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The Works of George Lord Lyttleton

Lyttelton, George <Lord>

London, 1774

II. Louis Le Grand - Peter The Great.

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-50364](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-50364)

DIALOGUES OF THE DEAD.

lighted, it is not in the power of the head of a party to say to the conflagration, *Thus far shalt thou go, and here shall thy violence stop.*

LORD FALKLAND.

The conversation we have had, as well as the reflexions of my own mind on past events, would, if I were condemned to my body again, teach me great moderation in my judgements of persons, who might happen to differ from me in difficult scenes of public action: they would entirely cure me of the *spirit of party*, and make me think, that, as in the church, so also in the state, no evil is more to be feared than a rancorous and enthusiastical zeal.

DIALOGUE II.

LOUIS LE GRAND—PETER THE GREAT.

L O U I S.

WHO, Sir, could have thought, when you were learning the trade of a shipwright in the dockyards of England and Holland, that you would ever acquire, as I had done, the surname of Great?

P E T E R.

Which of us best deserved that title, posterity will decide. But my greatness appeared sufficiently in that very act which seemed to you a debasement.

L O U I S.

The dignity of a king does not stoop to such mean employments. For my own part, I was careful never to appear to the eyes of my subjects or foreigners, but in all the splendor and majesty of royal power.

P E T E R.

P E T E R.

Had I remained on the throne of Russia, as my ancestors did, environed with all the pomp of barbarous greatness, I should have been idolized by my people, as much, at least, as you ever were by the French. My despotism was more absolute, their servitude was more humble. But then I could not have reformed their evil customs; have taught them arts, civility, navigation, and war; have exalted them from brutes in human shapes into men. In this was seen the extraordinary force of my genius beyond any comparison with all other kings, that I thought it no degradation, or diminution to my greatness, to descend from my throne, and go and work in the dock-yards of a foreign republic; to serve as a private sailor in my own fleets, and as a common soldier in my own army; till I had raised myself by my merit in all the several steps and degrees of promotion, up to the highest command, and had thus induced my nobility to submit to a regular subordination in the sea and land-service, by a lesson hard to their pride, and which they would not have learnt from any other master, or by any other method of instruction.

L O U I S.

I am forced to acknowledge, that it was a great act. When I thought it a mean one, my judgement was perverted by the prejudices arising from my own education, and the ridicule thrown upon it by some of my courtiers, whose minds were too narrow to be able to comprehend the greatness of your's in that situation.

P E T E R.

It was an act of more heroism than any ever done by Alexander or Caesar. Nor would I consent to exchange my glory with their's. They both did great things; but they were at the head of great nations, far superior in valour and military skill to those with whom they contended. I was the king of

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an ignorant, undisciplined, barbarous people. My enemies were at first so superior to my subjects, that ten thousand of them could beat a hundred thousand Russians. They had formidable navies: I had not a ship. The king of Sweden was a prince of the most intrepid courage, assisted by generals of consummate knowledge in war, and served by soldiers so disciplined, that they were become the admiration and terror of Europe. Yet I vanquished these soldiers; I drove that prince to take refuge in Turkey; I won battles at sea, as well as land; I *new-created* my people; I gave them arts, science, policy; I enabled them to keep all the powers of the North in awe and dependance, to give kings to Poland, to check and intimidate the Ottoman emperors, to mix with great weight in the affairs of all Europe. What other man has ever done such wonders as these? Read all the records of ancient and modern times, and find, if you can, one fit to be put in comparison with me!

L O U I S.

Your glory would indeed have been supreme and unequalled, if, in civilizing your subjects, you had reformed the brutality of your own manners, and the barbarous vices of your nature. But, alas! the legislator and reformer of the Muscovites was drunken and cruel.

P E T E R.

My drunkenness I confess: nor will I plead, to excuse it, the example of Alexander. It inflamed the tempers of both, which were by nature too fiery, into furious passions of anger, and produced actions, of which our reason, when sober, was ashamed. But the cruelty you upbraid me with may in some degree be excused, as necessary to the work I had to perform. Fear of punishment was in the hearts of my barbarous subjects the only principle of obedience. To make them respect the royal authority, I was obliged to arm it with all the terrors of
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rage. You had a more pliant people to govern, a people whose minds could be ruled, like a fine managed horse, with an easy and gentle rein. The fear of shame did more with them than the fear of the *knout* could do with the Russians. The humanity of your character and the ferocity of mine were equally suitable to the nations over which we reigned. But what excuse can you find for the cruel violence you employed against your Protestant subjects? They desired nothing but to live under the protection of laws you yourself had confirmed; and they repaid that protection by the most hearty zeal for your service. Yet these did you force, by the most inhuman severities, either to quit the religion in which they were bred, and which their consciences still retained, or to leave their native land, and endure all the woes of a perpetual exile. If the rules of policy could not hinder you from thus depopulating your kingdom, and transferring to foreign countries its manufactures and commerce, I am surpris'd that your heart itself did not stop you. It makes one shudder to think, that such orders should be sent from the most polished court in Europe, as the most savage Tartars could hardly have executed without remorse and compassion.

L O U I S.

It was not my heart, but my religion, that dictated these severities. My confessor told me, they alone would atone for all my sins.

P E T E R.

Had I believed in my patriarch, as you believed in your priest, I should not have been the great monarch that I was.— But I mean not to detract from the merit of a prince whose memory is dear to his subjects. They are proud of having obeyed you, which is certainly the highest praise to a king. My people also date their glory from the era of my reign. But there is this capital distinction between us. The pomp and pageantry

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of state were necessary to your greatness: I was great in myself, great in the energy and powers of my mind, great in the superiority and *sovereignty* of my soul over all other men.

DIALOGUE III.

PLATO—FENELON.

PLATO.

WELCOME to Elysium, O thou, the most pure, the most gentle, the most refined disciple of philosophy that the world, in modern times, has produced! Sage Fenelon, welcome!—I need not name myself to you. Our souls by sympathy must know one another.

FENELON.

I know you to be Plato, the most amiable of all the disciples of Socrates, and the philosopher of all antiquity whom I most desired to resemble.

PLATO.

Homer and Orpheus are impatient to see you in that region of these happy fields, which their shades inhabit. They both acknowledge you to be a great poet, though you have written no verses. And they are now busy in composing for you unfading wreaths of all the finest and sweetest Elysian flowers. But I will lead you from them to the sacred grove of Philosophy, on the highest hill of Elysium, where the air is most pure and most serene. I will conduct you to the fountain of Wisdom, in which you will see, as in your own writings, the fair image of Virtue perpetually reflected. It will raise in you more love than was felt by Narcissus, when he contemplated the beauty of his own face in the unruffled spring. But you shall