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THE

OLD REGIME

AND

THE REVOLUTION.

BY

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TRANSLATED

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P R E F A C E.

THE book I now publish is not a history of the Revolution. That history has been too brilliantly written for me to think of writing it afresh. This is a mere essay on the Revolution.

The French made, in 1789, the greatest effort that has ever been made by any people to sever their history into two parts, so to speak, and to tear open a gulf between their past and their future. In this design, they took the greatest care to leave every trace of their past condition behind them; they imposed all kinds of restraints upon themselves in order to be different from their ancestry; they omitted nothing which could disguise them.

I have always fancied that they were less successful in this enterprise than has been generally believed abroad, or even supposed at home. I have always suspected that they unconsciously retained most of the sentiments, habits, and ideas which the old regime had taught them, and by whose aid they achieved the Revolution; and that, without intending it, they used its ruins as materials for the construction of their new society. Hence it seemed that the proper way of studying the Revolution was to forget, for a time, the France we see before us, and to examine, in its grave, the France that is gone. That is the task which I

have here endeavored to perform; it has been more arduous than I had imagined.

The early ages of the monarchy, the Middle Ages, and the period of revival have been thoroughly studied; the labors of the authors who have chosen them for their theme have acquainted us not only with the events of history, but also with the laws, the customs, the spirit of the government and of the nation in those days. No one has yet thought of examining the eighteenth century in the same close, careful manner. We fancy that we are familiar with the French society of that age because we see clearly what glittered on its surface, and possess detailed biographies of the illustrious characters, and ingenious or eloquent criticisms on the works of the great writers who flourished at the time. But of the manner in which public business was transacted, of the real working of institutions, of the true relative position of the various classes of society, of the condition and feelings of those classes which were neither heard nor seen, of the actual opinions and customs of the day, we have only confused and frequently erroneous notions.

I have undertaken to grope into the heart of this old regime. It is not far distant from us in years, but the Revolution hides it.

To succeed in the task, I have not only read the celebrated books which the eighteenth century produced; I have studied many works which are comparatively unknown, and deservedly so, but which, as their composition betrays but little art, afford perhaps a still truer index to the instincts of the age. I have endeavored to make myself acquainted with all the

public documents in which the French expressed their opinions and their views at the approach of the Revolution. I have derived much information on this head from the reports of the States, and, at a later period, from those of the Provincial Assemblies. I have freely used the *cahiers* which were presented by the three orders in 1789. These *cahiers*, whose originals form a large series of folio volumes, will ever remain as the testament of the old French society, the final expression of its wishes, the authentic statement of its last will. They are a historical document that is unique.

Nor have I confined my studies to these. In countries where the supreme power is predominant, very few ideas, or desires, or grievances can exist without coming before it in some shape or other. But few interests can be created or passions aroused that are not at some time laid bare before it. Its archives reveal not merely its own proceedings, but the movement of the whole nation. Free access to the files of the Department of the Interior and the various prefectures would soon enable a foreigner to know more about France than we do ourselves. In the eighteenth century, as a perusal of this work will show, the government was already highly centralized, very powerful, prodigiously active. It was constantly at work aiding, prohibiting, permitting this or that. It had much to promise, much to give. It exercised paramount influence not only over the transaction of business, but over the prospects of families and the private life of individuals. None of its business was made public; hence people did not shrink from confiding to

it their most secret infirmities. ~ I have devoted much time to the study of its remains at Paris and in the provinces.*

I have found in them, as I anticipated, the actual life of the old regime, its ideas, its passions, its prejudices, its practices. I have found men speaking freely their inmost thoughts in their own language. I have thus obtained much information upon the old regime which was unknown even to the men who lived under it, for I had access to sources which were closed to them.

As I progressed in my labors, I was surprised to find in the France of that day many features which are conspicuous in the France we have before us. I met with a host of feelings and ideas which I have always credited to the Revolution, and many habits which it is supposed to have engendered; I found on every side the roots of our modern society deeply imbedded in the old soil. The nearer I drew to 1789, the more distinctly I noticed the spirit which brought about the Revolution. The actual physiognomy of the Revolution was gradually disclosed before me. Its temper, its genius were apparent; it was all there. I saw there not only the secret of its earliest efforts, but the promise also of its ultimate results—for the Revolu-

* I have made especial use of the archives of some of the greater intendants' offices, such as those of Tours, which are very complete; they refer to a very large district (*généralité*), placed in the centre of France, and containing a million of souls. My thanks are due to the young and able keeper of the archives, M. Grandmaison. Other intendants' offices, such as that of Ile de France, have satisfied me that business was conducted on the same plan throughout most of the kingdom.

tion had two distinct phases: one during which the French seemed to want to destroy every remnant of the past, another during which they tried to regain a portion of what they had thrown off. Many of the laws and political usages of the old regime which disappeared in 1789 reappeared some years afterward, just as some rivers bury themselves in the earth and rise to the surface at a distance, washing new shores with the old waters.

