

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION. BOOK THE FIRST

William Blake

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The dead brood over Europe: the cloud and vision descends over cheerful France;
O cloud well appointed! Sick, sick, the Prince on his couch! wreath'd in dim
And appalling mist; his strong hand outstretch'd, from his shoulder down the bone,
Runs aching cold into the sceptre, too heavy for mortal grasp no more To be swayèd by visible hand, nor in
cruelty bruise the mild flourishing mountains.
Sick the mountains! and all their vineyards weep, in the eyes of the kingly mourner;
Pale is the morning cloud in his visage. Rise, Necker! the ancient dawn calls us
To awake from slumbers of five thousand years. I awake, but my soul is in dreams;
From my window I see the old mountains of France, like agèd men, fading away.

Troubled, leaning on Necker, descends the King to his chamber of council; shady mountains
In fear utter voices of thunder; the woods of France embosom the sound; Clouds of wisdom prophetic reply,
and roll over the palace roof heavy.
Forty men, each conversing with woes in the infinite shadows of his soul, Like our ancient fathers in regions
of twilight, walk, gathering round the King:
Again the loud voice of France cries to the morning; the morning prophesies to its clouds.

For the Commons convene in the Hall of the Nation. France shakes! And the heavens of France
Perplex'd vibrate round each careful countenance! Darkness of old times around them
Utters loud despair, shadowing Paris; her grey towers groan, and the Bastille trembles.

In its terrible towers the Governor stood, in dark fogs list'ning the horror; A thousand his soldiers, old
veterans of France, breathing red clouds of power and dominion.
Sudden seiz'd with howlings, despair, and black night, he stalk'd like a lion from tower
To tower; his howlings were heard in the Louvre; from court to court restless he dragg'd
His strong limbs; from court to court curs'd the fierce torment unquell'd, Howling and giving the dark
command; in his soul stood the purple plague,
Tugging his iron manacles, and piercing thro' the seven towers dark and sickly,
Panting over the prisoners like a wolf gorg'd. And the den nam'd Horror held a man
Chain'd hand and foot; round his neck an iron band, bound to the impregnable wall;
In his soul was the serpent coil'd round in his heart, hid from the light, as in a cleft rock:
And the man was confin'd for a writing prophetic. In the tower nam'd Darkness was a man
Pinion'd down to the stone floor, his strong bones scarce cover'd with sinews; the iron rings
Were forg'd smaller as the flesh decay'd: a mask of iron on his face hid the lineaments
Of ancient Kings, and the frown of the eternal lion was hid from the oppressèd earth.
In the tower nam'd Bloody, a skeleton yellow remainèd in its chains on its couch
Of stone, once a man who refus'd to sign papers of abhorrence; the eternal worm
Crept in the skeleton. In the den nam'd Religion, a loathsome sick woman bound down
To a bed of straw; the seven diseases of earth, like birds of prey, stood on the couch
And fed on the body: she refus'd to be whore to the Minister, and with a knife smote him.
In the tower nam'd Order, an old man, whose white beard cover'd the stone floor like weeds

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On margin of the sea, shrivell'd up by heat of day and cold of night; his den was short
And narrow as a grave dug for a child, with spiders' webs wove, and with slime
Of ancient horrors cover'd, for snakes and scorpions are his companions, harmless they breathe
His sorrowful breath: he, by conscience urg'd, in the city of Paris rais'd a pulpit,
And taught wonders to darken'd souls. In the den nam'd Destiny a strong man sat,
His feet and hands cut off, and his eyes blinded; round his middle a chain and a band
Fasten'd into the wall; fancy gave him to see an image of despair in his den,
Eternally rushing round, like a man on his hands and knees, day and night without rest:
He was friend to the favourite. In the seventh tower, nam'd the tower of God, was a man
Mad, with chains loose, which he dragg'd up and down; fed with hopes year by year, he pinèd
For liberty. Vain hopes! his reason decay'd, and the world of attraction in his bosom
Centred, and the rushing of chaos overwhelm'd his dark soul: he was confin'd
For a letter of advice to a King, and his ravings in winds are heard over Versailles.

