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CHAMBERS'S EDINBURGH JOURNAL, NO. 426

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 426

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 426 / Various — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

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Chambers's Edinburgh Journal, No. 426 / Volume 17, New Series, February 28, 1852

TIME'S REVIEW OF CHARACTER ROBESPIERRE

Some characters are a puzzle to history, and none is more so than that of Robespierre. According to popular belief, this personage was a blood-thirsty monster, a vulgar tyrant, who committed the most unheard-of enormities, with the basely selfish object of raising himself to supreme power—of becoming the Cromwell of the Revolution. Considering that Robespierre was for five years—1789 to 1794—a prime leader in the political movements in France; that for a length of time he was personally concerned in sending from forty to fifty heads to the scaffold per diem; and that the Reign of Terror ceased immediately on his overthrow—it is not surprising that his character is associated with all that is villainous and detestable. Nevertheless, as the obscurities of the great revolutionary drama clear up, a strange suspicion begins to be entertained, that the popular legend respecting Robespierre is in a considerable degree fallacious; nay, it is almost thought that this man was, in reality, a most kind-hearted, simple, unambitious, and well-disposed individual—a person who, to say the least of it, deeply deplored the horrors in which considerations of duty had unhappily involved him. To attempt an unravelment of these contradictions, let us call up the phantom of this mysterious personage, and subject him to review.

To understand Robespierre, it is necessary to understand the French Revolution. The proximate cause of that terrible convulsion was, as is well known, an utter disorder in all the functions of the state, and more particularly in the finances, equivalent to national bankruptcy. That matters might have been substantially patched up by judicious statesmanship, no one doubts; but that a catastrophe, sooner or later, was unavoidable, seems to be equally certain. The mind of France was rotten; the principles of society were undermined. As regards religion, there was a universal scepticism, of which the best literature of the day was the exponent; but this unbelief was greatly strengthened by the scandalous abuses in the ecclesiastical system. It required no depth of genius to point out that the great principles of brotherly love, humility, equality, liberty, promulgated as part and parcel of the Christian dispensation eighteen centuries previously, had no practical efficacy so far as France was concerned. Instead of equality before God and the law, the humbler classes were feudal serfs, without any appeal from the cruel oppressions to which they were exposed. In the midst of gloom, Rousseau's vague declamations on the rights of man fell like a ray of light. A spark was communicated, which kindled a flame in the bosoms of the more thoughtful and enthusiastic. An astonishing impulse was almost at once given to investigation. The philosopher had his adherents all over France. Viewed as a species of prophet, he was, properly speaking, a madman, who in his ravings had glanced on the truth, but only glanced. Among men of sense, his ornate declamations concerning nature and reason would have excited little more attention than that which is usually given to poetic and speculative fancies.

Amidst an impulsive and lively people, unaccustomed to the practical consideration and treatment of abuses, there arose a cry to destroy, root up; to sweep away all preferences and privileges; to bring down the haughty, and raise the depressed; to let all men be free and equal, all men being brothers. Such is the origin of the three words—liberty, equality, and fraternity, which were caught up as the charter of social intercourse. It is for ever to be regretted that this explosion of sentiment was so utterly destructive in its character; for therein has it inflicted immense wrong on what is abstractedly true and beautiful. At first, as will be remembered, the revolutionists did not aim at establishing a

republic, but that form of government necessarily grew out of their hallucinations. Without pausing to consider that a nation of emancipated serfs were unprepared to take on themselves the duties of an enlightened population, the plunge was unhesitatingly made.

At this comparatively distant day, even with all the aids of the recording press, we can form no adequate idea of the fervour with which this great social overthrow was set about and accomplished. The best minds in France were in a state of ecstasy, bordering on delirium. A vast future of human happiness seemed to dawn. Tyranny, force, fraud, all the bad passions, were to disappear under the beneficent approach of Reason. Among the enthusiasts who rushed into this marvellous frenzy, was Maximilian Robespierre. It is said by his biographers, that Robespierre was of English or Scotch origin: we have seen an account which traced him to a family in the north, of not a dissimilar name. His father, at all events, was an advocate at Arras, in French Flanders, and here Maximilian was born in 1759. Bred to the law, he was sent as a representative to the States-General in 1789, and from this moment he entered on his career, and Paris was his home. At his outset, he made no impression, and scarcely excited public notice. His manners were singularly reserved, and his habits austere. The man lived within himself. Brooding over the works of Rousseau, he indulged in the dream of renovating the moral world. Like Mohammed contriving the dogmas of a new religion, Robespierre spent days in solitude, pondering on his destiny. To many of the revolutionary leaders, the struggle going on was merely a political drama, with a Convention for the *dénouement*. To Robespierre, it was a philosophical problem; all his thoughts aimed at the ideal—at the apotheosis of human nature.

