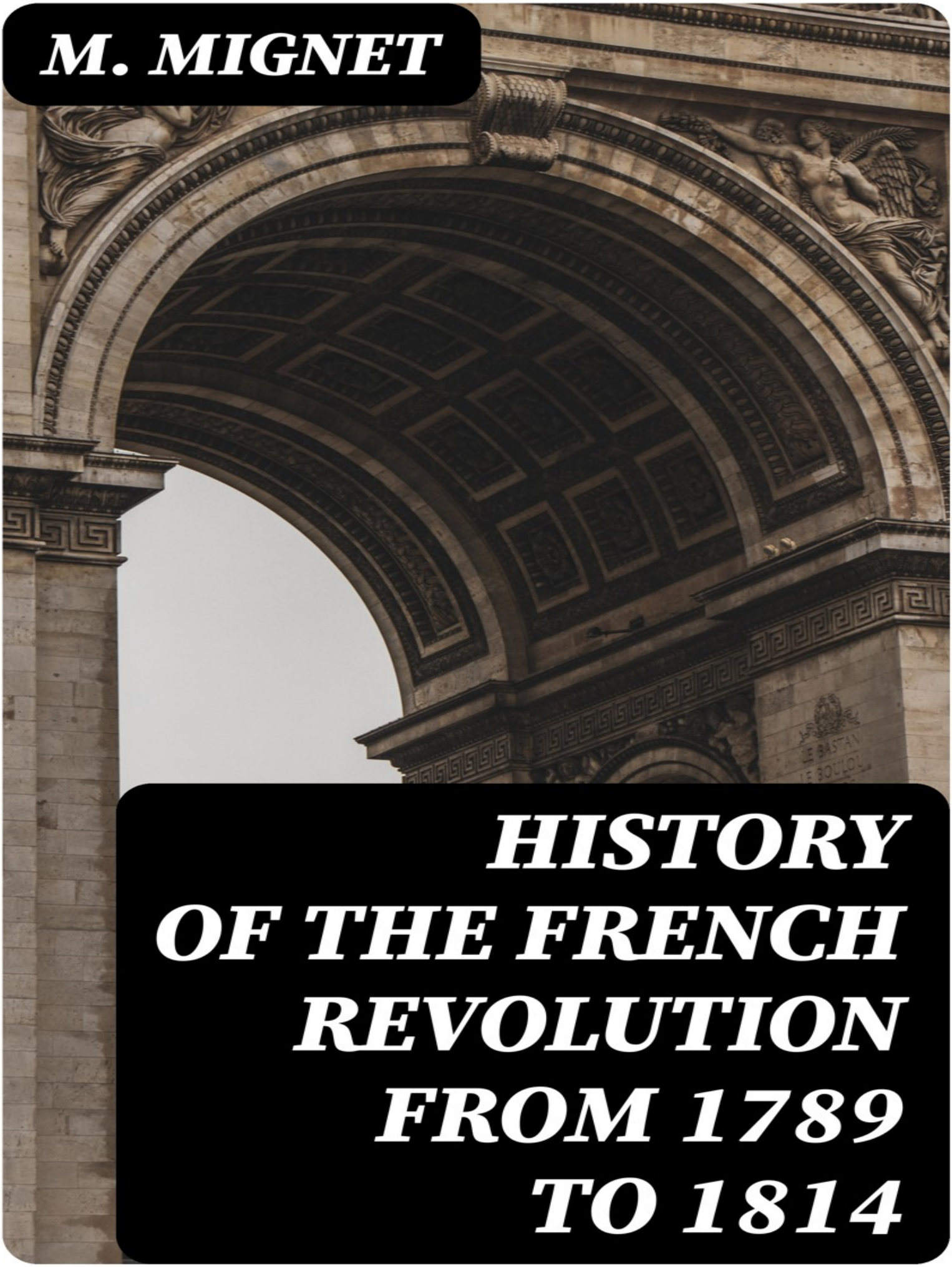

M. MIGNET

HISTORY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION FROM 1789 TO 1814