But the dens shook and trembled: the prisoners look up and assay to shout; they listen,
Then laugh in the dismal den, then are silent; and a light walks round the dark towers.
For the Commons convene in the Hall of the Nation; like spirits of fire in the beautiful
Porches of the Sun, to plant beauty in the desert craving abyss, they gleam On the anxious city: all children
new-born first behold them, tears are fled,
And they nestle in earth-breathing bosoms. So the city of Paris, their wives and children,
Look up to the morning Senate and visions of sorrow leave pensive streets.
But heavy-brow'd jealousies lour o'er the Louvre; and terros of ancient Kings
Descend from the gloom and wander thro' the palace, and weep round the King and his Nobles;
While loud thunders roll, troubling the dead. Kings are sick throughout all the earth!
The voice ceas'd: the Nation sat; and the triple forg'd fetters of times were unloos'd.
The voice ceas'd: the Nation sat; but ancient darkness and trembling wander thro' the palace.

As in day of havoc and routed battle among thick shades of discontent, On the soul-skirting mountains of
sorrow cold waving, the Nobles fold round the King;
Each stern visage lock'd up as with strong bands of iron, each strong limb bound down as with marble,
In flames of red wrath burning, bound in astonishment a quarter of an hour.

Then the King glow'd: his Nobles fold round, like the sun of old time quench'd in clouds;
In their darkness the King stood; his heart flam'd, and utter'd a with'ring heat, and these words burst forth:

"The nerves of five thousand years' ancestry tremble, shaking the heavens of France;
Throbs of anguish beat on brazen war foreheads; they descend and look into their graves.
I see thro' darkness, thro' clouds rolling round me, the spirits of ancient Kings
Shivering over their bleachèd bones; round them their counsellors look up from the dust,
Crying: "Hide from the living! Our bonds and our prisoners shout in the open field.
Hide in the nether earth! Hide in the bones! Sit obscurèd in the hollow scull!
Our flesh is corrupted, and we wear away. We are not numberèd among the living. Let us hide
In stones, among roots of trees. The prisoners have burst their dens.
Let us hide! let us hide in the dust! and plague and wrath and tempest shall cease."
He ceas'd, silent pond'ring; his brows folded heavy, his forehead was in affliction.
Like the central fire from the window he saw his vast armies spread over the hills,
Breathing red fires from man to man, and from horse to horse: then his bosom
Expanded like starry heaven; he sat down: his Nobles took their ancient seats.

Then the ancientest Peer, Duke of Burgundy, rose from the Monarch's right hand, red as wines
From his mountains; an odour of war, like a ripe vineyard, rose from his garments,

And the chamber became as a clouded sky; o'er the Council he stretch'd his red limbs
 Cloth'd in flames of crimson; as a ripe vineyard stretches over sheaves of corn,
 The fierce Duke hung over the Council; around him crowd, weeping in his burning robe,
 A bright cloud of infant souls: his words fall like purple autumn on the sheaves:

`Shall this marble-built heaven become a clay cottage, this earth an oak stool, and these mowers
 From the Atlantic mountains mow down all this great starry harvest of six thousand years?
 And shall Necker, the hind of Geneva, stretch out his crook'd sickle o'er fertile France,
 Till our purple and crimson is faded to russet, and the kingdoms of earth bound in sheaves,
 And the ancient forests of chivalry hewn, and the joys of the combat burnt for fuel;
 Till the power and dominion is rent from the pole, sword and sceptre from sun and moon,
 The law and gospel from fire and air, and eternal reason and science From the deep and the solid, and man
 lay his faded head down on the rock
 Of eternity, where the eternal lion and eagle remain to devour?
 This to prevent, urg'd by cries in day, and prophetic dreams hovering in night,
 To enrich the lean earth that craves, furrow'd with ploughs, whose seed is departing from her,
 Thy Nobles have gather'd thy starry hosts round this rebellious city,
 To rouse up the ancient forests of Europe, with clarions of cloud-breathing war,
 To hear the horse neigh to the drum and trumpet, and the trumpet and war shout reply.
 Stretch the hand that beckons the eagles of heaven: they cry over Paris, and wait
 Till Fayette point his finger to Versailles the eagles of heaven must have their prey!