The especial objects of the work I now present to the public are to explain why the Revolution, which was impending over every European country, burst forth in France rather than elsewhere; why it issued spontaneously from the society which it was to destroy; and how the old monarchy contrived to fall so completely and so suddenly.

My design is to pursue the work beyond these limits. I intend, if I have time and my strength does not fail me, to follow through the vicissitudes of their long revolution these Frenchmen with whom I have lived on such familiar terms under the old regime; to see them throwing off the shape they had borrowed from this old regime, and assuming new shapes to suit events, yet never changing their nature, or wholly disguising the old familiar features by changes of expression.

I shall first go over the period of 1789, when their affections were divided between the love of freedom and the love of equality; when they desired to establish free as well as democratic institutions, and to acknowledge and confirm rights as well as to destroy privileges. This was an era of youth, of enthusiasm, of pride, of generous and heartfelt passions; despite

its errors, men will remember it long, and for many a day to come it will disturb the slumbers of those who seek to corrupt or to enslave the French.

In the course of a hasty sketch of the Revolution, I shall endeavor to show what errors, what faults, what disappointments led the French to abandon their first aim, to forget liberty, and to aspire to become the equal servants of the master of the world; how a far stronger and more absolute government than the one the Revolution overthrew then seized and monopolized all political power, suppressed all the liberties which had been so dearly bought, and set up in their stead empty shams; deprived electors of all means of obtaining information, of the right of assemblage, and of the faculty of exercising a choice, yet talked of popular sovereignty; said the taxes were freely voted, when mute or enslaved assemblies assented to their imposition; and, while stripping the nation of every vestige of self-government, of constitutional guarantees, and of liberty of thought, speech, and the press—that is to say, of the most precious and the noblest conquests of 1789—still dared to claim descent from that great era.

I shall stop at the period at which the work of the Revolution appears complete, and the new society created. I shall then examine that new society. I shall try to discover wherein it resembles and wherein it differs from the society which preceded it; to ascertain what we have gained and what we have lost by the universal earthquake; and shall lastly attempt to foresee our future prospects.

A portion of this second work I have roughly sketched, but it is not yet fit for the public eye. Shall I be

permitted to finish it? Who knows? The fate of individuals is even more obscure than that of nations.

I trust I have written this work without prejudice; but I do not claim to have written dispassionately. It would be hardly decent for a Frenchman to be calm when he speaks of his country, and thinks of the times. I admit that, in studying every feature of the society of other times, I have never lost sight of that which we see before us. I have tried not only to detect the disease of which the patient died, but to discover the remedy that might have saved him. I have acted like those physicians who try to surprise the vital principle in each paralyzed organ. My object has been to draw a perfectly accurate, and, at the same time, an instructive picture. Whenever I have found among our ancestors any of those masculine virtues which we need so much and possess so little—a true spirit of independence, a taste for true greatness, faith in ourselves and in our cause—I have brought them boldly forward; and, in like manner, whenever I have discovered in the laws, or ideas, or manners of olden time, any trace of those vices which destroyed the old regime and weakened us to-day, I have taken pains to throw light on them, so that the sight of their mischievous effects in the past might prove a warning for the future.

In pursuing this object, I have not, I confess, allowed myself to be influenced by fears of wounding either individuals or classes, or shocking opinions or recollections, however respectable they may be. I have often felt regret in pursuing this course, but remorse, never. Those whom I may have offended must forgive me, in

consideration of the honesty and disinterestedness of my aim.

I may perhaps be charged with evincing in this work a most inopportune love for freedom, about which I am assured that Frenchmen have ceased to care.

I can only reply to those who urge this charge that in me the feeling is of ancient date. More than twenty years have elapsed since I wrote, in reference to another society, almost these very words.

In the darkness of the future three truths may be plainly discerned. The first is, that all the men of our day are driven, sometimes slowly, sometimes violently, by an unknown force—which may possibly be regulated or moderated, but can not be overcome—toward the destruction of aristocracies. The second is, that, among all human societies, those in which there exists and can exist no aristocracy are precisely those in which it will be most difficult to resist, for any length of time, the establishment of despotism. And the third is, that despotisms can never be so injurious as in societies of this nature; for despotism is the form of government which is best adapted to facilitate the development of the vices to which these societies are prone, and naturally encourages the very propensities that are indigenous in their disposition.

When men are no longer bound together by caste, class, corporate or family ties, they are only too prone to give their whole thoughts to their private interest, and to wrap themselves up in a narrow individuality in which public virtue is stifled. Despotism does not combat this tendency; on the contrary, it renders it irresistible, for it deprives citizens of all common pas-

sions, mutual necessities, need of a common understanding, opportunity for combined action: it ripens them, so to speak, in private life. They had a tendency to hold themselves aloof from each other: it isolates them. They looked coldly on each other: it freezes their souls.

