

THE CAUSES OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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The Causes of the French Revolution by John Russell

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JOHN RUSSELL

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CHAPTER I.

THE COURT.

THE word "Revolution," which was associated, in the days of our ancestors, with events so fortunate, and has inspired so much terror in our own, is applied to changes totally dissimilar in character. When Brutus expelled the Tarquins from Rome, a family was banished, and the office of king was abolished; but the senate retained its authority, and the breach in the constitution was filled by the election of two consuls, who held, for a year, the greater part of the authority which had before been exercised for life by a royal head. In modern times, when the Dutch rose against their Spanish masters, kingly supremacy was done away; but the chief persons of the country were

called, without confusion, to the government of the state. So, when the English revolted in 1688, and the Americans nearly a century afterwards, the powers which had been abused were taken away from one person, but were transferred, with new engagements and restrictions, to others, who naturally and easily succeeded to the confidence their predecessors had forfeited. But the French Revolution is a revolution of another kind. It led rapidly to that which we often speak of, but scarcely ever see, namely, anarchy. All that had previously formed a title to respect, became an object of proscription; neither wealth, nor station, nor character, nor law, nor even the revolutionary governments themselves, had any permanent influence with the people. The state was left to the guidance of men, who would for ever have remained obscure, had they not become eminent in crime. The ruling assembly was converted into an arena, where each gladiator trod in the blood of his comrades; and when his turn came, his fall was applauded with as much savage delight as that of his antagonist had been but a few moments before.

It is our purpose, however, not to describe the French Revolution, but to enquire into its causes. The singular spectacle of deeds so cruel, in the midst of a nation so polished, must excite the mind to observe and reflect. The duty of the historian requires more than a lamentation over the horrors of this terrible period ; nor will it be enough to show that reforms, quietly accomplished, would have been better than a violent convulsion. If it be true, as Mr. Burke once said, that rebellions always are provoked, the most eloquent of his invectives ought not to prevent us from enquiring what there was in the conduct of the royal family of France, or in the privileges of the nobility, which tended to excite a deep spirit of revenge against them ; or where was the peculiarity in the condition of the remaining classes, which made them each in their turn unable to retain the power they had acquired.

In making these enquiries, it is no part of our business to justify those who overthrew the monarchy. No one accustomed to calm reasoning can allow that the popular voice is an infallible rule for the guidance of measures of state ; but although the people are conducted

by leaders to the choice of wise or pernicious remedies, it is not to be denied that they are seldom mistaken as to the existence of grievances. Let us observe, then, the conduct of the king, the nobility, and clergy; let us enquire in what manner the government acted on the condition of the nation. When we have thus ascertained the nature of the evil, it will be instructive to visit the sources of public opinion; to weigh the merits of the political and moral philosophers, who foretold a change, and who pointed out the road to arrive at it. Never was a nation more prepared for revolution by previous discussion; never did a nation in revolution wander so much without chart or compass through stormy seas, in darkness, and in danger.

Sufficient descriptions have been given of the nature of the French monarchy, as it was established by the relentless vigour of Richelieu, the ablest of politicians, and Lewis XIV., the most skilful of monarchs. The one, by promptitude and terror, had quelled the turbulent passions; the other, by pomp and foreign war, had governed the quick imaginations of his subjects.

The people, in a state of vassalage, misery, and ignorance, suffered and obeyed. The reign of Lewis XV. somewhat improved their general condition; and government reaped the advantage of what was due to civilisation.

For a long time the situation of France was tranquil: commerce increased; Paris was embellished, and the Boulevards, having been planted during the ministry of Cardinal Fleury, began to display those crowds of gay and idle people, and that prodigious variety of amusements, which are to be seen there at the present day. The manufactures of tapestry, silk, and fine cloth, made great progress towards perfection, and enriched the country. The government assisted in some measure the activity and industry of individuals. In 1754 an edict appeared, permitting the free exportation of corn from one province to another; a particular attention was given to that branch of the government which concerned the roads; an active and enlightened superintendent, of the name of Trudaine, constructed new roads on a magnificent scale. Even the roads, however, bear testimony that they were made rather for the dignity of the