He ceas'd, and burn'd silent: red clouds roll round Necker; a weeping is heard o'er the palace.
 Like a dark cloud Necker paus'd, and like thunder on the just man's burial day he paus'd.
 Silent sit the winds, silent the meadows; while the husbandman and woman of weakness
 And bright children look after him into the grave, and water his clay with love,
 Then turn towards pensive fields: so Necker paus'd, and his visage was cover'd with clouds.

The King lean'd on his mountains; then lifted his head and look'd on his armies, that shone
 Thro' heaven, tinging morning with beams of blood; then turning to Burgundy, troubled:
 `Burgundy, thou wast born a lion! My soul is o'ergrown with distress For the Nobles of France, and dark
 mists roll round me and blot the writing of God
 Written in my bosom. Necker rise! leave the kingdom, thy life is surrounded with snares.
 We have call'd an Assembly, but not to destroy; we have given gifts, not to the weak;
 I hear rushing of muskets and bright'ning of swords; and visages, redd'ning with war,
 Frowning and looking up from brooding villages and every dark'ning city.
 Ancient wonders frown over the kingdom, and cries of women and babes are heard,
 And tempests of doubt roll around me, and fierce sorrows, because of the Nobles of France.
 Depart! answer not! for the tempest must fall, as in years that are passèd away.'

Dropping a tear the old man his place left, and when he was gone out
 He set his face toward Geneva to flee; and the women and children of the city
 Kneel'd round him and kissèd his garments and wept: he stood a short space in the street,
 Then fled; and the whole city knew he was fled to Geneva, and the Senate heard it.
 But the Nobles burn'd wrathful at Necker's departure, and wreath'd their clouds and waters
 In dismal volumes; as, risen from beneath, the Archbishop of Paris arose
 In the rushing of scales, and hissing of flames, and rolling of sulphurous smoke:

`Hearken, Monarch of France, to the terrors of heaven, and let thy soul drink of my counsel!
 Sleeping at midnight in my golden tower, the repose of the labours of men
 Wav'd its solemn cloud over my head. I awoke; a cold hand passèd over my limbs, and behold!

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An agèd form, white as snow, hov'ring in mist, weeping in the uncertain light.

Dim the form almost faded, tears fell down the shady cheeks; at his feet many cloth'd

In white robes, strewn in air censers and harps, silent they lay prostrated; Beneath, in the awful void, myriads descending and weeping thro' dismal winds;

Endless the shady train shiv'ring descended, from the gloom where the agèd form wept.

At length, trembling, the vision sighing, in a low voice like the voice of the grasshopper, whisper'd:

"My groaning is heard in the abbeys, and God, so long worshipp'd, departs as a lamp

Without oil; for a curse is heard hoarse thro' the land, from a godless race Descending to beasts; they look downward, and labour, and forget my holy law;

The sound of prayer fails from lips of flesh, and the holy hymn from thicken'd tongues;

For the bars of Chaos are burst; her millions prepare their fiery way

Thro' the orbèd abode of the holy dead, to root up and pull down and remove,

And Nobles and Clergy shall fail from before me, and my cloud and vision be no more;

The mitre become black, the crown vanish, and the sceptre and ivory staff Of the ruler wither among bones of death; they shall consume from the thistly field,

And the sound of the bell, and voice of the sabbath, and singing of the holy choir

Is turn'd into songs of the harlot in day, and cries of the virgin in night.

They shall drop at the plough and faint at the harrow, unredeem'd, unconfess'd, unpardon'd;

The priest rot in his surplice by the lawless lover, the holy beside the accursèd,

The King, frowning in purple, beside the grey ploughman, and their worms embrace together."

The voice ceas'd: a groan shook my chamber. I slept, for the cloud of repose returnèd;

But morning dawn'd heavy upon me. I rose to bring my Prince heaven-utter'd counsel.

