



The Life of Napoleon - Volume II of IV (Illustrated)

William Sloane

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Volume II of IV

In the closing years of the eighteenth century European society began its effort to get rid of benevolent despotism, so called, and to secure its liberties under forms of constitutional government. The struggle began in France, and spread over the more important lands of continental Europe; its influence was strongly felt in England, and even in the United States. Passing through the phases of constitutional reform, of anarchy, and of military despotism, the movement seemed for a time to have failed, and to outward appearances absolutism was stronger after Waterloo than it had been half a century earlier.

But the force of the revolution was only checked, not spent; and to the awakening of general intelligence, the strengthening of national feeling, and the upbuilding of a sense of common brotherhood among men, produced by the revolutionary struggles of this epoch, Europe owes whatever liberty and free government its peoples now enjoy. At the close of this period national power was no longer in the hands of the aristocracy, nor in those of kings; it had passed into the third social stratum, variously designated as the middle class, the burghers or bourgeoisie, and the third estate, a body of men as little willing to share it with the masses as the kings had been. Nevertheless, the transition once begun could not be stopped, and the advance of manhood suffrage has ever since been proportionate to the capacity of the laboring classes to receive and use it, until now, at last, whatever may be the nominal form of government in any civilized land, its stability depends entirely upon the support of the people as a whole. That which is the basis of all government—the power of the purse—has passed into their hands.

This momentous change was of course a turbulent one—the most turbulent in the history of civilization, as it has proved to be the most comprehensive. Consequently its epoch is most interesting, being dramatic in the highest degree, having brought into prominence men and characters who rank among the great of all time, and having exhibited to succeeding generations the most important lessons in the most vivid light. By common consent the eminent man of the time was Napoleon Bonaparte, the revolution queller, the burgher sovereign, the imperial democrat, the supreme captain, the civil reformer, the victim of circumstances which his soaring ambition used but which his unrivaled prowess could not control. Gigantic in his proportions, and satanic in his fate, his was the most tragic figure on the stage of modern history. While the men of his own and the following generation were still alive, it was almost impossible that the truth should be known concerning his actions or his motives; and to fix his place in general history was even less feasible. What he wrote and said about himself was of course animated by a determination to appear in the best light; what others wrote and said has been biased by either devotion or hatred.

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