In societies of this stamp, in which there are no fixed landmarks, every man is constantly spurred on by a desire to rise and a fear of falling. And as money, which is the chief mark by which men are classified and divided one from the other, fluctuates incessantly, passes from hand to hand, alters the rank of individuals, raises families here, lowers them there, every one is forced to make constant and desperate efforts to acquire or retain it. Hence the ruling passions become a desire for wealth at all cost, a taste for business, a love of gain, and a liking for comfort and material pleasures. These passions pervade all classes, not excepting those which have hitherto been strangers to them. If they are not checked they will soon enervate and degrade them all. Now, it is essential to despotism to encourage and foster them. Debilitating passions are its natural allies; they serve to divert attention from public affairs, and render the very name of revolution terrible. Despotism alone can supply the secrecy and darkness which cupidity requires to be at ease, and which embolden men to brave dishonor for the sake of fraudulent gain. These passions would have been strong in the absence of despotism: with its aid they are paramount.

On the other hand, liberty alone can combat the vices which are natural to this class of societies, and arrest their downward progress. Nothing but liberty

can draw men forth from the isolation into which their independence naturally drives them—can compel them to associate together, in order to come to a common understanding, to debate, and to compromise together on their joint concerns. Liberty alone can free them from money-worship, and divert them from their petty, every-day business cares, to teach them and make them feel that there is a country above and beside them. It alone awakens more energetic and higher passions than the love of ease, provides ambition with nobler aims than the acquisition of wealth, and yields the light which reveals, in clear outline, the virtues and the vices of mankind.

Democratic societies which are not free may be rich, refined, ornate, even magnificent, and powerful in proportion to the weight of their homogeneous mass; they may develop private virtues, produce good family-men, honest merchants, respectable landowners, and even good Christians—for their country is not of this world, and it is the glory of their religion that it produces them in the most corrupt societies and under the worst governments—the Roman empire during its decline was full of such as these; but there are things which such societies as those I speak of can never produce, and these are great citizens, and, above all, a great people. I will go farther; I do not hesitate to affirm that the common level of hearts and minds will never cease to sink so long as equality and despotism are combined.

This is what I thought and wrote twenty years ago. I acknowledge that nothing has since happened that could lead me to think or write otherwise. As I made known my good opinion of liberty when it was

in favor, I can not be blamed for adhering to that opinion now that it is in disgrace.

I must, moreover, beg to assure my opponents that I do not differ from them as widely as they perhaps imagine. Where is the man whose soul is naturally so base that he would rather be subject to the caprices of one of his fellow-men than obey laws which he had helped to make himself, if he thought his nation sufficiently virtuous to make a good use of liberty? I do not think such a man exists. Despots acknowledge that liberty is an excellent thing; but they want it all for themselves, and maintain that the rest of the world is unworthy of it. Thus there is no difference of opinion in reference to liberty; we differ only in our appreciation of men; and thus it may be strictly said that one's love for despotism is in exact proportion to one's contempt for one's country. I must beg to be allowed to wait a little longer before I embrace that sentiment.

I may say, I think, without undue self-laudation, that this book is the fruit of great labor. I could point to more than one short chapter that has cost me over a year's work. I could have loaded my pages with foot-notes, but I have preferred inserting a few only, and placing them at the end of the volume, with a reference to the pages to which they apply. They contain examples and proofs of the facts stated in the text. I could furnish many more if this book induced any one to take the trouble of asking for them.



THE
OLD REGIME AND THE REVOLUTION.

BOOK FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

CONTRADICTIONARY OPINIONS FORMED UPON THE REVOLUTION WHEN
IT BROKE OUT.

PHILOSOPHERS and statesmen may learn a valuable lesson of modesty from the history of our Revolution, for there never were events greater, better prepared, longer matured, and yet so little foreseen.

With all his genius, Frederick the Great had no perception of what was at hand. He touched the Revolution, so to speak, but he did not see it. More than this, while he seemed to be acting according to his own impulse, he was, in fact, its forerunner and agent. Yet he did not recognize its approach; and when at length it appeared full in view, the new and extraordinary characteristics which distinguished it from the common run of revolutions escaped his notice.

Abroad, it excited universal curiosity. It gave birth to a vague notion that a new era was at hand. Nations entertained indistinct hopes of changes and reforms, but no one suspected what they were to be. Princes and ministers did not even feel the confused

presentiment which it stirred in the minds of their subjects. They viewed it simply as one of those chronic diseases to which every national constitution is subject, and whose only effect is to pave the way for political enterprises on the part of neighbors. When they spoke truly about it, it was unconsciously. When the principal sovereigns of Germany proclaimed at Pillnitz, in 1791, that all the powers of Europe were menaced by the danger which threatened royalty in France, they said what was true, but at bottom they were far from thinking so. Secret dispatches of the time prove that these expressions were only intended as clever pretexts to mask their real purposes, and disguise them from the public eye. They knew perfectly well—or thought they knew—that the French Revolution was a mere local and ephemeral accident, which might be turned to account. In this faith they formed plans, made preparations, contracted secret alliances; quarreled among themselves about the booty they saw before them; were reconciled, and again divided; were ready, in short, for every thing except that which was going to happen.

