HELPS FOR STUDENTS OF HISTORY, NO. 29. THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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Helps for students of history, No. 29. The French Revolution by G. P. Gooch

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G. P. GOOCH

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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

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LONDON

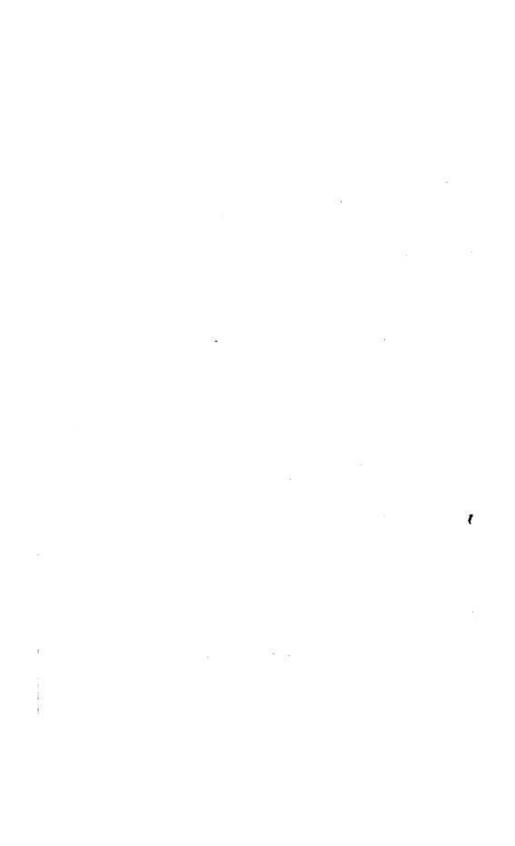
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THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

THE French Revolution is the most important event in the life of modern Europe. Herder compared it to the Reformation and the rise of Christianity; and it deserves to be ranked with those two great movements in history, because, like them, it destroyed the landmarks of the world in which generations of men had passed their lives, because it was a movement towards a completer humanity, and because it too was a religion, with its doctrines, its apostles, and its martyrs. It brought on the stage of human affairs forces which have moulded the actions of men ever since, and have taken a permanent place among the formative influences of civilization. As Christianity taught that man was a spiritual being, and the Reformation proclaimed that no barrier should stand between the soul and God, so the Revolution asserted the equality of men, and declared each one of them, regardless of birth, colour, or religion, to be possessed of inalienable rights.

The universal significance of the event was recognized both by those who took part in it and by those who watched it from afar. The orators on the Seine were fully conscious that the eyes of the world were upon them. "Your laws will be the laws of Europe if you are worthy of them," declared Mirabeau to the Constituent Assembly; "the Revolution will make the round of the globe." "When France has a cold," remarked Metternich bitterly, "all Europe sneezes." "Whoever regards this Revolution as exclusively French," echoed Mallet du Pan, "is incapable of pronouncing judgment upon it." "The French Revolution," declared Gentz in 1794, "is one of those events which belong to the whole human race. It is of such dimensions that it is hardly permissible to occupy oneself with any subordinate interest, of such magnitude that posterity will eagerly inquire how contemporaries of every country thought and felt about it, how they argued and how they acted." Friends and foes of the "principles of '89" were at one in emphasizing the power of its appeal; and men like Burke and Tom Paine, Immanuel Kant and Joseph de Maistre, who agreed in nothing else, were convinced that the problems it raised concerned humanity as a whole.

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The books in which the causes, events, and results

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of the Revolution have been narrated and discussed are beyond computation; but happily the greater number are either worthless or superseded. Brief surveys of the more important contributions to our knowledge are given in the appendix to Lord Acton's Lectures on the French Revolution, and in chap. xiii. of History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century, by G. P. Gooch.