineyard, the love of court-gossipry was not altogether extinct, and thus some glimpses are afforded of the man as well as of the monarch.

It was with the witty and accomplished Marguerite de Valois, his sister, that the taste originated of perpetuating by the pen the current of passing circumstances; and it is to her example that posterity is indebted for that courtly *cacoethes scribendi* by which the annals of subsequent reigns have been so greatly enriched.

In this paucity of *authentic* detail has consisted, as I was aware that it must do, the great difficulty of my task; but, as I resolved not to insert a single incident into the Work for which I had not competent authority, the court scenes scattered through the following pages may all be accepted as facts; and the reader will be enabled from them to form his own estimate of the claim which Francis I. could arrogate to himself of being considered as the chivalric monarch *par excellence*. The glorious day of Marignano saw the rising, and that of Pavia the setting of his fame as a soldier; so true it is that the prowess of the man was shamed by that of the boy. The early and unregretted death of one of his neglected queens, and the heart-broken endurance of the other, contrasted with the unbounded influence of his first favourite, and the insolent arrogance of his second, will sufficiently demonstrate his character as a husband. His open and illegal oppression of an over-taxed and suffering people, to satisfy the cravings of an extortionate and licentious court, will suffice to disclose his value as a monarch; while the reckless indifference with which he falsified his political pledges, abandoned his allies in their extremity in order to further his own interests, and sacrificed the welfare of his kingdom, and the safety of his armies, to his own puerile vanity, will complete a picture by no means calculated to elicit one regret that his reign was not prolonged.

Despite this drawback, however, the period was one of great and absorbing interest. The fierce and continual struggle for power between Francis and Charles V; the well-

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earned renown of the several generals on both sides; the names of the Connétable-Duke de Bourbon, Bayard, Pescara, Da Leyva, Doria, Gaston de Foix, Lautrec, and a host of others equally brave; the bright galaxy of beauty which adorned the court; the fair and gentle Madame de Châteaubriand, the haughty and voluptuous Duchess d'Etampes, the magnificent Diane of Poitiers, the mature, but still attractive, Louise de Savoie, the strong-minded and intellectual Marguerite de Valois, and the beautiful Catherine de' Medici; all combine to invest the age with a charm and a romance totally independent of the personal character of the monarch; while the fact of its having been the period of the mission of LUTHER, and the crowning work of the REFORMATION, suffices of itself to render it the greatest landmark on the whole highway of history.

Never, perhaps, did the reign of any European sovereign present so many, and such varying phases. A contest for empire, a captive monarch, a female regency, and a religious war; the poisoned bowl and the burning pile alike doing their work of death amid scenes of uncalculating splendour and unbridled dissipation; the atrocities of bigotry and intolerance, blent with the most unblushing licentiousness and the most undisguised profligacy;—such are the materials offered to the student by the times of Francis I.

Here, as was the case in a former Work, I have commenced my volumes by a brief glance at the conclusion of the previous reign; and, although censured by one of my critics upon that occasion for the introduction of retrospective matter, I have in this instance advisedly pursued the same system, from a conviction that the book must fall into the hands of many individuals, who, from want of time or opportunity, must necessarily be unacquainted with the precise position of the French nation on the accession of Francis I. To the historical student this preliminary sketch will be, of

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course, supererogatory; but as this is not a period at which any author can feel justified in writing only for a class, I believe that a succinct narrative of preceding events will tend to render the Work more generally acceptable; and I have, consequently, not suffered myself to be deterred from acting upon that conviction. The scholar will therefore forgive me, if, in seeking to augment the gratification of the less learned reader, I have dwelt for a time upon persons and events which, although living and occurring before he ascended the French throne, were destined to exert a powerful influence over the court and reign of Francis himself.

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