Englishmen, enlightened by the experience of their own history, and trained by a long enjoyment of political liberty, saw, through a thick mist, the steady advances of a great revolution; but they could not discern its form, or foresee the influence it was destined to exercise over the world and over their own interests. Arthur Young, who traveled through France just before the outbreak of the Revolution, was so far from suspecting its real consequences that he rather feared it might increase the power of the privileged classes.

“As for the nobility and the clergy,” says he, “if this revolution enhances their preponderance, I fear it will do more harm than good.”

Burke’s mind was illumined by the hatred he bore to the Revolution from the first; still he doubted for a time. His first inference was, that France would be weakened, if not annihilated. “France is at this time,” he said, “in a political light, to be considered as expunged out of the system of Europe. Whether she can ever appear in it again as a leading power is not easy to determine; but at present I consider France as not politically existing, and most assuredly it would take up much time to restore her to her former active existence. *Gallos quoque in bellis floruisse audivimus*—‘We have heard that the Gauls too were once noted in war,’ may be the remark of the present generation, as it was of an ancient one.”

Men judged as loosely on the spot. On the eve of the outbreak, no one in France knew what would be the result. Among all the contemporaneous *cahiers*, I have only found two which seem to mark any apprehension of the people. Fears are expressed that royalty, or the court, as it was still called, will retain undue preponderance. The States-General are said to be too feeble, too short-lived. Alarm is felt lest they should suffer violence. The nobility is very uneasy on this head. Several *cahiers* affirm that “the Swiss troops will swear never to attack the citizens, even in case of affray or revolt.” If the States-General are free, all the abuses may be corrected; the necessary reform is extensive, but easy.

Meanwhile the Revolution pursued its course. It

was not till the strange and terrible physiognomy of the monster's head was visible; till it destroyed civil as well as political institutions, manners, customs, laws, and even the mother tongue; till, having dashed in pieces the machine of government, it shook the foundations of society, and seemed anxious to assail even God himself; till it overflowed the frontier, and, by dint of methods unknown before, by new systems of tactics, by murderous maxims, and "armed opinions" (to use the language of Pitt), overthrew the landmarks of empires, broke crowns, and crushed subjects, while, strange to say, it won them over to its side: it was not till then that a change came over men's minds. Then sovereigns and statesmen began to see that what they had taken for a mere every-day accident in history was an event so new, so contrary to all former experience, so widespread, so monstrous and incomprehensible, that the human mind was lost in endeavoring to examine it. Some supposed that this unknown power, whose strength nothing could enhance and nothing diminish, which could not be checked, and which could not check itself, was destined to lead human society to complete and final dissolution. M. de Maistre, in 1797, observed that "the French Revolution has a satanic character." On the other hand, others discerned the hand of God in the Revolution, and inferred a gracious design of Providence to people France and the world with a new and better species. Several writers of that day seem to have been exercised by a sort of religious terror, such as Salvian felt at the sight of the barbarians. Burke, pursuing his idea, exclaims, "Deprived of the old government, deprived in a manner of all government,

France, fallen as a monarchy to common speculators, appears more likely to be an object of pity or insult, according to the disposition of the circumjacent powers, than to be the scourge and terror of them all; but out of the tomb of the murdered monarchy in France has arisen a vast, tremendous, unformed spectre, in a far more terrific guise than any which ever yet have overpowered the imagination and subdued the fortitude of man. Going straight forward to its end, unappalled by peril, unchecked by remorse, despising all common maxims and all common means, that hideous phantom has overpowered those who could not believe it was possible she could at all exist except on the principles which habit rather than nature has persuaded them are necessary to their own particular welfare and to their own ordinary modes of action."

Now, was the Revolution, in reality, as extraordinary as it seemed to its contemporaries? Was it as unexampled, as deeply subversive as they supposed? What was the real meaning, what the true character of this strange and terrible revolution? What did it actually destroy? What did it create?

It appears that the proper time has come to put these questions and to answer them. This is the most opportune moment for an inquiry and a judgment upon the vast topic they embrace. Time has cleared from our eyes the film of passion which blinded those who took part in the movement, and time has not yet impaired our capacity to appreciate the spirit which animated them. A short while hence the task will have become arduous, for successful revolutions obliterate their causes, and thus, by their own act, become inexplicable.

CHAPTER II.

THAT THE FUNDAMENTAL AND FINAL OBJECT OF THE REVOLUTION WAS NOT, AS SOME HAVE SUPPOSED, TO DESTROY RELIGIOUS AND TO WEAKEN POLITICAL AUTHORITY.

ONE of the first measures of the French Revolution was an attack upon the Church. Of all the passions to which that Revolution gave birth, that of irreligion was the first kindled, as it was the last extinguished. Even when the first enthusiasm of liberty had worn off, and peace had been purchased by the sacrifice of freedom, hostility to religion survived. Napoleon subdued the liberal spirit of the Revolution, but he could not conquer its anti-Christian tendencies. Even in the times in which we live, men have fancied they were redeeming their servility to the most slender officials of the state by their insolence to God, and have renounced all that was free, noble, and exalted in the doctrines of the Revolution, in the belief that they were still faithful to its spirit so long as they were infidels.