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INTRODUCTION

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Of the great incidents of History, none has attracted more attention or proved more difficult of interpretation than the French Revolution. The ultimate significance of other striking events and their place in the development of mankind can be readily estimated. It is clear enough that the barbarian invasions marked the death of the classical world, already mortally wounded by the rise of Christianity. It is clear enough that the Renaissance emancipated the human intellect from the trammels of a bastard mediaevalism, that the Reformation consolidated the victory of the "new learning" by including theology among the subjects of human debate. But the French Revolution seems to defy complete analysis. Its complexity was great, its contradictions numerous and astounding. A movement ostensibly directed against despotism culminated in the establishment of a despotism far more complete than that which had been overthrown. The apostles of liberty proscribed whole classes of their fellow-citizens, drenching

in innocent blood the land which they claimed to deliver from oppression. The apostles of equality established a tyranny of horror, labouring to extirpate all who had committed the sin of being fortunate. The apostles of fraternity carried fire and sword to the farthest confines of Europe, demanding that a continent should submit to the arbitrary dictation of a single people. And of the Revolution were born the most rigid of modern codes of law, that spirit of militarism which to-day has caused a world to mourn, that intolerance of intolerance which has armed anti-clerical persecutions in all lands. Nor were the actors in the drama less varied than the scenes enacted. The Revolution produced Mirabeau and Talleyrand, Robespierre and Napoleon, Sieyès and Hébert. The marshals of the First Empire, the doctrinaires of the Restoration, the journalists of the Orleanist monarchy, all were alike the children of this generation of storm and stress, of high idealism and gross brutality, of changing fortunes and glory mingled with disaster.

To describe the whole character of a movement so complex, so diverse in its promises and fulfilment, so crowded with incident, so rich in action, may well be declared impossible. No sooner has some proposition been apparently established, than a new aspect of the period is suddenly revealed, and all judgments have forthwith to be revised. That the Revolution was a great event is certain; all else seems to be uncertain. For some it is, as it was for Charles Fox, much the greatest of all events and much the best. For some it is, as it was for Burke, the accursed thing, the abomination of desolation. If its dark side alone be

regarded, it oppresses the very soul of man. A king, guilty of little more than amiable weakness and legitimate or pious affection; a queen whose gravest fault was but the frivolity of youth and beauty, was done to death. For loyalty to her friends, Madame Roland died; for loving her husband, Lucille Desmoulins perished. The agents of the Terror spared neither age nor sex; neither the eminence of high attainment nor the insignificance of dull mediocrity won mercy at their hands. The miserable Du Barri was dragged from her obscure retreat to share the fate of a Malesherbes, a Bailly, a Lavoisier. Robespierre was no more protected by his cold incorruptibility, than was Barnave by his eloquence, Hébert by his sensuality, Danton by his practical good sense. Nothing availed to save from the all-devouring guillotine. Those who did survive seem almost to have survived by chance, delivered by some caprice of fortune or by the criminal levity of "les tricoteuses," vile women who degraded the very dregs of their sex.

For such atrocities no apology need be attempted, but their cause may be explained, the factors which produced such popular fury may be understood. As he stands on the terrace of Versailles or wanders through the vast apartments of the château, the traveller sees in imagination the dramatic panorama of the long-dead past. The courtyard is filled with half-demented women, clamouring that the Father of his People should feed his starving children. The Well-Beloved jests cynically as, amid torrents of rain, Pompadour is borne to her grave. Maintenon, gloomily pious, urges with sinister whispers the commission of a great crime, bidding the king save his vice-laden soul.

Montespan laughs happily in her brief days of triumph. And dominating the scene is the imposing figure of the Grand Monarque. Louis haunts his great creation; Louis in his prime, the admired and feared of Europe, the incarnation of kingship; Louis surrounded by his gay and brilliant court, all eager to echo his historic boast, to sink in their master the last traces of their identity.

