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Letters On The Study And Use Of History

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Letter I. A plan for a general history of Europe.

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A P L A N

FOR A

General History of EUROPE.

LETTER I.

I SHALL take the liberty of writing to you a little oftener than the three or four times a year, which, you tell me, are all you can allow yourself to write to those you like best: and yet I declare to you with great truth, that you never knew me so busy in your life, as I am at present. You must not imagine from hence, that I am writing memoirs of myself. The subject is too slight to descend to posterity, in any other manner, than by that occasional mention which may be made of any little actor in the history of our age.

VOL. II.

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SYLLA,

SYLLA, CAESAR, and others of that rank, were, whilst they lived, at the head of mankind: their story was in some sort the story of the world, and as such might very properly be transmitted under their names to future generations. But for those who have acted much inferior parts, if they publish the piece, and call it after their own names, they are impertinent; if they publish only their own share in it, they inform mankind by halves, and neither give much instruction, nor create much attention. France abounds with writers of this sort, and, I think, we fall into the other extreme. Let me tell you, on this occasion, what has sometimes come into my thoughts.

THERE is hardly any century in history which began by opening so great a scene, as the century wherein we live, and shall, I suppose, die. Compare it with others, even the most famous, and you will think so. I will sketch the two last, to help your memory.

THE

THE loss of that balance which LAURENCE of Medicis had preserved, during his time, in Italy; the expedition of CHARLES the eighth to Naples; the intrigues of the duke of MILAN, who spun, with all the refinements of art, that net wherein he was taken at last himself; the successful dexterity of FERDINAND the Catholic, who built one pillar of the Austrian greatness in Spain, in Italy, and in the Indies; as the succession of the house of Burgundy, joined to the imperial dignity and the hereditary countries, established another in the upper and lower Germany: these causes, and many others, combined to form a very extraordinary conjuncture; and, by their consequences, to render the sixteenth century fruitful of great events, and of astonishing revolutions.

THE beginning of the seventeenth opened still a greater and more important scene. The Spanish yoke was well-nigh

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imposed on Italy by the famous triumvirate, TOLEDO at Milan, OSSUNA at Naples, and LA CUEVA at Venice. The distractions of France, as well as the state-policy of the queen mother, seduced by Rome, and amused by Spain; the despicable character of our JAMES the first, the rashness of the elector Palatine, the bad intelligence of the princes and states of the league in Germany, the mercenary temper of JOHN GEORGE of Saxony, and the great qualities of MAXIMILIAN of Bavaria, raised FERDINAND the second to the imperial throne; when, the males of the elder branch of the Austrian family in Germany being extinguished at the death of MATTHIAS, nothing was more desirable, nor perhaps more practicable, than to throw the empire into another house. Germany ran the same risque as Italy had done: FERDINAND seemed more likely, even than CHARLES the fifth had been, to become absolute master; and, if France had not furnished the greatest minister, and the
North

North the greatest captain, of that age, in the same point of time, Vienna and Madrid would have given the law to the western world.

As the Austrian scale sunk, that of Bourbon rose. The true date of the rise of that power, which has made the kings of France so considerable in Europe, goes up as high as CHARLES the seventh, and LEWIS the eleventh. The weakness of our HENRY the sixth, the loose conduct of EDWARD the fourth, and perhaps the oversights of HENRY the seventh, helped very much to knit that monarchy together, as well as to enlarge it. Advantage might have been taken of the divisions which religion occasioned; and supporting the protestant party in France would have kept that crown under restraints, and under inabilities, in some measure equal to those which were occasioned anciently by the vast alienations of its demesnes, and by the exorbitant power of

it's vassals. But JAMES the first was incapable of thinking with sense, or acting with spirit. CHARLES the first had an imperfect glimpse of his true interest, but his uxorious temper, and the extravagancy of that madman BUCKINGHAM, gave RICHELIEU time to finish a great part of his project: and the miseries, that followed in England, gave MAZARIN time and opportunity to complete the system. The last great act of this cardinal's administration was the Pyrenean treaty.

HERE I would begin, by representing the face of Europe such as it was at that epocha, the interests and the conduct of England, France, Spain, Holland, and the Empire. A summary recapitulation should follow of all the steps taken by France, during more than twenty years, to arrive at the great object she had proposed to herself in making this treaty: the most solemn article of which the minister,
who

who negotiated it, designed should be violated; as appears by his letters, writ from the Island of Pheasants, if I mistake not. After this, another draught of Europe should have it's place, according to the relations, which the several powers stood in, one towards another, in one thousand six hundred and eighty eight: and the alterations which the revolution in England made in the politics of Europe. A summary account should follow of the events of the war that ended in one thousand six hundred and ninety seven, with the different views of king WILLIAM the third, and LEWIS the fourteenth, in making the peace of Ryswic; which matter has been much canvassed, and is little understood. Then the dispositions made by the partition-treaties, and the influences and consequences of these treaties; and a third draught of the state of Europe at the death of CHARLES the second of Spain. All this would make the subject of one or two books, and would be the most proper

introduction imaginable to an history of that war with which our century began, and of the peace which followed.

THIS war, foreseen for above half a century, had been, during all that time, the great and constant object of the councils of Europe. The prize to be contended for was the richest, that ever had been staked, since those of the Persian and Roman empires. The union of two powers, which separately, and in opposition, had aimed at universal monarchy, was apprehended. The confederates therefore engaged in it, to maintain a balance between the two houses of Austria and Bourbon, in order to preserve their security, and to assert their independance. But with the success of the war they changed their views: and, if ambition began it on the side of France, ambition continued it on the other. The battles, the sieges, the surprising revolutions, which happened in the course of this war, are not to be paralleled

ralleled in any period of the same compass. The motives, and the measures, by which it was protracted, the true reasons why it ended in a manner, which appeared not proportionable to it's success; and the new political state, into which Europe was thrown by the treaties of Utrecht and Baden, are subjects on which few persons have the necessary informations, and yet every one speaks with assurance, and even with passion. I think I could speak on them with some knowledge, and with as much indifference as POLYBIUS does of the negotiations of his father LYCORTAS, even in those points where I was myself an actor.

I WILL even confess to you, that I should not despair of performing this part better than the former. There is nothing in my opinion so hard to execute, as those political maps, if you will allow me such an expression, and those systems of hints, rather than relations of events, which are necessary

necessary to connect and explain them; and which must be so concise, and yet so full; so complicate, and yet so clear. I know nothing of this sort well done by the ancients. SALUST's introduction, as well as that of THUCYDIDES, might serve almost for any other piece of the Roman or Greek story, as well as for those, which these two great authors chose. POLYBIUS does not come up, in his introduction, to this idea neither. Among the moderns, the first book of MACHIAVEL's History of Florence is a noble original of this kind: and perhaps father PAUL's History of Benefices is, in the same kind of composition, inimitable.

THESE are a few of those thoughts, which come into my mind when I consider how incumbent it is on every man, that he should be able to give an account even of his leisure; and, in the midst of solitude, be of some use to society.

I KNOW

I KNOW not whether I shall have courage enough to undertake the task I have chalked out: I distrust my abilities with reason, and I shall want several informations, not easy, I doubt, for me to obtain. But, in all events, it will not be possible for me to go about it this year; the reasons of which would be long enough to fill another letter, and I doubt that you will think this grown too bulky already.

Adieu.

General History of Europe

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