Hear my counsel, O King! and send forth thy Generals; the command of Heaven is upon thee!

Then do thou command, O King! to shut up this Assembly in their final home;

Let thy soldiers possess this city of rebels, that threaten to bathe their feet

In the blood of Nobility, trampling the heart and the head; let the Bastille devour

These rebellious seditious; seal them up, O Anointed! in everlasting chains.'

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He sat down: a damp cold pervaded the Nobles, and monsters of worlds unknown
Swam round them, watching to be deliverèd when Aumont, whose chaos-born soul
Eternally wand'ring, a comet and swift-falling fire, pale enter'd the chamber.
Before the red Council he stood, like a man that returns from hollow graves:
`Awe-surrounded, alone thro' the army, a fear and a with'ring blight blown by the north,
The Abbé de Sieyes from the Nation's Assembly, O Princes and Generals of France,
Unquestionèd, unhinderèd! Awe-struck are the soldiers; a dark shadowy man in the form
Of King Henry the Fourth walks before him in fires; the captains like men bound in chains
Stood still as he pass'd: he is come to the Louvre, O King, with a message to thee!
The strong soldiers tremble, the horses their manes bow, and the guards of thy palace are fled!
Uprose awful in his majestic beams Bourbon's strong Duke; his proud sword, from his thigh
Drawn, he threw on the earth: the Duke of Bretagne and the Earl of Bourgogne
Rose inflam'd, to and fro in the chamber, like thunder-clouds ready to burst.
`What damp all our fires, O spectre of Henry!' said Bourbon, `and rend the flames
From the head of our King? Rise, Monarch of France! command me, and I will lead
This army of superstition at large, that the ardour of noble souls, quenchless,
May yet burn in France, nor our shoulders be plough'd with the furrows of poverty.'
Then Orleans, generous as mountains, arose and unfolded his robe, and put forth
His benevolent hand, looking on the Archbishop, who changèd as pale as lead,
Would have risen but could not: his voice issuèd harsh grating; instead of words harsh hissings
Shook the chamber; he ceas'd abash'd. Then Orleans spoke; all was silent.
He breath'd on them, and said: `O Princes of fire, whose flames are for growth, not consuming,
Fear not dreams, fear not visions, nor be you dismay'd with sorrows which flee at the morning!
Can the fires of Nobility ever be quench'd, or the stars by a stormy night?
Is the body diseas'd when the members are healthful? can the man be bound in sorrow
Whose ev'ry function is fill'd with its fiery desire? can the soul, whose brain and heart

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Cast their rivers in equal tides thro' the great Paradise, languish because the feet,
Hands, head, bosom, and parts of love follow their high breathing joy?
And can Nobles be bound when the people are free, or God weep when his children are happy?
Have you never seen Fayette's forehead, or Mirabeau's eyes, or the shoulders of Target,
Or Bailly the strong foot of France, or Clermont the terrible voice, and your robes
Still retain their own crimson? Mine never yet faded, for fire delights in its form!
But go, merciless man, enter into the infinite labyrinth of another's brain
Ere thou measure the circle that he shall run. Go, thou cold recluse, into the fires
Of another's high flaming rich bosom, and return unconsum'd, and write laws.
If thou canst not do this, doubt thy theories, learn to consider all men as thy equals,
Thy brethren, and not as thy foot or thy hand, unless thou first fearest to hurt them.'
The Monarch stood up; the strong Duke his sword to its golden scabbard return'd;
The Nobles sat round like clouds on the mountains, when the storm is passing away:
'Let the Nation's Ambassador come among Nobles, like incense of the valley!'
Aumont went out and stood in the hollow porch, his ivory wand in his hand;
A cold orb of disdain revolv'd round him, and cover'd his soul with snows eternal.
Great Henry's soul shudder'd, a whirlwind and fire tore furious from his angry bosom;
He indignant departed on horses of heav'n. Then the Abbè de Sieyes rais'd his feet
On the steps of the Louvre; like a voice of God following a storm, the Abbé follow'd
The pale fires of Aumont into the chamber; as a father that bows to his son, Whose rich fields inheriting
spread their old glory, so the voice of the people bow'd
Before the ancient seat of the kingdom and mountains to be renew'd.
'Hear, O heavens of France! the voice of the people, arising from valley and hill,
O'erclouded with power. Hear the voice of valleys, the voice of meek cities,
Mourning oppress'd on village and field, till the village and field is a waste.
For the husbandman weeps at blights of the fife, and blasting of trumpets consume