Then a veil falls. But some can lift it, to behold a far different, a far more stirring vision, and to such the deeper causes of the Terror are revealed. For they behold a vast multitude, stained with care, haggard, forlorn, striving, dying, toiling even to their death, that the passing whim of a tyrant may be gratified. Louis commanded; Versailles arose, a palace of rare delight for princes and nobles, for wits and courtly prelates, for grave philosophers and ladies frail as fair. A palace and a hell, a grim monument to regal egoism, created to minister to the inflated vanity of a despot, an eternal warning to mankind that the abuse of absolute power is an accursed thing. Every flower, in those wide gardens has been watered with the tears of stricken souls; every stone in that vast pile of buildings was cemented with human blood. None can estimate the toll of anguish exacted that Versailles might be; none can tell all its cost, since for human suffering there is no price. The weary toilers went to their doom, unnoticed, unhonoured, their misery unregarded, their pain ignored, And the king rejoiced in his glory, while his poets sang paeans in his praise.

But the day of reckoning came, and that day was the Terror. The heirs of those who toiled made their account with the heirs of those who played. The players died bravely, like

the gallant gentlemen they were; their courage is applauded, a world laments their fate. The misery, thus avenged, is forgotten; all the long agony of centuries, all the sunless hours, all the darkness of a land's despair. For that sadness was hidden; it was but the exceeding bitter lot of the poor, devoid of that dramatic interest which illumines one immortal hour of pain. Yet he who would estimate aright the Terror, who would fully understand the Revolution, must reflect not only upon the suffering of those who fell victims to an outburst of insensate frenzy, but also upon the suffering by which that frenzy was aroused. In a few months the French people took what recompense they might for many decades of oppression. They exacted retribution for the building of Versailles, of all the châteaux of Touraine; for all the burdens laid upon them since that day when liberty was enchained and France became the bond-slave of her monarchs. Louis XVI. paid for the selfish glory of Louis XIV.; the nobles paid for the pleasures which their forefathers had so carelessly enjoyed; the privileged classes for the privileges which they had usurped and had so grievously misused.

The payment fell heavily upon individuals; the innocent often suffered for the guilty; a Liancourt died while a Polignac escaped. Many who wished well to France, many who had laboured for her salvation, perished; virtue received the just punishment of vice. But the Revolution has another side; it was no mere nightmare of horrors piled on horrors. It is part of the pathos of History that no good has been unattended by evil, that by suffering alone is mankind redeemed, that through the valley of shadow lies the path

by which the race toils slowly towards the fulfilment of its high destiny. And if the victims of the guillotine could have foreseen the future, many might have died gladly. For by their death they brought the new France to birth. The Revolution rises superior to the crimes and follies of its authors; it has atoned to posterity for all the sorrow that it caused, for all the wrong that was done in its name. If it killed laughter, it also dried many tears. By it privilege was slain in France, tyranny rendered more improbable, almost impossible. The canker of a debased feudalism was swept away. Men were made equal before the law. Those barriers by which the flow of economic life in France was checked were broken down. All careers were thrown open to talent. The right of the producer to a voice in the distribution of the product was recognised. Above all, a new gospel of political liberty was expounded. The world, and the princes of the world, learned that peoples do not exist for the pleasure of some despot and the profit of his cringing satellites. In the order of nature, nothing can be born save through suffering; in the order of politics, this is no less true. From the sorrow of brief months has grown the joy of long years; the Revolution slew that it might also make alive.

Herein, perhaps, may be found the secret of its complexity, of its seeming contradictions. The authors of the Revolution pursued an ideal, an ideal expressed in three words, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity. That they might win their quest, they had both to destroy and to construct. They had to sweep away the past, and from the resultant chaos to construct a new order. Alike in destruction and construction, they committed errors; they fell far below their high ideals.

