GLIMPSES OF
WORLD HISTORY
BEING FURTHER LETTERS TO HIS DAUGHTER
WRITTEN IN PRISON, AND CONTAINING
A RAMBLING ACCOUNT OF HISTORY
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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The French Revolution

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I find it a little difficult to write to you about the French Revolution. This is not for any lack of material, but because of the very abundance of it. The Revolution was an amazing and an ever-changing drama, full of extraordinary incidents that still fascinate us and horrify and thrill. The politics of princes and statesmen has their home in the closet and the private room, and an air of mystery covers them. A discreet veil hides many sins, and decorous language conceals the conflict of rival ambitions and greed. Even when this conflict leads to war and vast numbers of young people are sent to their death for the sake of this greed and ambition, our ears are not offended by mention of any such lowly motives. We are told, instead, of noble ideals and great causes which demand the last sacrifice.

But a revolution is very different. It has its home in the field and the street and the marketplace, and its methods are rough and crude. The people who make it have not had the advantage of the education of the princes and the statesmen. Their language is not courtly and decorous, hiding a multitude of intrigues and evil designs. There is no mystery about them, no veils to hide the working of their minds; even their bodies have little enough covering. Politics in a revolution cease to be the sport of kings or professional politicians. They deal with realities, and behind them are raw human nature and the empty stomachs of the hungry.

So we see in France, during these fateful five years from 1789 to 1794, the hungry masses in action. It is they who force the hands of timid politicians and make them abolish monarchy and feudalism and the privileges of the Church. It is they who pay homage to the terrible Madame Guillotine and take cruel vengeance against those who had crushed them in the past and those whom they suspect of intriguing against their new-found freedom. It is these ragged, barefooted people who, with improvised arms, rush to defend their Revolution on the battlefield, and drive back the trained armies of a Europe united against them. They achieve wonders, these people of France, but after several years of terrible strain and conflict, the Revolution exhausts its energy and turns on itself and begins to eat up its own children. And then comes the counter-revolution, swallowing up the Revolution, and sending the common people who had dared and suffered so much back to be ruled by the "superior" classes. Out of the counter-revolution emerges Napoleon, dictator and emperor of the counter-revolution, nor Napoleon could not be the people to their old places! No one could wipe away the principal conquests of the Revolution; and no one could take away from the French people, and indeed the other peoples of Europe, the passionate memory of the days when the underdog cast off his yoke, even though for a while only.

There were many parties and groups fighting for mastery in the early days of the Revolution. There were the royalists, indulging in the vain hope of keeping Louis XVI as an absolute king; the moderate liberals wanting a constitution and prepared to keep the King as a limited monarch; the moderate republicans, called the party of the Girondists; and the more extreme republicans, named the Jacobins, because they used to meet in the hall of the Jacobin Convent. These were the main groups, and among them all, and outside them, were many adventurers. Behind all these groups and individuals were the masses of France, and especially of Paris, acting under many an unknown leader from their own ranks. In foreign countries, especially in England, there were the émigrés, the French nobles who had run away from the Revolution and were continually intriguing against it. All the Powers of Europe were ranged against revolutionary France. Parliamentary but aristocratic England, as well as the kings and emperors of the Continent, were equally afraid of this strange eruption of the common man, and tried to crush it.

The royalists and the King intrigued, and only brought their own ruin nearer. The party which was most important at first in the National Assembly was that of the moderate liberals, who wanted a constitution somewhat after the fashion of England and America. Their leader was Mirabeau. For nearly two years we were in power in the Assembly and, flushed with the success of the first days of the Revolution, they made many brave declarations and brought about some important changes. Twenty days after the fall of the Bastille, on August 4, 1789, there was a dramatic scene in the Assembly. The subject before the Assembly was the abolition of feudal rights and privileges. There was something in the air of France then which went to the heads of the people, and even the feudal lords seem to have been intoxicated for a while by the new wine of freedom. Great nobles and leaders of the Church got up in the Assembly Chamber and vied with each other in giving up their feudal rights and special privileges. It was an honest and generous gesture, though it did not have much effect for some years. Sometimes, but rarely, such generous impulses move a privileged class; or perhaps it may be that a realization comes to it that the end of privilege is near and a virtuous generosity is the best course. Only a few days ago we saw a wonderful gesture of this kind made by the caste Hindus in India when Dapu fasted to remove
untouchability and, as if by a magician's wand, a wave of feeling passed through the land. The chains that Hindus had placed over many of their brethren fell from them in some measure, and a thousand doors, that had been closed to these untouchables for ages, opened out to them.

