

THE REVOLUTIONARY SPIRIT

PRECEDING

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

BY

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CONDENSED AND TRANSLATED BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE BY PROFESSOR HUXLEY



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INTRODUCTION.

THE interval between the fall of the Bourbon despotism and the rise of that of Napoleon, during which the social and political foundations of old France were swept away, forms an epoch in the history of the modern world, the importance of which looms the larger the farther the stream of Time carries us away from it. Far-reaching as were the moral and political consequences of the great events of the sixteenth century, they begin to look small beside those of the later age; and even the speculative controversies of the Reformation dwindle down to mere theological squabbles in face of the issues tried at the great popular assize of the Revolution, when every authority, whether its pretensions were human or divine, was called upon to make them good before the tribunal of reason.

And, while the questions debated with so much rancour and fought over at the cost of so much bloodshed, between Papists and Protestants, are rapidly losing their interest, in view of the sense of the insecurity of the ground upon which both combatants take their stand, which is rapidly growing among thinking men; the grave political and social problems which press for solution, at the present day, are the same as those which offered themselves a hundred years ago.

In the Draft of a Constitution, which Robespierre drew up and presented to the Convention in 1793, I fail to discover any article which goes beyond the requirements of liberal politicians among ourselves, who would be shocked to

be considered extremists. Moreover, the *a priori* method of the *Philosophes*, who, ignoring the conditions of scientific method, settled the most difficult problems of practical politics by fine-drawn deductions from axiomatic assumptions about natural rights, is as much in favour at the end of the nineteenth, as it was in the latter half of the eighteenth century.

Under these circumstances, it should be needless to commend the scientific study of the phenomena of the revolutionary epoch to all thoughtful men. Histories of the French Revolution abound; but too many of them are elaborate pleadings for one or other of the parties concerned in the struggle, not without an eye to the illustration and enforcement of the writer's own principles; or they are vivid pictures drawn by literary artists, which may enable the reader to see, but do not greatly help him to understand, the Revolution. Most of us, however, can be trusted to bring a goodly store of both partizanship and imagination to the study of the past; what most lack is the scientific temper which aims only at accuracy in matters of fact, and logical impartiality in drawing conclusions therefrom.

Goethe has somewhere said that the most valuable result of the study of history is the enthusiasm which it creates; and it may be true that such is the best to be got out of ordinary histories. But the enthusiasms thus begotten have so often turned out to be mistaken; the "verdict of history" has been so often upset on appeal; and experience drives home to every man so strongly the extreme difficulty of arriving at just judgments about the conduct of others, even when he has ample means of knowing the circumstances, that there is great room for historians who will renounce the enthusiasm and verdict business and be content with

devoting their best efforts to the exposition of the bare cold-blooded truth.

I am disposed to think that the conception of the nature and the causes of the French Revolution, which is most widely prevalent among us (students of De Tocqueville and of Taine, of course, excepted), departs widely from this ideal standard. Its causes are popularly sought in the decay of religion and morality consequent upon the diffusion of the teachings of a handful of sceptical and levelling Philosophers; and its nature is defined as an outbreak of the covetous ferocity of the mob let loose, when the bonds of society had been destroyed by these same terrible *Philosophes*. Even the question, whether the Revolution was perhaps the result of a whole nation going mad, has not seemed inconsistent with the sanity of the querist. And yet, when the facts of history are fully and impartially set forth, the wonder is rather that sane men put up with the chaotic imbecility, the hideous injustices, the shameless scandals, of the *Ancien Régime*, in the earlier half of the century, many years before the political *Philosophes* wrote a line,—why the Revolution did not break out in 1754 or 1757, as it was on the brink of doing, instead of being delayed, by the patient endurance of the people, for another generation.

It can hardly be doubted that the Revolution of '89 owed many of its worst features to the violence of a populace degraded to the level of the beasts by the effect of the institutions under which they herded together and starved; and that the work of reconstruction which it attempted was to carry into practice the speculations of Mably and of Rousseau. But, just as little, does it seem open to question that, neither the writhings of the dregs of the populace in their misery, nor the speculative demonstrations of the

Philosophers, would have come to much, except for the revolutionary movement which had been going on ever since the beginning of the century. The deeper source of this lay in the just and profound griefs of at least 95 per cent. of the population, comprising all its most valuable elements, from the agricultural peasants to the merchants and the men of letters and science, against the system by which they were crushed, or annoyed, whichever way they turned. But the surface-current was impelled by the official defenders of the *Ancien Régime* themselves. It was the Court, the Church, the Parliaments, and, above all, the Jesuits, acting in the interests of the despotism of the Papacy, who, in the first half of the eighteenth century, effectually undermined all respect for authority, whether civil or religious, and justified the worst that was or could be said by the *Philosophes* later on.