The altruistic enthusiasts of the National Assembly gave place to the practical politicians of the Convention, the diplomatists of the Directory, the generals of the Consulate. The Empire was far from realising that bright vision of a regenerate nation which had dazzled the eyes of Frenchmen in the first hours of the States-General. Liberty was sacrificed to efficiency; equality to man's love for titles of honour; fraternity to desire of glory. So it has been with all human effort. Man is imperfect, and his imperfection mars his fairest achievements. Whatever great movement may be considered, its ultimate attainment has fallen far short of its initial promise. The authors of the Revolution were but men; they were no more able than their fellows to discover and to hold fast to the true way of happiness. They wavered between the two extremes of despotism and anarchy; they declined from the path of grace. And their task remained unfulfilled. Many of their dreams were far from attaining realisation; they inaugurated no era of perfect bliss; they produced no Utopia. But their labour was not in vain. Despite its disappointments, despite all its crimes and blunders, the French Revolution was a great, a wonderful event. It did contribute to the uplifting of humanity, and the world is the better for its occurrence.

That he might indicate this truth, that he might do something to counteract the distortion of the past, Mignet wrote his *Histoire de la Révolution Française*. At the moment when he came from Aix to Paris, the tide of reaction was rising steadily in France. Decazes had fallen; Louis XVIII. was surrendering to the ultra-royalist cabal. Aided by such fortuitous events as the murder of the Duc de Berri, and

supported by an artificial majority in the Chamber, Villèle was endeavouring to bring back the *ancien régime*. Compensation for the *émigrés* was already mooted; ecclesiastical control of education suggested. Direct criticism of the ministry was rendered difficult, and even dangerous, by the censorship of the press. Above all, the champions of reaction relied upon a certain misrepresentation of the recent history of their country. The memory of the Terror was still vivid; it was sedulously kept alive. The people were encouraged to dread revolutionary violence, to forget the abuses by which that violence had been evoked and which it had swept away. To all complaints of executive tyranny, to all demands for greater political liberty, the reactionaries made one answer. They declared that through willingness to hear such complaints Louis XVI. had lost his throne and life; that through the granting of such demands, the way had been prepared for the bloody despotism of Robespierre. And they pointed the apparent moral, that concessions to superficially mild and legitimate requests would speedily reanimate the forces of anarchy. They insisted that by strong government and by the sternest repression of the disaffected alone could France be protected from a renewal of that nightmare of horror, at the thought of which she still shuddered. And hence those who would prevent the further progress of reaction had first of all to induce their fellow-countrymen to realise that the Revolution was no mere orgy of murder. They had to deliver liberty from those calumnies by which its curtailment was rendered possible and even popular.

Understanding this, Mignet wrote. It would have been idle for him to have denied that atrocities had been committed, nor had the day for a panegyric on Danton, for a defence of Robespierre, yet dawned. Mignet did not attempt the impossible. Rather by granting the case for his opponents he sought to controvert them the more effectively. He laid down as his fundamental thesis that the Revolution was inevitable. It was the outcome of the past history of France; it pursued the course which it was bound to pursue. Individuals and episodes in the drama are thus relatively insignificant and unimportant. The crimes committed may be regretted; their memory should not produce any condemnation of the movement as a whole. To judge the Revolution by the Terror, or by the Consulate, would be wrong and foolish; to declare it evil, because it did not proceed in a gentle and orderly manner would be to outrage the historical sense. It is wiser and more profitable to look below the surface, to search out those deep lessons which may be learned. And Mignet closes his work by stating one of these lessons, that which to him was, perhaps, the most vital: "On ne peut régir désormais la France d'une manière durable, qu'en satisfaisant le double besoin qui lui a fait entreprendre la révolution. Il lui faut, dans le gouvernement, une liberté politique réelle, et dans la société, le bien-être matériel que produit le développement sans cesse perfectionné de la civilisation."