So in aflush of enthusiasm the National Assembly of revolutionary France abolished, by resolution at least, serfdom and privileges and feudal courts and the exemption of nobles and clergy from taxation, and even titles. It was strange that although the King still remained, the nobility lost their titles.

The Assembly then went on to pass a Declaration of the Rights of Man. The idea for this famous declaration was probably taken from the American Declaration of Independence. But the American declaration is short and simple, the French one long and rather complicated. The Rights of Man were the rights which were supposed to ensure him equality and liberty and happiness. Very brave and daring seemed this Declaration of the Rights of Man at the time, and for nearly 100 years afterwards it was the charter of the liberals and democrats of Europe. And yet to-day it is out of date and does not solve any of the problems of our time. It took a long time for people to discover that more equality before the law and the possession of a vote do not ensure real equality or liberty or happiness, and that those in power have other ways of exploiting them still. Political thought has advanced or changed much since the days of the French Revolution, and probably even most of the conservatives to-day would accept the high-sounding principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But that does not mean, as all of us can find out without much trouble, that they are prepared to grant real equality and freedom. This Declaration, indeed, protected private property. The estates of the big nobles and the Church were confiscated for other reasons relating to feudal rights and special privileges. But the right to own property was considered a sacred and inviolable one. As you perhaps now know, advanced political thought now considers that private property is an evil and should, as far as possible, be abolished.

The Declaration of the Rights of Man may seem to us to-day a commonplace document. The brave ideals of yesterday often enough become the commonplaces of to-day. But at the time it was proclaimed it sent a thrill through Europe, and it seemed to carry the fair promise of better times to all who suffered any of the days of the French Revolution, and probably even most of the conservatives to-day would accept the high-sounding principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man. But that does not mean, as all of us can find out without much trouble, that they are prepared to grant real equality and freedom. This Declaration, indeed, protected private property. The estates of the big nobles and the Church were confiscated for other reasons relating to feudal rights and special privileges. But the right to own property was considered a sacred and inviolable one. As you perhaps now know, advanced political thought now considers that private property is an evil and should, as far as possible, be abolished.

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The Assembly brought about many other useful reforms. The vast property of the Church was confiscated by the State. A new division of France was made into eighty departments and this division, I believe, still exists. Better law-courts, to take the place of the old feudal courts, were set up. All this was to the good, but it did not go far enough. It did not benefit much the peasantry who hungered for land or the common people in the towns who hungered for bread. The Revolution seemed to have been arrested. As I have told you, the masses, the peasantry and the common people of the towns were not represented in the Assembly at all. The Assembly was controlled by the middle classes, under the leadership of Mirabeau; and as soon as they felt that they had gained their objects, they tried their best to stop the Revolution. They even began to ally themselves to King Louis and to shoot down the peasantry in the provinces. Their leader, Mirabeau, actually became the secret advisor of the King. And the common people, who had stormed and captured the Bastille and thought that they had thereby cast aside their chains, wondered what had happened. Their freedom seemed to be as far off as ever, and the new National Assembly was keeping them down almost in the manner of the old lords.

Boiled in the Assembly, the people of Paris, which was the heart of the Revolution, found another outlet for their revolutionary energy. This was the Commune or municipality of Paris. Not only the Commune, but each section of the city, which returned several members to the Commune, had a living organization, in direct touch with the masses. The Commune, and the sections especially, became the standard-bearers of the Revolution and the rivals of the moderate and middle-class Assembly.

Meanwhile the anniversary of the fall of the Bastille came round, and the people of Paris held a great fête on July 14. The Fête of the Federation it was called; and the common people of Paris gave their labour freely to decorate the city, for they felt that the fête was theirs.

