

NAPOLEON: THE FALL

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Napoleon: the fall by E. M. Beardsley

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E. M. BEARDSLEY

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NAPOLEON AT FONTAINEBLEAU.

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"It was time that this vast man should fall. The moment had come for incorruptible supreme equity to look to it.

Napoleon had been impeached before the Infinite, and his fall was decreed.

He vexed God."

Victor Hugo.

PREFACE.

This work (I can hardly use so pretentious a title as a history) deals with the fall of Napoleon—the greatest overthrow, the greatest catastrophe recorded in the annals of human story, and with the sombre tragedy of his long dragged-out, agonising death on his Promethean rock of Saint Helena, and is divided into three epochs or phases, the three stages of his Titanic overthrow. These phases in Napoleon's fall are clearly defined and distinct; the first from the outbreak of the Russian war in the summer of 1812 to his arrival at Warsaw in December of the same year, after the fatal retreat from Moscow; the second from his return to Paris after the disastrous campaign of Russia to his first abdication at Fontainebleau; and the third from his detention at Elba to his death at Saint Helena.

I have dealt somewhat exhaustively upon the Russian war, up to the commencement of the retreat of the Grand Army from the ruins of Moscow, as this was Napoleon's last campaign in new realms of conquest and the last in which he was the aggressor, for the German war of 1813 was really a defensive war, in which Napoleon fought for the preservation of his dominion in Central Europe, and in the campaign of France, in 1814, he fought against banded Europe not merely in defence of France, but for his very existence, and in the Waterloo campaign, although he was actually the aggressor, he took the initiative to forestall the allied

armies of Europe closing upon him for the invasion of France and his utter subversion.

The prime causes of the Russian war of 1812, of Napoleon's downfall, were the refusal of Napoleon to evacuate Prussia, withdraw his troops from the French garrisons on the Oder and the Vistula, and on the part of Russia the relaxation of the Continental System over the dominions of the Czar. In a sense, therefore, the Russian war of 1812 may be regarded as a commercial war engendered by England, for without England the Continental System would never have been.

Englishmen hug themselves with the idea that Waterloo is a *purely* British victory. I have endeavoured to dispel and at the same time prove the fallacy of this fatuous idea, however distasteful it may be to the *amour propre* of most Britons, and to show that Prussia shares equally with England in the overthrow of their mutual enemy at Waterloo, and that without the timely arrival of Blücher at the crucial moment Wellington would have been obliged to abandon the field of battle. Waterloo is not an *exclusively* British victory: Napoleon was overthrown there by the *united armies of England and Prussia*, and not by the unaided efforts of the British army or the military skill of either of the allied generals.

To his detractors Napoleon is a bloodthirsty tyrant, a usurper, grasping and unrelenting. If he was a tyrant and a usurper, then his tyranny and usurpation were of inestimable beneficence to mankind, and his wars and conquests, paradoxical as it may seem, a blessing to the world. If he conquered Italy it was only to pave the way to her present unification. If he conquered Germany and Prussia it was only to infuse

among all Germans a spirit of inextinguishable patriotism. If he conquered Egypt it was only to revive her ancient splendour and disclose to the world her archæological wonders and benefit her by his enlightened legislation. If he conquered Poland it was only to deliver her, for the nonce, from the hated yoke of Prussia. If he conquered Spain it was only to abolish the Inquisition, abridge the oppressive power of the Roman Church, eradicate all feudal laws, and revivify the internal commerce and promote the prosperity of the country. If he imprisoned the Pope and reft him of his temporal power, it was only to manifest to the world that the inviolableness of the Papacy was but a fatuity—the wildest of all chimeras. If he usurped the throne of the Bourbons he only did so to stem the Revolution, to organise the legislature of France, and by his Code to ameliorate the lot of man not merely in France, but in Germany, Italy, Prussia, Holland, Spain and Switzerland as well.

Although perhaps the greatest conqueror that the annals of history have ever known, yet Napoleon stands forth as the champion of the free-will of man, and as the greatest example the world has yet seen to what a pre-eminence of power the very humblest may attain through the afflatus of supreme genius. Napoleon stands for freedom inasmuch as he assailed and battered down the thrones of the effete dynasties of Europe, and made the crowned despots of Europe grovel at his feet by means of that power which a militant democracy and a revolutionary France had invested him with, and which his genius converted into such a formidable instrument of retribution, for he was the avenger of that great political crime—the partition of Poland by the condign chastise-

ment which the three bandit nations, that had robbed the Poles of their independence, Prussia, Russia, and Austria, received alternately at his hands at Austerlitz, Jena, and Friedland.

Had Napoleon never lived, had his strenuous individuality been substituted by a tamer train of historical events, had the space in history which his vast entity displaces been filled up instead by less stirring events than those which have signalled his career, had the dawn of the 19th century not witnessed the exploits of one even greater than Alexander, and in short not enabled us to gauge to what a pre-eminence—to what illimitable supremacy the human intellect can attain, what a void would have remained in history to be filled. What sterility would have existed in man's conception of human genius, of human possibilities!

Napoleon is unquestionably the most virile of human beings the modern world, at all events, has ever known. If ever mortal justly deserved the title of man it was he: he is the very quintessence of masculineness. In France he was not so much the general, the Consul or the Emperor as *l'homme*—the man; he is the antithesis of feminineness and of whatever is effete, inept, debile, decadent, or emasculated, and had he never lived it would have been necessary to revert to a remote period of human story to the annals of ancient history to the days of Cæsar, Hannibal and Alexander to find an intellect in any way comparable in strenuous virility to his own, and even then no adequate conception of an intellect as vigorous as that of Napoleon could have been formed owing to the impersonality which these great human prodigies have acquired through the nebulousness, the opaqueness which the centuries have woven

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