It was not Mignet's object to present a complete account of the Revolution, and while he records the more important events of the period, he does not attempt to deal exhaustively with all its many sides. It is accordingly

possible to point out various omissions. He does not explain the organisation of the "deputies on mission," he only glances at that of the commune or of the Committee of Public Safety. His account of the Consulate and of the Empire appears to be disproportionately brief. But the complexity of the period, and the wealth of materials for its history, render it impossible for any one man to discuss it in detail, and Mignet's work gains rather than loses by its limitations. Those facts which illustrate his fundamental thesis are duly recorded; the causes and results of events are clearly indicated; the actions of individuals are described in so far as they subserve the author's purpose. The whole book is marked by a notable impartiality; it is only on rare occasions, as in the case of Lafayette, that the circumstances in which it was written have been permitted to colour the judgments passed. Nor is the value of the work seriously reduced by the fact that modern research compels its revision in certain particulars, since it is so clearly not intended to be a final and detailed history of the period. It is a philosophical study of a great epoch, and as such, however its point of view may be criticised, it is illuminating and well worthy of preservation. It supplies a thoughtful and inspiring commentary upon the French Revolution.

L. CECIL JANE. 1915.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.—François Auguste Marie Mignet was born at Aix in Provence in 1796. He was educated at Avignon and in his native town, at first studying law. But, having gained some literary successes, he removed to Paris in 1821 and devoted himself to writing. He became

professor of history at the *Athenée*, and after the Revolution of 1830 was made director of the archives in the Foreign Office, a post which he held until 1848. He was then removed by Lamartine and died in retirement in 1854. His *Histoire de la Révolution Française* was first published in 1824; a translation into English appeared in Bogue's European library in 1846 and is here re-edited. Among Mignet's other works may be mentioned *Antoine Perez et Philippe II.* and *Histoire de Marie Stuart*. As a journalist, he wrote mainly on foreign policy for the *Courrier Français*.

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FROM THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE EMPIRE, 1804-1814

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that of Charlemagne—Blockade of the continent—Napoleon employs the cessation of commerce to reduce England, as he had employed arms to subdue the continent—Invasion of Spain and Portugal; Joseph Napoleon appointed to the throne of Spain; Murat replaces him on the throne of Naples—New order of events: national insurrection of the peninsula; religious contest with the pope—Commercial opposition of Holland—Fifth coalition—Victory of Wagram; peace of Vienna; marriage of Napoleon with the archduchess Marie Louise—Failure of the attempt at resistance; the pope is dethroned; Holland is again united to the empire, and the war in Spain prosecuted with vigour—Russia renounces the continental system; campaign of 1812; capture of Moscow; disastrous retreat—Reaction against the power of Napoleon; campaign of 1813; general defection—Coalition of all Europe; exhaustion of France; marvellous campaign of 1814—The allied powers at Paris; abdication at Fontainbleau; character of Napoleon; his part in the French revolution—Conclusion.

INTRODUCTION

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I am about to take a rapid review of the history of the French revolution, which began the era of new societies in Europe, as the English revolution had begun the era of new governments. This revolution not only modified the political

power, but it entirely changed the internal existence of the nation. The forms of the society of the middle ages still remained. The land was divided into hostile provinces, the population into rival classes. The nobility had lost all their powers, but still retained all their distinctions: the people had no rights, royalty no limits; France was in an utter confusion of arbitrary administration, of class legislation and special privileges to special bodies. For these abuses the revolution substituted a system more conformable with justice, and better suited to our times. It substituted law in the place of arbitrary will, equality in that of privilege; delivered men from the distinctions of classes, the land from the barriers of provinces, trade from the shackles of corporations and fellowships, agriculture from feudal subjection and the oppression of tithes, property from the impediment of entails, and brought everything to the condition of one state, one system of law, one people.

In order to effect such mighty reformation as this, the revolution had many obstacles to overcome, involving transient excesses with durable benefits. The privileged sought to prevent it; Europe to subject it; and thus forced into a struggle, it could not set bounds to its efforts, or moderate its victory. Resistance from within brought about the sovereignty of the multitude, and aggression from without, military domination. Yet the end was attained, in spite of anarchy and in spite of despotism: the old society was destroyed during the revolution, and the new one became established under the empire.