So the Revolution stood in 1790 and 1781. The Assembly had lost all its revolutionary ardour and had had enough of changes; but the people of Paris were still simmering with revolutionary energy, the peasantry still looking hungrily at the land. Matters could not continue long in this way; either the Revolution had to go ahead or to die down. The moderate leader, died early in 1791. In spite of his secret intrigues with the King he was popular with the people and kept them in check. On June 21, 1791, an event took place which decided the fate of the Revolution. This was the flight of King Louis and Marie Antoinette in disguise. They almost managed to reach the frontier. But some peasants recognized them at Varennes, near Vendom, and they were stopped and brought back to Paris.

This act of the King and Queen sealed their fate so far as the people of Paris were concerned. The idea of the republic now grew rapidly, and yet so moderate and so far removed from public sentiment were the Assembly and the government of the day, that they continued to shoot down people who demanded that Louis be dethroned. Marat, one of the great figures of the Revolution, was hunted by the authorities because he denounced the King, after
his flight, as a traitor. He had to hide in the sewers of Paris and contracted a terrible skin disease there.

Still, strange to say, Louis continued in theory as king for over a year more. In September 1791 the National Assembly finished its career and gave place to the Legislative Assembly. This was as moderate as the other, and was representative only of the upper classes. It did not represent the rising fever of France. This fever of revolution spread among the people, and the extreme republicans, the Jacobins, who came from the people, grew in strength.

Meanwhile the Powers of Europe were watching these strange happenings with alarm. For a while Prussia and Austria and Russia were busy with booty elsewhere. They were planning an end to the old kingdom of Poland, but events in France were marching too far ahead, and claimed their attention. In 1792 France was at war with Austria and Prussia. Austria, I might inform you, was now in possession of the Belgian part of the Netherlands, and this had a common frontier with France. Foreign armies advanced into French territory and defeated the French troops. The King was supposed, not without reason, to be in league with them, and all royalists were suspected of treachery. As the dangers grew round them, the people of France became more and more inclined and panicky. They saw spies and traitors everywhere. The revolutionary Commune of Paris took the lead at this crisis, hoisted the Red Flag to signify that the people had proclaimed martial law against the rebellion of the Court, and on August 10, 1792, ordered an attack on the King's palace. The King had them shot down by his Swiss guards. But the victory lay with the people, and the Commune forced the Assembly to depose the King and imprison him.

The Red Flag, as everybody knows, is now the flag of the workers everywhere, of socialism and communism. Formerly it used to be the official flag to proclaim martial law against the people. I imagine, but I am not sure, that the use of this flag by the Paris Commune was the first use of it on behalf of the people, and it was from this that it gradually developed into the workers' flag.

The deposition and imprisonment of the King were not enough. The people of Paris, inflamed at the action of the Swiss guards in shooting and killing many of them, and full of fear and anger at traitors and spies, went about arresting the people whom they suspected and killing the prisoners with them. Many of these arrested were not even guilty, but many innocent persons were also arrested and imprisoned. Some days later another fierce wave of passion came over the people, and they brought out their prisoners from the prisons and, after a mock trial, killed most of them. Over 1000 persons were killed in these "September massacres", as they are called. This was the first taste of blood on a large scale which the Paris mob got. Much more blood was to flow before the thirst was satisfied.

In September also occurred the first victory of the French troops over the invading Austrians and Prussians. This was at the little battle of Valmy, small in itself but with big results, for it saved the Revolution.

On September 21, 1792, the National Convention met. This was a new body taking the place of the Assembly. It was more advanced than the two Assemblies that had gone before it, but it still lagged behind only the Commune. The first thing that the Convention did was to proclaim a republic. The trial of Louis XVI came soon after; he was condemned to death, and on January 21, 1793, he had to pay with his head for the sins of the monarchy. He was guillotined—that is, beheaded by the guillotine. The people of France had now burned their boats behind them. They had taken the final step and defied the kings and emperors of Europe. There was no going back for them, and from the very steps of the guillotine, which was still covered with a king's blood, Danton, a great leader of the Revolution, addressed the assembled crowds and hurled his challenge at these other kings. "The kings of Europe would challenge us," he cried, "we throw them the head of a king!"

