

CONSIDERATIONS  
ON THE  
PRINCIPAL EVENTS  
OF  
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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POSTHUMOUS WORK OF  
THE BARONESS DE STAËL.  
EDITED BY  
THE DUKE DE BROGLIE, AND THE BARON DE STAËL.

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Les Révolutions qui arrivent dans les grands états  
ne sont point un effet du hazard, ni du caprice  
de peuples. MEMOIRS DE SULLY.

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TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT.

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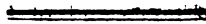
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## CHAPTER XII.

*Of the Love of Liberty.*

• **T**HE necessity of free governments, that is to say, of limited monarchies in great states, and independent republics in those which are small, is so evident, that we are tempted to believe no one can refuse sincerely to admit so obvious a truth; and yet, when we meet with men who combat it in earnest, we would wish, for our own satisfaction, to frame some explanation of their motives. Liberty has three classes of opponents in France;—the nobles, who consider honour as consisting in passive obedience, the nobles, who possess more reflection with less candour, and believe that the interests of their own aristocracy are identified with the interests of absolute power;—the men whom the French Revolution has disgusted with the ideas which it profaned;—finally, the Bonapartists, the Jacobins, all, in short, who think that conscience has no concern with politics. The nobles who



connect honour with passive obedience altogether confound the spirit of ancient chivalry with that of the courtiers of modern days. The ancient knights, doubtless, were ready to die for their king, and so would every warrior for his leader; but, as we have already said, they were by no means the partisans of absolute power: they sought to encompass that power with barriers, and placed their glory in defending a liberty, which, though aristocratical, was still liberty. As to the nobles who are convinced that the privileges of the aristocracy must now rest upon the despotism which they once sought to imitate, we may say to them, as in the romance of *Waverly*: "What concerns you is not so much whether James Stuart shall be King, as whether Fergus Mac Ivor shall be Earl." The institution of a peerage accessible to merit, is to nobility what the English constitution is to monarchy. It is the only mode of preserving either the one or the other: for we live in an age in which the world does not readily imagine that the minority, and a very small minority, can have a right which is not for the advantage of the majority. A few years ago, the Sultan of Persia

had an account given to him of the English constitution, by the ambassador of England at his court. After having listened to it, and, as we shall see, understood it tolerably well: "I can conceive," said he, "that the order of things which you describe to me is better framed than the government of Persia for the duration and happiness of your empire; but it seems to me much less conducive to the enjoyment of the monarch." This was an accurate statement of the question; only that it is better even for the monarch to be guided in the administration of affairs by public opinion, than incessantly to run the risk of being in opposition to it. Justice is the ægis of all and of every one: but in its quality of justice, it is the great number which has the preferable claim to protection.

We have next to speak of those whom the misfortunes and the crimes of the French Revolution have terrified, and who fly from one extreme to the other, as if the arbitrary power of an individual were the only sure preservative against that of mobs. It was thus that they exalted the tyranny of Bonaparte, and it is thus that they would render Louis XVIII a despot,

if his superior wisdom did not protect him from it. Tyranny is an upstart, and despotism a grandee; but both are equally offensive to human reason. After having witnessed the servility with which Bonaparte was obeyed, it is difficult to conceive that the republican spirit is that which is to be dreaded in France. The diffusion of knowledge and the nature of things will bring liberty to France; but the nation assuredly will not spontaneously show itself either factious or turbulent. Since for so many ages every generous soul has loved liberty; since the noblest actions have been inspired by her; since antiquity and the history of modern times exhibit to us so many prodigies effected by public spirit; since we have seen so lately what nations can do; since every reflecting writer has been loud in proclaiming the praises of freedom; since not one political work of lasting reputation can be cited which is not animated by this sentiment; since the fine arts, poetry, the masterpieces of the theatre, which are intended to excite emotion in the human heart, all exalt public liberty; what are we to say of those little men, great only in folly, who, with an accent insipid

and affected as their whole being, declare to you, that it is very bad taste to trouble yourselves with politics; that after the horrors which we have witnessed nobody cares for liberty; that popular elections are an institution altogether vulgar; that the people always make a bad choice; and that genteel persons are not suited to go, as in England, and mingle with the populace. *It is bad taste to trouble ourselves with politics.* Good heavens! Of what then are those young people to think, who were educated under the government of Bonaparte, merely to go and fight, without any instruction, without any interest in literature or the fine arts. Since they can have neither a new idea, nor a sound judgment, on such subjects, they would, at least, be men, if they were to occupy themselves with their country, if they were to deem themselves citizens, if their life were to be in any way useful. But what would they substitute for the politics which they affect to proscribe? Some hours passed in the antichamber of ministers, to obtain places which they are not qualified to fill; some trivial parlour conversations, beneath the understanding of even the silliest of the women

to whom they address them. When they were encountering death they might escape without blame, because there is always greatness in courage : but in a country which, thanks to Heaven ! will be at peace, to have no attainments beyond the level of a chamberlain, and to be unable to impart other knowledge or dignity to their native land ;—this is bad taste indeed. The time is gone by when young Frenchmen could set the fashion in every thing. They have still, it is true, the frivolity of former days : but they have no longer the graces on account of which that frivolity might be pardoned.