Yet nothing is easier than to satisfy one's self that the anti-religious war was a mere incident of the great Revolution; a striking, but fleeting expression of its physiognomy; a temporary result of ideas, and passions, and accidents which preceded it—any thing but its own proper fruit.

It is generally understood—and justly so—that the philosophy of the eighteenth century was one of the chief causes of the Revolution; and it is not to be denied that that philosophy was deeply irreligious; but it was twofold, and the two divisions are widely distinct.

One division or system contained all the new or revived opinions with reference to the conditions of society, and the principles of civil and political law. Such were, for example, the doctrines of the natural equality of man, and the consequent abolition of all caste, class, or professional privileges, popular sovereignty, the paramount authority of the social body, the uniformity of rules These doctrines are not only the causes of the French Revolution; they are, so to speak, its substance; they constitute the most fundamental, the most durable, the truest portion of its work.

The other system was widely different. Its leaders attacked the Church with absolute fury. They assailed its clergy, its hierarchy, its institutions, its doctrines; to overthrow these, they tried to tear up Christianity by the roots. But this portion of the philosophy of the eighteenth century derived its origin from objects which the Revolution destroyed: it naturally disappeared with its cause, and was, so to speak, buried in its triumph. I purpose returning to this great topic hereafter, and will add but one word here in order to explain myself more fully. Christianity was hated by these philosophers less as a religious doctrine than as a political institution; not because the priests assumed to regulate the concerns of the other world, but because they were landlords, seigniors, tithe-holders, administrators in this; not because the Church could

not find a place in the new society which was being established, but because she then occupied the place of honor, privilege, and might in the society which was to be overthrown.

See how time has confirmed this view, and is still confirming it under our own eyes! Simultaneously with the consolidation of the political work of the Revolution, its religious work has been undone. The more thoroughly the political institutions it assailed have been destroyed; the more completely the powers, influences, and classes which were peculiarly obnoxious to it have been conquered, and have ceased in their ruin to be objects of hatred; in fine, the more the clergy have held themselves aloof from the institutions which formerly fell by their side, the higher has the power of the Church risen, and the deeper has it taken root in men's minds.

This phenomenon is not peculiar to France; every Christian Church in Europe has gained ground since the French Revolution.

Nothing can be more erroneous than to suppose that democracy is naturally hostile to religion. Neither Christianity nor even Catholicism involves any contradiction to the democratic principle; both are, in some respects, decidedly favorable to it. All experience, indeed, shows that the religious instinct has invariably taken deepest root in the popular heart. All the religions which have disappeared found a last refuge there. Strange, indeed, it would be if the tendency of institutions based on the predominance of the popular will and popular passions were necessarily and absolutely to impel the human mind toward impiety.

All that I have said of religious I may repeat with additional emphasis in regard to political authority.

When the Revolution overthrew simultaneously all the institutions and all the usages which had governed society and restrained mankind within bounds, it was, perhaps, only natural to suppose that its result would be the destruction, not of one particular frame of society, but of all social order; not of this or that government, but of all public authority. There was a degree of plausibility in assuming that it aimed essentially at anarchy; yet I will venture to say that this also was an illusion.

Less than a year after the Revolution had begun, Mirabeau wrote secretly to the king, "Compare the present state of things with the old regime, and console yourself and take hope. A part—the greater part of the acts of the national assembly are decidedly favorable to a monarchical government. Is it nothing to have got rid of Parliament, separate states, the clerical body, the privileged classes, and the nobility? Richelieu would have liked the idea of forming but one class of citizens; so level a surface assists the exercise of power. A series of absolute reigns would have done less for royal authority than this one year of Revolution." He understood the Revolution like a man who was competent to lead it.

The French Revolution did not aim merely at a change in an old government; it designed to abolish the old form of society. It was bound to assail all forms of established authority together; to destroy acknowledged influences; to efface traditions; to substitute new manners and usages for the old ones; in a word,

to sweep out of men's minds all the notions which had hitherto commanded respect and obedience. Hence its singular anarchical aspect.

But a close inspection brings to light from under the ruins an immense central power, which has gathered together and grasped all the several particles of authority and influence formerly scattered among a host of secondary powers, orders, classes, professions, families, and individuals, sown broadcast, so to speak, over the whole social body. No such power had been seen in the world since the fall of the Roman empire. This new power was created by the Revolution, or, rather, it grew spontaneously out of the ruins the Revolution made. If the governments it created were fragile, they were still far stronger than any that had preceded them, and their very fragility, as will be shown hereafter, sprang from the same cause as their strength.