102

REVOLUTION AND COUNTER-REVOLUTION

October 13, 1932

KING LOUIS was gone. But even before his death France had undergone an amazing change. The blood of her people was aflame with the fever of revolution; their veins tingled and a flaming enthusiasm took possession of them. Republican France was at bay; the rest of Europe, kindly Europe, was against her. Republican France would show these effete kings and princes how patriots warmed by the sun of liberty could fight. They would fight not only for their own newly won freedom, but for the freedom of all others who were oppressed by kings and nobles. To the nations of Europe the French people sent their message, calling upon them to rise against their rulers, and declaring themselves the friends of all peoples and the enemies of all tyrannical governments. France, la patrie, became the mother of freedom, at whose altar it was a joy to sacrifice. And in this hour of fierce enthusiasm there came to them a wonderful song, in tune with their flaming mood, making them rush forward singing to the battle-front and leap over all obstacles, reckless of the odds. This was Rouget de Lisle's war-song for the army of the Rhine, known since then as the Marseillaise, and even now the national song of the French.

Allez, enfants de la patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé,
Contre nous de la tyrannie,
L'étendard sanglant est levé,
Entendez-vous dans les campagnes,
Mugir ces féroces soldats !
The war spread. England became a powerful enemy because of her navy. Republican France had built up a great land army, but on the sea she was weak. England started a blockade of all French ports. From England also the French émigrés poured into France millions of false assignats or currency notes of the French Republic. In this way they tried to ruin French currency and finances.

The foreign war dominated everything, and all the energy of the nation went into it. Such wars are dangerous for revolutions, for they turn attention from social problems to fighting the foreign enemy, and thus the real object of the revolution is defeated. War fever takes the place of the fever of revolution. So it happened in France and, as we shall see, the last stage of France was the dictatorship of a great military commander.

There was trouble also at home. In the Vendée, in the west of France, a great peasant revolt broke out, partly because of the refusal of the peasantry there to join the new armies, and partly because of the efforts of the royalist leaders and émigrés. The Revolution was really being controlled and directed by the city people of Paris; the peasantry could not understand or appreciate the swift changes in the capital, and they lagged behind. The Vendée revolt was suppressed with great cruelty. During war, and especially civil war, the worst passions are aroused and pity becomes a luxury for the wretched. In Lyons there was a counter-revolutionary rising. It was put down and a proposal was made that the great city of Lyons be destroyed as a punishment! “Lyons must be made war against liberty—Lyons exists no more!” Fortunately this proposal was not accepted, but Lyons was made to suffer a great deal.

Meanwhile what was happening in Paris? Who was in control there? A newly elected Commune and its sections still dominated the life of the city. In the National Convention there was a struggle for life between the various groups, chief amongst which were the Girondins or the moderate republicans and the Jacobins or the extreme republicans. The Jacobins won, and at the beginning of June 1793 most of the Girondin deputies were excluded from the Convention. The Convention now took the final step to abolish feudal rights, and lands which had belonged to the feudal lords were restored to the local communes or municipalities—that is, these lands became common property.

The Convention, dominated by the Jacobins now, appointed two committees—the Committees of Public Welfare and Public Safety —and gave them wide powers. These committees, and especially the one on Public Safety, soon became very powerful and dreaded. They drove the Convention on from step to step till the Revolution tumbled into the abyss of the Terror. Fear still cast its shadow over everybody: fear of the foreign enemies who surrounded them, of spies and traitors, and there were many of these. Fear blinds and makes desperate, and the Convention, urged on by this ever-haunting fear, passed a terrible law in September 1793—the Law of Suspects. No one who was suspected was safe, and who could
be free from being suspected? A month later twenty-two Girondin deputes of the Convention were tried by the Revolutionary Tribunal and rapidly sentenced to death.

Thus began the Terror. Daily there were journeys to the guillotine of those who were condemned; daily the carts—tumbrils they were called—carrying these victims, creaked and rumbled over the cobbled-streets of the Paris streets, and the people jeered at the unhappy persons. To speak even in the Convention against the ruling clique was dangerous, for that led to suspicion, and suspicion led to trial and the guillotine. The Convention was controlled by the Committees of Public Welfare and Public Safety. These Committees, with all the power of life and death in their hands, did not like to share it with others. They objected to the Commune of Paris; indeed, they objected to everyone who did not agree with them. Power has an extraordinary way of corrupting people. So these Committees set about to crush the Commune, which, with its sections, had been the backbone of the Revolution. They crushed the sections first, and, having lopped off its supports, they crushed the Commune. Thus does revolution often eat itself up. The sections in each part of Paris were the links which joined the populace with the people on top; they were the veins through which ran the red blood of the Revolution, which gave it strength and life. The crushing of the sections and the Commune early in 1794 meant the cutting off of this life-blood. Henceforth the Convention and the Committees were organs of government on top, not in living touch with the people, trying, like all those in authority, to impose their will on others by means of the Terror. This was the beginning of the end of the real revolutionary period. For another six months the Terror was to continue and the Revolution drag on. But the end was in sight.