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The souls of mild France; the pale mother nourishes her child to the deadly slaughter.
When the heavens were seal'd with a stone, and the terrible sun clos'd in an orb, and the moon
Rent from the nations, and each star appointed for watchers of night,
The millions of spirits immortal were bound in the ruins of sulphur heaven
To wander enslav'd; black, depress'd in dark ignorance, kept in awe with the whip
To worship terrors, bred from the blood of revenge and breath of desire
In bestial forms, or more terrible men; till the dawn of our peaceful morning,
Till dawn, till morning, till the breaking of clouds, and swelling of winds, and the universal voice;
Till man raise his darken'd limbs out of the caves of night. His eyes and his heart
Expand Where is Space? where, O Sun, is thy dwelling? where thy tent, O faint slumb'rous Moon?
Then the valleys of France shall cry to the soldier: "Throw down thy sword and musket,
And run and embrace the meek peasant." Her Nobles shall hear and shall weep, and put off
The red robe of terror, the crown of oppression, the shoes of contempt, and unbuckle
The girdle of war from the desolate earth. Then the Priest in his thund'rous cloud
Shall weep, bending to earth, embracing the valleys, and putting his hand to the plough,
Shall say: "No more I curse thee; but now I will bless thee: no more in deadly black
Devour thy labour; nor lift up a cloud in thy heavens, O laborious plough;
That the wild raging millions, that wander in forests, and howl in law-blasted wastes,
Strength madden'd with slavery, honesty bound in the dens of superstition,
May sing in the village, and shout in the harvest, and woo in pleasant gardens
Their once savage loves, now beaming with knowledge, with gentle awe adornèd;
And the saw, and the hammer, the chisel, the pencil, the pen, and the instruments
Of heavenly song sound in the wilds once forbidden, to teach the laborious ploughman
And shepherd, deliver'd from clouds of war, from pestilence, from night-fear, from murder,
From falling, from stifling, from hunger, from cold, from slander, discontent and sloth,
That walk in beasts and birds of night, driven back by the sandy desert,

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Like pestilent fogs round cities of men; and the happy earth sing in its course,
The mild peaceable nations be openèd to heav'n, and men walk with their fathers in bliss."
Then hear the first voice of the morning: "Depart, O clouds of night, and no more
Return; be withdrawn cloudy war, troops of warriors depart, nor around our peaceable city
Breathe fires; but ten miles from Paris let all be peace, nor a soldier be seen!" '
He ended: the wind of contention arose, and the clouds cast their shadows; the Princes
Like the mountains of France, whose agèd trees utter an awful voice, and their branches
Are shatter'd; till gradual a murmur is heard descending into the valley,
Like a voice in the vineyards of Burgundy when grapes are shaken on grass,
Like the low voice of the labouring man, instead of the shout of joy;
And the palace appear'd like a cloud driven abroad; blood ran down the ancient pillars.
Thro' the cloud a deep thunder, the Duke of Burgundy, delivers the King's command:
`Seest thou yonder dark castle, that moated around, keeps this city of Paris in awe?
Go, command yonder tower, saying: "Bastille, depart! and take thy shadowy course;
Overstep the dark river, thou terrible tower, and get thee up into the country ten miles.
And thou black southern prison, move along the dusky road to Versailles; there
Frown on the gardens" and, if it obey and depart, then the King will disband
This war-breathing army; but, if it refuse, let the Nation's Assembly thence learn
That this army of terrors, that prison of horrors, are the bands of the murmuring kingdom.'
Like the morning star arising above the black waves, when a ship-wreck'd soul sighs for morning,
Thro' the ranks, silent, walk'd the Ambassador back to the Nation's Assembly, and told
The unwelcome message. Silent they heard; then a thunder roll'd round loud and louder;
Like pillars of ancient halls and ruins of times remote, they sat.
Like a voice from the dim pillars Mirabeau rose; the thunders subsided away;
A rushing of wings around him was heard as he brighten'd, and cried out aloud:
`Where is the General of the Nation?' The walls re-echo'd: `Where is the General of the Nation?'