*After the horrors which we have witnessed, it is said, nobody now wishes to hear the name of liberty.* If characters of sensibility give themselves up to an involuntary and distempered hatred (for so must it be named, since it depends on certain recollections, certain associations of terror, which it is impossible to vanquish), we would say to them with a poet of the present day, that liberty must not be compelled to stab herself like Lucretia, because she has been violated. We would bid them remember that the massacre of St. Bartholomew has not caused

the proscription of the Catholic faith. We would tell them, in short, that the fate of truth is not dependant on the men who put this or that motto on their banners, and that good sense has been given to every individual to judge of things as they are in themselves, and not according to accidental circumstances. The guilty of all times have tried to avail themselves of a generous pretext in order to excuse bad actions : there are few crimes in the world, which their authors have not ascribed to honour, to religion, or to liberty. It does not follow, I think, that it is on that account necessary to proscribe whatever there is of beautiful upon earth. In politics especially, as there is room for fanaticism as well as for bad faith, for devotedness as well as for personal interest, we are subject to fatal errors when we have not a certain force of understanding and of soul. If on the day after the death of Charles I, an Englishman, cursing with reason that enormity, had implored Heaven that there might never again be freedom in England, we might certainly have felt an interest in that emotion of a good heart, which in its agitation confounded all the pretexts of a great crime with the crime

itself; and would have proscribed, had it been able, even the sun, which had risen on that day as well as on others. But if so unthinking a prayer had been heard, England would not at this day serve as an example to the world; the universal dominion of Bonaparte would be weighing Europe to the ground; for, without the aid of England, Europe would not have been in a situation to work out her own deliverance. Such arguments and many others might be addressed to persons, whose very prejudices merit respect, because they spring from the affections of the heart. But what are we to say of those who treat the friends of liberty as Jacobins, while they themselves have been ready instruments in the hands of the Imperial power. We were forced, they say, to be so. Ah! I know some who could likewise speak of constraint, and who yet escaped it. But since you have allowed yourselves to be compelled, at least allow us to endeavour to give you a free constitution, in which the empire of the law will prevent any thing wrong from being required of you: for, as appears to me, you are in danger of giving way too readily to circumstances. They, whom nature

has endued with a disposition to resist, have less reason to dread despotism: but you, who have crouched under it so well, should earnestly wish that at no time, under no prince, in no shape, may it ever again overtake you.

The epicureans of our days would wish that knowledge might improve our physical existence without exciting intellectual developement: they would have the great body of the community labour to render social life more agreeable and comfortable, without desiring to share in the advantages which it has gained for all. In former days the general style of life had little delicacy or refinement, and the relations of society were likewise much more simple and stable. But now that commerce has multiplied every thing, if you do not give motives of emulation to talent, the love of money will fill the vacancy. You will not raise up the castles of feudal chieftains from their ruins; you will not recall to life the princesses, who with their own hands spun the vests of the warriors; you will not even restore the reign of Louis XIV. The present times admit not of that sort of gravity and respect, which then gave so much ascendancy to that court. But



you will have corruption, and corruption without refinement of mind ; the lowest degradation to which the human species can fall. It is not then between knowledge and the ancient system of feudal manners that we are to choose, but between the desire of distinction and the avarice of wealth.

Examine the adversaries of freedom in every country, you will find among them a few deserters from the camp of men of talent, but in general you will see that the enemies of freedom are the enemies of knowledge and intelligence. They are proud of their deficiency in this respect ; and it must be allowed that such a negative triumph is easily gained.

The secret has been found of exhibiting the friends of liberty as the enemies of religion : there are two pretexts for the singular injustice which would exclude from this earth the noblest of sentiments, alliance with Heaven. The first is the Revolution ; as it was effected in the name of philosophy, an inference has thence been drawn, that to love liberty it is necessary to be an atheist. Assuredly, it is because the French did not unite religion to liberty, that their revo-

lution deviated so soon from its primitive direction. There might be certain dogmas of the Catholic church which did not agree well with the principles of freedom; passive obedience to the Pope was as difficult to be defended as passive obedience to the King. But Christianity has in truth brought liberty upon earth; justice towards the oppressed, respect for the unfortunate; equality before God, of which equality in the eye of the law is only an imperfect image. It is by confusion of thought, voluntary in some, blind in others, that endeavours have been made to represent the privileges of the nobility and the absolute power of the throne as doctrines of religion. The forms of social organization can have no concern with religion, except by their influence on the maintenance of justice towards all, and of the morals of each individual. The rest belongs to the science of this world.