Who were the leaders of Paris and France during these days of storm and stress? Many names stand out. Camille Desmoulins, the man who led the attack on the Bastille in 1789, and played a popular part on many another occasion. pleading for a policy of clemency during the Terror, he himself fell a victim to the guillotine, to be followed only a few days later by his young wife, Luiclle, who preferred death to living without him. Fabre d'Eglantine, the poet, Fouquier-Tinville, the dreaded public prosecutor, Marat, perhaps the greatest and ablest of the men of the Revolution, stabbed to death by a young girl, Charlotte Corday. Danton, whom I have twice quoted already, brave and leonine, a great and popular orator, but none the less to end on the guillotine. And Robespierre, the best known of all, the leader of the Jacobins and practically the dictator of the Convention during the days of the Terror. He has become almost the embodiment of the Terror, and many people think of him with a shudder. Yet of this man's honesty and patriotism there is no question; he was known as the "incorruptible". But simple as he was in his life, he was inordinately self-centred, and he seemed to think that everyone who differed from him was a traitor to the Republic and the Revolution.

Many of the great men of the Revolution, who had been his colleagues, were sent to the guillotine at his instance; till at last the Convention which had been following him so meekly turned upon him. They called him a tyrant and a despot, and put an end to him and his despotism.

All these leaders of the Revolution were young men; revolutions are born made by the old. Important as many of these leaders were, none of them, not even Robespierre, plays a dominating part in the great drama. Before the fact of the Revolution itself they seem to shrink; for the Revolution was not brought about, or even controlled, by them. It was one of those elemental and humbld earth-quakes which occur from time to time in history, and which social conditions and long-continued misery and despotism prepare, slowly but irrecoverably.

Do not imagine that the Convention did nothing except quarrel and guillotine. The energy released by a real revolution is always very great. Much of this was absorbed by the foreign wars, but still much remained, and a great deal of constructive work was done. In particular, the whole system of national education was overhauled. The Metric System, which every child in school learns now, was introduced then, and it simplified all weights and measures of length and volume. This system has spread now to most parts of the civilized world, but conservative England still sticks to an ancient out-of-date system of yards and furlongs and pounds and hundredweights and the like. We in India have to put up with these complicated lengths and weights as well as seers and maunds, etc.

As a logical corollary to the metric system, there was a new republican calendar. It began from the day the Republic was proclaimed, September 22, 1792. The week of seven days was changed to a week of ten days, the tenth day being a holiday. There were twelve months still, but their names were changed. Fabre d'Eglantine, the poet, gave delightful new names to the months, in accordence with the season. The three spring months were Germinal, Floréal, Prairial; the summer months were Messidor, Thermidor, Fructidor; autumn came in Vendémiaire, Brumaire, Frimaire; and winter in Nivôse, Pluviôse, Ventôse. This calendar did not long survive the Republic.

At one time there was a strong movement against Christianity and the worship of Reason was proposed. Temples of Truth were put up. The movement spread rapidly to the provinces. In November 1793 there was a great Fête of Liberty and Reason in Nôtre Dame Cathedral in Paris, and a beautiful woman personified Reason. But Robespierre was conservative in such matters. He did not approve of this movement. Neither did Danton. The Jacobin Committee of Public Welfare was against it, and the leaders of the movement were therefore guillotined. There was no half-way house between power and the guillotine. As a counterblast to the Fête of Liberty and Reason, Robespierre arranged another celebration—the Fête of the Supreme Being. By a vote of
the Convention it was decided that France believed in a Supreme Being! The Roman Catholic religion crept back again into favour.