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Sudden as the bullet wrapp'd in his fire, when brazen cannons rage in the field,
Fayette sprung from his seat saying `Ready!' Then bowing like clouds, man toward man, the Assembly
Like a Council of Ardours seated in clouds, bending over the cities of men,
And over the armies of strife, where their children are marshall'd together to battle,
They murmuring divide; while the wind sleeps beneath, and the numbers are counted in silence,
While they vote the removal of War, and the pestilence weighs his red wings in the sky.
So Fayette stood silent among the Assembly, and the votes were given, and the numbers numb'red;
And the vote was that Fayette should order the army to remove ten miles from Paris.
The agèd Sun rises appall'd from dark mountains, and gleams a dusky beam
On Fayette; but on the whole army a shadow, for a cloud on the eastern hills
Hover'd, and stretch'd across the city, and across the army, and across the Louvre.
Like a flame of fire he stood before dark ranks, and before expecting captains:
On pestilent vapours around him flow frequent spectres of religious men, weeping
In winds; driven out of the abbeys, their naked souls shiver in keen open air;
Driven out by the fiery cloud of Voltaire, and thund'rous rocks of Rousseau,
They dash like foam against the ridges of the army, uttering a faint feeble cry.
Gleams of fire streak the heavens, and of sulphur the earth, from Fayette as he lifted his hand;
But silent he stood, till all the officers rush round him like waves
Round the shore of France, in day of the British flag, when heavy cannons
Affright the coasts, and the peasant looks over the sea and wipes a tear:
Over his head the soul of Voltaire shone fiery; and over the army Rousseau his white cloud
Unfolded, on souls of war, living terrors, silent list'ning toward Fayette.
His voice loud inspir'd by liberty, and by spirits of the dead, thus thunder'd:
`The Nation's Assembly command that the Army remove ten miles from Paris;
Nor a soldier be seen in road or in field, till the Nation command return.'
Rushing along iron ranks glittering, the officers each to his station

Depart, and the stern captain strokes his proud steed, and in front of his solid ranks
Waits the sound of trumpet; captains of foot stand each by his cloudy drum:
Then the drum beats, and the steely ranks move, and trumpets rejoice in the sky.
Dark cavalry, like clouds fraught with thunder, ascend on the hills, and bright infantry, rank
Behind rank, to the soul-shaking drum and shrill fife, along the roads glitter like fire.
The noise of trampling, the wind of trumpets, smote the Palace walls with a blast.
Pale and cold sat the King in midst of his Peers, and his noble heart sunk, and his pulses
Suspended their motion; a darkness crept over his eyelids, and chill cold sweat
Sat round his brows faded in faint death; his Peers pale like mountains of the dead,
Cover'd with dews of night, groaning, shaking forests and floods. The cold newt,
And snake, and damp toad on the kingly foot crawl, or croak on the awful knee,
Shedding their slime; in folds of the robe the crown'd adder builds and hisses
From stony brows: shaken the forests of France, sick the kings of the nations,
And the bottoms of the world were open'd, and the graves of archangels unseal'd:
The enormous dead lift up their pale fires and look over the rocky cliffs.
A faint heat from their fires reviv'd the cold Louvre; the frozen blood reflow'd.
Awful uprose the King; him the Peers follow'd; they saw the courts of the Palace
Forsaken, and Paris without a soldier, silent. For the noise was gone up
And follow'd the army; and the Senate in peace sat beneath morning's beam.