It was the simple, regular, grand form of this central power which Mirabeau discerned through the dust of the crumbling institutions of olden time. The masses did not see it, great as it was. Time gradually disclosed it to all; and now, princes can see nothing else. Admiration and envy of its work fill the mind, not only of the sovereigns it created, but of those who were strangers or inimical to its progress. All are busy destroying immunities, abolishing privileges throughout their dominions; mingling ranks, leveling, substituting hired officials in the room of an aristocracy, a uniform set of laws in the place of local franchises, a single strong government instead of a system of diversified authorities. Their industry in this revolutionary work is unceasing; when they meet an obstacle, they

will sometimes even borrow a hint or a maxim from the Revolution. They have been noticed inciting the poor against the rich, the commoner against the noble, the peasant against his lord. The French Revolution was both their scourge and their tutor.

CHAPTER III.

THAT THE FRENCH REVOLUTION, THOUGH POLITICAL, PURSUED THE SAME COURSE AS A RELIGIOUS REVOLUTION, AND WHY.

ALL political and civil revolutions have been confined to a single country. The French Revolution had no country; one of its leading effects appeared to be to efface national boundaries from the map. It united and divided men, in spite of law, traditions, characters, language; converted enemies into fellow-countrymen, and brothers into foes; or, rather, to speak more precisely, it created, far above particular nationalities, an intellectual country that was common to all, and in which every human creature could obtain rights of citizenship.

No similar feature can be discovered in any other political revolution recorded in history. But it occurs in certain religious revolutions. Therefore those who wish to examine the French Revolution by the light of analogy must compare it with religious revolutions.

Schiller observes with truth, in his *History of the Thirty Years' War*, that one striking effect of the Reformation was that it led to sudden alliances and warm friendships among nations which hardly knew each other. Frenchmen were seen, for instance, fighting against Frenchmen, with Englishmen in their ranks. Men born on distant Baltic shores marched down into

the heart of Germany to protect Germans of whom they had never heard before. All the foreign wars of the time partook of the nature of civil wars; in all the civil wars foreigners bore arms. Old interests were forgotten in the clash of new ones; questions of territory gave way to questions of principle. All the old rules of politics and diplomacy were at fault, to the great surprise and grief of the politicians of the day. Precisely similar were the events which followed 1789 in Europe.

The French Revolution, though political, assumed the guise and tactics of a religious revolution. Some further points of resemblance between the two may be noticed. The former not only spread beyond the limits of France, but, like religious revolutions, spread by preaching and propagandism. A political revolution, which inspired proselytism, and whose doctrines were preached abroad with as much warmth as they were practiced at home, was certainly a new spectacle, the most strikingly original of all the novelties which were presented to the world by the French Revolution. But we must not stop here. Let us go further, and try to discover whether these parallel results did not flow from parallel causes.

Religions commonly affect mankind in the abstract, without allowance for additions or changes effected by laws, customs, or national traditions. Their chief aim is to regulate the concerns of man with God, and the reciprocal duties of men toward each other, independently of social institutions. They deal, not with men of any particular nation or any particular age, but with men as sons, fathers, servants, masters, neighbors.

Based on principles essential to human nature, they are applicable and suited to all races of men. Hence it is that religious revolutions have swept over such extensive areas, and have rarely been confined, as political revolutions have, to the territory of one people, or even one race; and the more abstract their character, the wider they have spread, in spite of differences of laws, climate, and race.

The old forms of paganism, which were all more or less interwoven with political and social systems, and whose dogmas wore a national and sometimes a sort of municipal aspect, rarely traveled beyond the frontiers of a single country. They gave rise to occasional outbursts of intolerance and persecution, but never to proselytism. Hence, the first religious revolution felt in Western Europe was caused by the establishment of Christianity. That faith easily overstepped the boundaries which had checked the outgrowth of pagan systems, and rapidly conquered a large portion of the human race. I hope I shall exhibit no disrespect for that holy faith if I suggest that it owed its successes, in some degree, to its unusual disentanglement from all national peculiarities, forms of government, social institutions, and local or temporary considerations.

The French Revolution acted, with regard to things of this world, precisely as religious revolutions have acted with regard to things of the other. It dealt with the citizen in the abstract, independent of particular social organizations, just as religions deal with mankind in general, independent of time and place. It inquired, not what were the particular rights of French

citizens, but what were the general rights and duties of mankind in reference to political concerns.

It was by thus divesting itself of all that was peculiar to one race or time, and by reverting to natural principles of social order and government, that it became intelligible to all, and susceptible of simultaneous imitation in a hundred different places.

By seeming to tend rather to the regeneration of the human race than to the reform of France alone, it roused passions such as the most violent political revolutions had been incapable of awakening. It inspired proselytism, and gave birth to propagandism; and hence assumed that quasi religious character which so terrified those who saw it, or, rather, became a sort of new religion, imperfect, it is true, without God, worship, or future life, but still able, like Islamism, to cover the earth with its soldiers, its apostles, and its martyrs.

It must not be supposed that all its methods were unprecedented, or all the ideas it brought forward absolutely original. On many former occasions, even in the heart of the Middle Ages, agitators had invoked the general principles on which human societies rest for the purpose of overthrowing particular customs, and had assailed the constitution of their country with arguments drawn from the natural rights of man; but all these experiments had been failures. The torch which set Europe on fire in the eighteenth century was easily extinguished in the fifteenth. Arguments of this kind can not succeed till certain changes in the condition, customs, and minds of men have prepared a way for their reception.