After the crushing of the Paris sections and Commune, matters were rapidly coming to a head. The Jacobins were supreme; they controlled the government, but they were forty years too late. The guillotining of Hébert and his supporters, who had taken the lead in the Fête of Liberty and Reason, was the first big break in the Jacobin party. Fabre d'Eglantine followed; and when, early in 1794, Danton and Camille Desmoulins and others protested against Robespierre sending too many people to the guillotine, they themselves were struck down. The execution of Danton, in April 1794, carried out in a hurry lest the people should intervene, meant to the people of Paris and the provinces that the Revolution had ended. A lion of the Revolution had fallen, and a narrow clique was now in power. Surrounded by enemies, cut off from the people, this clique spotted treason everywhere and saw no other way of saving itself than to intensify the Terror.

So the Terror grew worse and the tumbrils rolling to the guillotine were more crowded with victims than ever. In June a new law was passed, called the Law of the 22nd Prairial, which made it a crime, punishable by death, to spread false news to divide or stir up the people, to undermine morality and corrupt the public conscience. Everyone who differed from Robespierre and his henchmen could be caught in the wide net of this law. Large groups of persons were tried together and sentenced—as many as 150, a mixture of convicts, royalists and others, being tried together on one occasion.

Forty-six days this new Terror lasted. At last, on the 9th Thermidor (July 27, 1794), the worm turned. The Convention suddenly turned against Robespierre and his supporters, and with cries of “Down with the tyrant!”, they arrested them, and would not allow Robespierre even to speak. The next day the tumbril carried him to the guillotine where he had sent so many. Thus ended the French Revolution.

After the fall of Robespierre came the counter-revolution. The Moderates came to the front, and these people now fell on the Jacobins and terrorized over them. After the Red Terror there came what is called the White Terror. Fifteen months later, in October 1795, the Convention broke up and a Directory of five members became the Government. This was definitely a bourgeois government, and it tried to keep down the common people. For over four years the Directory ruled France and, each was the prestige and strength of the Republic even after all the internal troubles, it carried on victorious war abroad. There were some insurrections against it, but they were put down. One of these was suppressed by a young general of the Republican Army, Napoleon Bonaparte, who dared to fire at the Paris crowd—this is famous as the “whiff of grapeshot”—and kill many of them. When the old Revolutionary Army could itself be used to kill the common people of France, then obviously there was no shadow of revolution left.

So the Revolution ended, and many of the bright dreams of the idealists and the hopes of the poor ended with it. And yet it had gained much that it set out to gain. No counter-revolution could bring back serfdom again, and not even the Bourbon kings—the French dynasty was Bourbon—when they came back, could take back the land which had been distributed among the peasantry. The common man in the field or in the town was far better off than he had ever been before. Indeed, even during the Terror he was better off than before the Revolution. The Terror was not against him, but against the upper classes; though towards the end some of the poorer people also suffered under it.

The Revolution fell, but the republican idea spread throughout Europe, and with it went the principles which had been proclaimed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

October 27, 1932

I have not written for two weeks. I am afraid I grow slack. The thought that I am approaching the end of my story keeps me back a little. Already we are at the end of the eighteenth century; the 100 years of the nineteenth century await our inspection, and then we shall have just two and thirty years of the twentieth to bring us right up to to-day. But these 132 years that remain will take a lot of telling. Being quite near us, they loom large and fill our minds, and seem to us more important than earlier events. Much that we see around us to-day has its roots in these years, and indeed I shall have no easy task in leading you through the dense forest of events and happenings of the last century and more. Perhaps this is the reason why I think it! But I wonder also what I shall do when, at last, I bring this story of man to the year 1932, and the past merges into the present and stops being the shadow of the future. What shall I write to you then, my dear? What pretext shall I find to sit down in hand and think of you, or imagine you sitting by me asking me many a question which I try to answer?

Three letters I have written about the French Revolution—three long letters about five brief years in the history of France. During our journey through the ages we have taken centuries at a stride, and we have seen continents at a glance. But here in France, between the years 1789 and 1794, we have made a fairly lengthy stay; and yet you will be surprised to learn that I have tried very hard to be brief, for my mind was full of the subject and my pen wanted to run on. The French Revolution is important historically. It marks the end of an epoch and the beginning of another. But it fascinates even more by its dramatic character, and it teaches many a lesson to all of us. The world is to-day again in a ferment, and we are on the eve of great changes. In our own country we