It is time that five-and-twenty years, of which fifteen belong to military despotism, should no longer place themselves as a phantom betwixt history and us, and should no longer deprive us of all the lessons and of all the examples which it exhibits. Is Aristides to be forgotten, and

Phocion, and Epaminondas, in Greece; Regulus, Cato, and Brutus, at Rome; Tell in Switzerland; Egmont and Nassau in Holland; Sidney and Russel in England; because a country that had long been governed by arbitrary power was delivered, during a revolution, to men whom arbitrary power had corrupted. What is there so extraordinary in such an event, as to change the course of the stars, that is, to give a retrograde motion to truth, which was before advancing with history to enlighten the human race? By what public sentiment shall we be moved henceforth, if we are to reject the love of liberty? Old prejudices have now no influence upon men except from calculation; they are defended only by those who have a personal interest in defending them. What man in France desires absolute power from pure love or for its own sake. Inform yourself of the personal situation of its partisans, and you will soon know the motives of their doctrine. On what then would the fraternal tie of human associations be founded, if no enthusiasm were to be developed in the heart? Who could be elated with being a Frenchman, after having seen liberty destroyed by tyranny, ty-

ranny broken to pieces by foreign force, unless the laurels of war were at least rendered honourable by the conquest of liberty? We should have to contemplate a mere struggle between the selfishness of those who were privileged by birth, and the selfishness of those who are privileged by events. But where would then be France? Who could boast of having served her, since nothing would remain in the heart, either of past times or of the new reform?

Liberty! Let us repeat her name with so much the more energy, that the men who should pronounce it, at least as an apology, keep it at a distance through flattery: let us repeat it without fear of wounding any power that deserves respect; for all that we love, all that we honour, is included in it. Nothing but liberty can arouse the soul to the interests of social order. Assemblages of men would be nothing but associations for commerce or agriculture, if the life of patriotism did not excite individuals to sacrifice themselves for their fellows. Chivalry was a warlike brotherhood, which satisfied that thirst for self-devotion which is felt by every generous heart. The nobles were companions in arms, bound



together by duty and honour; but since the progress of the human mind has created nations, in other words, since all men participate in some degree in the same advantages, what would become of the human species were it not for the sentiment of liberty? Why should the patriotism of a Frenchman begin at this frontier, and cease at that, if there were not within this compass hopes, enjoyments, an emulation, a security, which make him love his native land as much through the genuine feelings of the soul as through habit? Why should the name of France awaken so invincible an emotion, if there were no other ties among the inhabitants of this fine country, than the privileges of some and the subjection of the rest?

Wherever you meet with respect for human nature, affection for fellow-creatures, and that energy of independence which can resist every thing upon earth, and prostrate itself only before God; there you behold man the image of his Creator, there you feel at the bottom of the soul an emotion which so penetrates its very substance, that it cannot deceive you with respect to truth. And you, noble Frenchmen, for whom honour

was freedom, you who by a long series of exploits and greatness ought to consider yourselves as a chosen portion of the human race, permit the nation to raise itself to a level with you: she too has rights of conquest; every Frenchman may now call himself a gentleman, if every gentleman is not willing to be called a citizen.

It is indeed a remarkable circumstance, that throughout the world, wherever a certain depth of thought exists, there is not to be found an enemy of freedom. As the celebrated Humboldt has traced upon the mountains of the New World the different degrees of height which permit the development of this or that plant, so might we predict what extent, what elevation of spirit is requisite to enable a man to conceive the great interests of his species in their full connexion, and in all their truth. The evidence of these opinions is such, that they who have once admitted them can never renounce them, and that from one end of the world to the other, the friends of freedom maintain communication by knowledge, as religious men by sentiments: or rather knowledge and sentiment unite in the love of freedom as in that of the Supreme Being. Is the

question the abolition of the slave trade, or the liberty of the press, or religious toleration? Jefferson thinks as La Fayette; La Fayette, as Wilberforce; and even they who are now no more are reckoned in the holy league. Is it then from the calculations of interest, is it from bad motives, that men so superior, in situations and countries so different, should be in such harmony in their political opinions? Without doubt knowledge is requisite to enable us to soar above prejudices: but it is in the soul also that the principles of liberty are founded; they make the heart palpitate like love and friendship, they come from nature, they ennoble the character. One connected series of virtues and ideas seems to form that golden chain described by Homer, which in binding man to heaven, delivers him from all the fetters of tyranny.

THE END.

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