There are times when men differ so widely that the

bare idea of a common law for all appears unintelligible. There are others, again, when they will recognize at a glance the least approach toward such a law, and embrace it eagerly.

The great wonder is not that the French Revolution employed the methods it did, and conceived the ideas it brought forth; what is wonderful and startling is that mankind had reached a point at which these methods could be usefully employed, and these ideas readily admitted.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE SAME INSTITUTIONS HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED OVER NEARLY ALL EUROPE, AND WERE EVERY WHERE FALLING TO PIECES.

THE tribes which overthrew the Roman empire, and eventually constituted modern nations, differed in race, origin, and language; they were alike in barbarism only. They found the empire in hopeless confusion, which they aggravated; and thus, when they settled, each was isolated from the others by the ruins it had made. Civilization was almost extinct. Social order had ceased to exist. International communication was difficult and dangerous. Safety dictated the division of the great European family into a thousand little states, which soon became exclusive and hostile to each other.

Yet out of this chaos uniform laws suddenly issued.

They were not borrowed from Roman legislation. They were, indeed, so much opposed to it that the old Roman law was the instrument afterward used to transform and abolish them.^a Their principles were original, and wholly different from any that had ever been broached before. Composed of symmetrical parts, knit together as closely as the articles of any modern code, they constituted a body of really learned laws for the use of a semi-barbarous people.

It is not my design to inquire how such a system was formed and spread over Europe. I merely note

the fact that, during the Middle Ages, it existed to some extent in every country; and in many, to the total exclusion of all other systems.

I have had occasion to study the political institutions which flourished in England, France, and Germany during the Middle Ages. As I advanced in the work, I have been filled with amazement at the wonderful similarity of the laws established by races so far apart and so widely different. They vary constantly and infinitely, it is true, in matters of detail, but in the main they are identical every where. Whenever I discovered in the old legislation of Germany a political institution, a rule, or a power, I knew that a thorough search would bring something similar to light in France and England; and I never failed to find it so. Each of the three nations enabled me to understand the other two.

In all three the government was carried on in accordance with the same principles: the political assemblies were constituted from the same materials, and armed with the same powers; society was divided into the same classes, on the same sliding-scale; the nobles occupied the same rank, enjoyed the same privileges, were marked by the same natural characteristics—in short, the men were, properly speaking, identically the same in all.

The city constitutions resembled each other; the rural districts were governed on one uniform plan. There was no material difference in the condition of the peasantry; land was held, occupied, cultivated on the same plan, and the farmer paid the same taxes. From the confines of Poland to the Irish Sea we can

trace the same seigniories, seigniors' court, feuds, rents, feudal services, feudal rights, corporate bodies. Sometimes the names are the same, and, what is still more remarkable, the same idea pervades all these analogous institutions. I think it is safe to say that in the fourteenth century the various social, political, administrative, judicial, economical, and literary institutions of Europe were more nearly alike than they are now, though civilization has done so much to facilitate intercourse and efface national barriers.

The task I have undertaken does not require me to relate how this old constitution of Europe gradually gave way and broke down; I merely state that in the eighteenth century it was in proximate ruin every where.^b Decay was least conspicuous in the eastern half of the continent, and most in the west; but old age and decrepitude were prominent on all sides.

The records of the old Middle-Age institutions contain the history of their decline. It is well known that land registers (*terriers*) were kept in each seignior, in which, century after century, were entered the boundaries of the feuds and seigniories, the rents due, the services to be rendered, the local customs. I have seen registers of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, which are masterpieces of method, perspicuity, and intellect. The more modern ones grow more obscure, more incomplete, more confused as they approach our own day. It would seem as though the civilization of society had involved the relapse of the political system into barbarism.

The old European constitution was better preserved in Germany than in France; but there, too, a portion

of the institutions to which it had given life were already destroyed. One can judge of the ravages of time, however, better from the portion which survived than from that which had perished.

Of the municipal franchises which, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, had converted the chief cities of Germany into rich and enlightened republics,^c a mere empty shadow remained. Their enactments were unrepealed; their magistrates bore the old titles, and appeared to perform the old duties; but the activity, the energy, the civic patriotism, the manly and fruitful virtues of olden time had vanished. These venerable institutions seemed to have sunk down without distortion.

All the surviving mediæval sources of authority had suffered from the same disease; all alike were decayed and languishing. Nor was this all: every thing which, without actually growing out of the mediæval system, had been connected with it and marked by its stamp, seemed equally lifeless. Aristocracy wore an air of servile debility. Even political freedom, which had filled the Middle Ages with its works, became sterile in the dress in which they had clothed it.^d Those provincial assemblies which had preserved their old constitution in its integrity were rather a hindrance than a help to civilization. They presented a stolid, impenetrable front to the march of intellect, and drove the people into the arms of monarchs. There was nothing venerable in the age of these institutions; the older they grew, the smaller their claims to respect; and somehow, the more harmless they became, the more hatred they seemed to inspire. A German writer, whose

sympathies were all on the side of the old regime under which he lived, says, "The present state of things is shameful for all of us, and even contemptible. It is strange how unfavorably men look upon every thing that is old. Novelty penetrates even the family circle, and overturns its peace. Our very housekeepers want to get rid of their old furniture." Yet in Germany, as in France, society was then thrilling with activity, and highly prosperous; but (mark this well! it is the finishing touch to the picture) every living, acting, producing agent was new, and not only new, but contrary to the old.