These important truths appeared to me to be so clearly set forth and demonstrated in M. Rocquain's "L'Esprit révolutionnaire avant la Revolution," when I fell in with the book some years ago, that I ventured to speak of its merits, forgetting at the time the commendation of the work by Mr. Lecky in the fifth volume of his "History of the Eighteenth Century in England," which it would have been much more to the purpose to quote.

However, I may congratulate myself on having done some service by suggesting the translation of M. Rocquain's work. The hint has been carried into effect; and the English version which has been prepared by Miss Hunting, with the author's sanction, though abridged, in deference to practical needs, appears to me to present a clear and adequate view of the scope and substance of the original.

T. H. HUXLEY,

AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

THE state of public opinion which gave rise to the French Revolution was not the outcome of the teachings of the Philosophers. The entire century prepared the catastrophe.

On the morrow of the death of Louis XIV., there were manifested signs of that feeling of opposition to the Church and Throne which, aimed as they were at the two strongest institutions of the old form of government, eventually brought about the ruin of both. This double opposition was caused by the attacks made by an intolerant autocrat upon the sacred rights of conscience. At the commencement of the Regency the general resentment was for a moment appeased, but it broke out again with renewed force when the Duc d'Orléans, who had at first appeared to discard the policy of the late King, made, in his turn, common cause with Rome. Thenceforward two parties were formed; the one included the Jesuits and the Superior Clergy, the other the entire Nation. During the Ministry of Cardinal Fleury this alliance between Royalty and the Holy See was strengthened, and all the methods of an arbitrary Government were employed to substitute Romish theories for the Gallican doctrines held by the majority of the people. Discontent seized upon the lower orders of the

clergy, the magistracy, the *bourgeoisie*, and the people. From being religious the opposition became political. When, after the death of Cardinal Fleury, Louis XV. took hold of the reins of Government, it was hoped that things would take a different course. But the indolence of the Monarch permitted the Ultramontane party to regain its ascendancy, and the excessive zeal of the superior clergy stirred up the most stormy opposition.

As always happens, the opposition was increased by all kinds of extraneous grievances.

When the Philosophers came to set fire to the house, it already tottered on its base. These men did no more than unite in a Code of Doctrine the ideas that were fermenting in all minds. From the middle of the century the spirit of opposition had become the spirit of Revolution.

It is of this fermentation of public opinion, of this spirit of opposition deepening into a spirit of Revolution, and manifesting itself with increasing distinctness, that we have striven to indicate the origin and retrace the progress. The numerous brochures that appeared at this epoch, in particular those that attracted the attention of the Government and provoked severities, have been our first source of information. In the eighteenth century the pamphlet was the organ of public opinion. The Government defended itself against the pamphlet as in our day it defends itself against the newspaper. The Council of State, the Parliament, and sometimes the Grand Council or the *Châtelet* pronounced judgment, declaring these pamphlets suppressed, and this declaration involved the destruction of every copy of the incriminated work. Such a sentence was equivalent to a mark of infamy, and the common hangman was usually entrusted with the execution of it.

In the course of our researches we have sometimes made use of these writings themselves, and sometimes of the decrees which they called forth, and which were posted, cried, and sold in the streets, and nearly always included a statement of the objects of their promulgation. Those of the Parliament, especially, were accompanied by *réquisitoires*, in which the spirit of the condemned works were remarked upon, and the most offensive fragments thereof cited. Having, in the process of time, become very rare, these decrees form an important collection at the *Archives Nationales*. Until now, no one has made extracts from them. It must not be thought that all the decrees were inspired by the same spirit. On the contrary, while those of the Council of State faithfully reflected the ideas of the Government, those of the Parliament often opposed the theories of the reigning powers.

Together with the valuable and often unexpected information contained in these documents, we have also called to our aid the *Mémoires* of contemporaries, and have thus been enabled to connect the movement of public thought with that of public events, and to show facts giving birth to ideas and ideas to facts. Besides this, we have chronicled the discourses, threats, and murmurings that denoted the state of popular feeling. We have made mention of seditious writings, placarded furtively by night at street corners. We have recalled the uprisings and revolts, and revealed, in fact, not only the daring acts that sprang from philosophical doctrines, but the rising tide of human passion.

Whatever judgment may be passed upon our work, there will, at least, be found in it much information, now brought to light for the first time, that must form a useful adjunct

to the history of public opinion in the eighteenth century.

Our design has been neither to defend a cause nor to sustain a thesis, but solely to relate what has been, and, in carefully reproducing the past, to leave to readers the task of making their own reflections upon the events which are here narrated.

FÉLIX ROCQUAIN.