When a reform has become necessary, and the moment for accomplishing it has arrived, nothing can prevent it,

everything furthers it. Happy were it for men, could they then come to an understanding; would the rich resign their superfluity, and the poor content themselves with achieving what they really needed, revolutions would then be quietly effected, and the historian would have no excesses, no calamities to record; he would merely have to display the transition of humanity to a wiser, freer, and happier condition. But the annals of nations have not as yet presented any instance of such prudent sacrifices; those who should have made them have refused to do so; those who required them have forcibly compelled them; and good has been brought about, like evil, by the medium and with all the violence of usurpation. As yet there has been no sovereign but force.

In reviewing the history of the important period extending from the opening of the states-general to 1814, I propose to explain the various crises of the revolution, while I describe their progress. It will thus be seen through whose fault, after commencing under such happy auspices, it so fearfully degenerated; in what way it changed France into a republic, and how upon the ruins of the republic it raise the empire. These various phases were almost inevitable, so irresistible was the power of the events which produced them. It would perhaps be rash to affirm that by no possibility could the face of things have been otherwise; but it is certain that the revolution, taking its rise from such causes, and employing and arousing such passions, naturally took that course, and ended in that result. Before we enter upon its history, let us see what led to the convocation of the states-general, which themselves

brought on all that followed. In retracing the preliminary causes of the revolution, I hope to show that it was as impossible to avoid as to guide it.

From its establishment the French monarchy had had no settled form, no fixed and recognised public right. Under the first races the crown was elective, the nation sovereign, and the king a mere military chief, depending on the common voice for all decisions to be made, and all the enterprises to be undertaken. The nation elected its chief, exercised the legislative power in the Champs de Mars under the presidentship of the king, and the judicial power in the courts under the direction of one of his officers. Under the feudal regime, this royal democracy gave way to a royal aristocracy. Absolute power ascended higher, the nobles stripped the people of it, as the prince afterwards despoiled the nobles. At this period the monarch had become hereditary; not as king, but as individually possessor of a fief; the legislative authority belonged to the seigneurs, in their vast territories or in the barons' parliaments; and the judicial authority to the vassals in the manorial courts. In a word, power had become more and more concentrated, and as it had passed from the many to the few, it came at last from the few to be invested in one alone. During centuries of continuous efforts, the kings of France were battering down the feudal edifice, and at length they established themselves on its ruins, having step by step usurped the fiefs, subdued the vassals, suppressed the parliaments of barons, annulled or subjected the manorial courts, assumed the legislative power, and effected that judicial authority

should be exercised in their name and on their behalf, in parliaments of legists.

The states-general, which they convoked on pressing occasions, for the purpose of obtaining subsidies, and which were composed of the three orders of the nation, the clergy, the nobility, and the third estate or commons, had no regular existence. Originated while the royal prerogative was in progress, they were at first controlled, and finally suppressed by it. The strongest and most determined opposition the kings had to encounter in their projects of aggrandizement, proceeded much less from these assemblies, which they authorized or annulled at pleasure, than from the nobles vindicating against them, first their sovereignty, and then their political importance. From Philip Augustus to Louis XI. the object of all their efforts was to preserve their own power; from Louis XI. to Louis XIV. to become the ministers of that of royalty. The Fronde was the last campaign of the aristocracy. Under Louis XIV. absolute monarchy definitively established itself, and dominated without dispute.

The government of France, from Louis XIV. to the revolution, was still more arbitrary than despotic; for the monarchs had much more power than they exercised. The barriers that opposed the encroachments of this immense authority were exceedingly feeble. The crown disposed of persons by *lettres de cachet*, of property by confiscation, of the public revenue by imposts. Certain bodies, it is true, possessed means of defence, which were termed privileges, but these privileges were rarely respected. The parliament had that of ratifying or of refusing an impost, but the king