Royalty had nothing in common with mediæval royalty; its prerogatives were different, its rank had changed, its spirit was new, the homage it received was unusual. *The central power encroached on every side upon decaying local franchises. A hierarchy of public functionaries usurped the authority of the nobles. All these new powers employed methods and took for their guide principles which the Middle Ages either never knew or rejected, and which, indeed, were only suitable for a state of society they never conceived.

At first blush it would appear that the old constitution of Europe is still in force in England; but, on a closer view, this illusion is dispelled. Forget old names, pass over old forms, and you will find the feudal system substantially abolished there as early as the seventeenth century: all classes freely intermingled, an eclipsed nobility, an aristocracy open to all, wealth installed as the supreme power, all men equal before the law, equal taxes, a free press, public debates—phenomena which were all unknown to mediæval society.

It was the skillful infusion of this young blood into the old feudal body which preserved its life, and imbued it with fresh vitality, without divesting it of its ancient shape. England was a modern nation in the seventeenth century, though it preserved, as it were embalmed, some relics of the Middle Ages.

This hasty glance at foreign nations was essential to a right comprehension of the following pages. No one can understand the French Revolution without having seen and studied something more than France.

CHAPTER V.

WHAT DID THE FRENCH REVOLUTION REALLY ACHIEVE?

THE object of the preceding inquiries was to clear the way for the solution of the question I originally put: What was the real object of the Revolution? what was its peculiar character? why was it brought about? what did it achieve?

It is an error to suppose, as some have done, that the object of the Révolution was to overthrow the sovereignty of religious creeds. Despite appearances, it was essentially a social and political revolution. It did not tend to perpetuate or consolidate disorder, to "methodize anarchy" (as one of its leading opponents remarked), but rather to augment the power and the rights of public authority. It was not calculated to change the character of our civilization, as others imagined, or to arrest its progress, or even to alter, essentially, any of the fundamental laws upon which our Western societies rest. When it is disengaged from the extraneous incidents which imparted a temporary coloring to its complexion, and is examined on its own proper merits, it will be seen that its sole effect was to abolish those institutions which had held undivided sway over Europe for several centuries, and which are usually known as the feudal system; in order to substitute therefor a social and political organization mark-

ed by more uniformity and more simplicity, and resting on the basis of the equality of all ranks.

That alone required a stupendous revolution; for these old institutions were not only connected and interwoven with all the religious and political laws of Europe, but had, besides, created a host of ideas, and feelings, and habits, and customs, which had grown up around them. To destroy and cut out of the social body a part which clung to so many organs involved a frightful operation. This made the Revolution appear even greater than it was. It appeared the universal destroyer; for what it did destroy was linked, and, in some degree, incorporated with almost every thing else.

Radical as it was, the Revolution introduced fewer innovations than has been generally supposed, as I shall have occasion to show hereafter. What it really achieved was the destruction—total, or partial, for the work is still in progress—of every thing which proceeded from the old aristocratical and feudal institutions, and of every thing which clung to them or bore in any way their distinguishing mark. It respected no legacy of the past but such as had been foreign to these institutions, and could exist without them.

It was, least of all, a casual accident. True, it took the world by surprise; yet it was the mere natural result of very long labors, the sudden and violent termination of a task which had successively engaged ten generations of men. Had it never taken place, the old social edifice would none the less have fallen, though it would have given way piecemeal instead of breaking down with a crash. The Revolution effect-

ed suddenly, by a convulsive and sudden effort, without transition, precautions, or pity, what would have been gradually effected by time had it never occurred. That was its achievement.

It is surprising that this fact, which we discern so plainly to-day, should have once been hidden from the eyes of the shrewdest observers. Burke appeals to the French: "Had you but made it to be understood that, in the delusion of your amiable error, you had gone farther than your wise ancestors; that you were resolved to assume your ancient privileges while you preserved the spirit of your ancient and your recent loyalty and honor; or, if diffident of yourselves, and not clearly discerning the almost obliterated constitution of your ancestors, you had but looked to your neighbors in this land, who had kept alive the ancient principles and the models of the old common law of Europe"

Burke can not see that the real object of the Revolution is to abolish that very common law in Europe; he does not perceive that that, and nothing else, is the gist of the movement.

But, as society was every where prepared for this Revolution, why did it break out in France rather than abroad? Why did it present features here which were either wholly dropped or only partially reproduced in other countries? This secondary inquiry is worth resolving: it will form the subject of the following Book.