

Wordsworth: The Prelude (1850)

BOOK TENTH

RESIDENCE IN FRANCE—(CONTINUED)

It was a beautiful and silent day
 That overspread the commencement of earth,
 Then fading with unusual quietness,—
 A day as beautiful as e'er was given
 To soothe regret, though deepening what
 it soothed.
 When by the gliding Loire I paused, and
 cast
 Upon his rich domains, vineyard and
 firth,
 Green meadow-ground, and many-
 coloured woods, and farwell look;
 Again, and yet again, a farewell look;
 Then from the quiet of that scene passed
 on,
 Bound to the fierce Metropolis. From
 his throne
 The King had fallen, and that invading
 host—
 Presumptuous cloud, on whose black
 front was written
 The tender mercies of the dismal wind
 That bore it—on the plains of Liberty 15
 Had burst innocuous. Say in bolder
 words,
 They—who had come elate as eastern
 hunters
 Banded beneath the Great Mogul, when
 he
 Erewhile went forth from Agra or Lahore,
 Kalahs and Omrahs in his train, intent 20
 To drive their prey enclosed within a ring
 Wide as a province, but, the signal given,

Before the point of the life-threatening
 spear
 Narrowing itself by moments—they, rash
 men,
 Had seen the anticipated quarry turned
 Into avengers, from whose wrath they
 fled
 In terror. Disappointment and dismay
 Remained for all whose fancies had run
 wild
 With evil expectations; confidence 29
 And perfect triumph for the better cause.
 The State, as if to stamp the final seal
 On her security, and to the world
 Show what she was, a high and fearless
 soul,
 Exulting in defiance, or heart-stung 34
 By sharp resentment, or belike to taunt
 With spiteful gratitude the baffled League,
 That had stirred up her slacking factu-
 ties
 To a new transition, when the King was
 crushed,
 Spared not the empty throne, and in
 proud hate
 Assumed the body and venerable name
 Of a Republic. Lamentable crimes, 44
 'Tis true, had gone before this hour, dire
 work
 Of massacre, in which the senseless sword
 Was prayed to as a judge; but these were
 past

Fourth free from them for ever, as was
 thought,—
 45 ephemeral monsters, to be seen but once;
 Things that could only show themselves
 and die.
 Cheered with this hope, to Paris I
 returned,
 And ranged, with ardour heretofore un-
 felt,
 The spacious city, and in progress passed
 the prison where the unhappy Monarch
 lay,
 Associate with his children and his wife
 in bondage; and the palace, lately
 stormed
 With roar of cannon by a furious host. 54
 I crossed the square (an empty area then)
 Of the Carrousel, where so late had lain
 The dead, upon the dying heaped, and
 gazed
 On this and other spots, as doth a man
 Upon a volume whose contents he knows
 are memorable, but from him locked
 up,
 lying written in a tongue he cannot read,
 60 so that he questions the mute leaves with
 pain,
 And half upbraids their silence. But
 that night
 I felt most deeply in what world I was,
 What ground I trod on, and what air I
 breathed.
 65 High was my room and lonely, near the
 roof
 Of a large mansion or hotel, a lodge
 That would have pleased me in more
 quiet times;
 Nor was it wholly without pleasure then.
 With unextinguished taper I kept watch,
 Reading at intervals; the fear gone by 71
 Pressed on me almost like a fear to come.
 I thought of those September massacres,
 I divided from me by one little month,
 Saw them and touched: the rest was con-
 75 jured up
 From tragic fictions or true history,
 Remembrances and dim admonishments.
 The horse is taught his manege, and no
 star
 Of wildest course but treads back his own
 steps;
 For the spent hurricane the air provides
 As fierce a successor; the tide retreats 81
 But to return out of its hiding-place
 In the great deep: all things have second
 birth;
 The earthquake is not satisfied at once;
 And in this way I wrought upon myself,
 Until I seemed to hear a voice that cried,
 To the whole city, 'sleep no more.' The
 trance
 Fled with the voice to which it had given
 birth;

But vainly comments of a calmer mind
 Promised soft peace and sweet forgetful-
 90 ness.
 The place, all hushed and silent as it was,
 Appeared unfit for the repose of night,
 Defenceless as a wood where tigers roam.

[. . .]

A man is fallen indeed, when he is thus flattered. The anodyne draught of oblivion, thus drugged, is well calculated to preserve a galling wakefulness, and to feed the living ulcer of a corroding memory. Thus to administer the opiate potion of amnesty, powdered with all the ingredients of scorn and contempt, is to hold to his lips, instead of "the balm of hurt minds," the cup of human misery full to the brim, and to force him to drink it to the dregs.⁴³

Yielding to reasons, at least as forcible as those which were so delicately urged in the compliment on the new year, the king of France will probably endeavour to forget these events and that compliment. But history, who keeps a durable record of all our acts, and exercises her awful censure over the proceedings of all sorts of sovereigns, will not forget either those events, or the era of this liberal refinement in the intercourse of mankind. History will record, that on the morning of the 6th of October, 1789, the king and queen of France, after a day of confusion, alarm, dismay, and slaughter, lay down, under the pledged security of public faith, to indulge nature in a few hours of respite, and troubled, melancholy repose. From this sleep the queen was first startled by the voice of the sentinel at her door, who cried out to her to save herself by flight — that this was the last proof of fidelity he could give — that they were upon him, and he was dead. Instantly he was cut down. A band of cruel ruffians and assassins, reeking with his blood, rushed into the chamber of the queen, and pierced with a hundred strokes of bayonets and poniards the bed, from whence this persecuted woman had but just time to fly almost naked, and, through ways unknown to the murderers, had escaped to seek refuge at the feet of a king and husband, not secure of his own life for a moment.

This king, to say no more of him, and this queen, and their infant children, (who once would have been the pride and hope of a great and generous people,) were then forced to abandon the sanctuary of the most splendid palace in the world, which they left swimming in blood, polluted by massacre, and strewed with scattered limbs and mutilated carcasses. Thence they were conducted into the capital of their kingdom. Two had been selected from the unprovoked, unresisted, promiscuous slaughter, which was made of the gentlemen of birth and family who composed the king's body guard. These two gentlemen, with all the parade of an execution of justice, were cruelly and publicly dragged to the block, and beheaded in the great court of the palace. Their heads were struck upon spears, and led the procession; whilst the royal captives who followed in the train were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and

43. *Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 22. Balm there indicates sleep.

infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the fires of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women. After they had been made to taste, drop by drop, more than the bitterness of death, in the slow torture of a journey of twelve miles, protracted to six hours, they were, under a guard, composed of those very soldiers who had thus conducted them through this famous triumph, lodged in one of the old palaces of Paris, now converted into a bastille for kings.

Is this a triumph to be consecrated at altars? to be commemorated with grateful thanksgiving? to be offered to the divine humanity with fervent prayer and enthusiastic ejaculation? — These Theban and Thracian orgies, acted in France, and applauded only in the Old Jewry, I assure you, kindle prophetic enthusiasm in the minds but of very few people in this kingdom: although a saint and apostle, who may have revelations of his own, and who has so completely vanquished all the mean superstitions of the heart, may incline to think it pious and decorous to compare it with the entrance into the world of the Prince of Peace, proclaimed in a holy temple by a venerable sage, and not long before not worse announced by the voice of angels to the quiet innocence of shepherds.

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From
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