Let us take a look at his personal appearance. Visionaries are usually slovens. They despise fashions, and imagine that dirtiness is an attribute of genius. To do the honourable member for Artois justice, he was above this affectation. Small and neat in person, he always appeared in public tastefully dressed, according to the fashion of the period—hair well combed back, frizzled, and powdered; copious frills at the breast and wrists; a stainless white waistcoat; light-blue coat, with metal buttons; the sash of a representative tied round his waist; light-coloured breeches, white stockings, and shoes with silver buckles. Such was his ordinary costume; and if we stick a rose in his button-hole, or place a nosegay in his hand, we shall have a tolerable idea of his whole equipment. It is said he sometimes appeared in top-boots, which is not improbable; for this kind of boot had become fashionable among the republicans, from a notion that as top-boots were worn by gentlemen in England, they were allied to constitutional government. Robespierre's features were sharp, and enlivened by bright and deeply-sunk blue eyes. There was usually a gravity and intense thoughtfulness in his countenance, which conveyed an idea of his being thoroughly in earnest. Yet, his address was not unpleasing. Unlike modern French politicians, his face was always smooth, with no vestige of beard or whiskers. Altogether, therefore, he may be said to have been a well-dressed, gentlemanly man, animated with proper self-respect, and having no wish to court vulgar applause by neglecting the decencies of polite society.

Before entering on his public career in Paris, Robespierre had probably formed his plans, in which, at least to outward appearance, there was an entire negation of self. A stern incorruptibility seemed the basis of his character; and it is quite true that no offers from the court, no overtures from associates, had power to tempt him. There was only one way by which he could sustain a high-souled independence, and that was the course adopted in like circumstances by Andrew Marvel—simple wants, rigorous economy, a disregard of fine company, an avoidance of expensive habits. Now, this is the curious thing in Robespierre's history. Perhaps there was a tinge of pride in his living a life of indigence; but in fairness it is entitled to be called an honest pride, when we consider that the means of profusion were within his reach. On his arrival in Paris, he procured a humble lodging in the Marais, a populous district in the north-eastern faubourgs; but it being represented to him some time afterwards, that, as a public man, it was unsafe to expose himself in a long walk daily to and from this obscure residence, he removed to a house in the Rue St Honoré, now marked No. 396, opposite the Church of the Assumption. Here he found a lodging with M. Duplay, a respectable but humble

cabinet-maker, who had become attached to the principles of the Revolution; and here he was joined by his brother, who played an inferior part in public affairs, and is known in history as 'the Younger Robespierre.' The selection of this dwelling seems to have fallen in with Robespierre's notions of economy; and it suited his limited patrimony, which consisted of some rents irregularly paid by a few small farmers of his property in Artois. These ill-paid rents, with his salary as a representative, are said to have supported three persons—himself, his brother, and his sister; and so straitened was he in circumstances, that he had to borrow occasionally from his landlord. Even with all his pinching, he did not make both ends meet. We have it on authority, that at his death he was owing L.160; a small debt to be incurred during a residence of five years in Paris, by a person who figured as a leader of parties; and the insignificance of this sum attests his remarkable self-denial.

Lamartine's account of the private life of Robespierre in the house of the Duplays is exceedingly fascinating, and we should suppose is founded on well-authorised facts. The house of Duplay, he says, 'was low, and in a court surrounded by sheds filled with timber and plants, and had almost a rustic appearance. It consisted of a parlour opening to the court, and communicating with a sitting-room that looked into a small garden. From the sitting-room a door led into a small study, in which was a piano. There was a winding-staircase to the first floor, where the master of the house lived, and thence to the apartment of Robespierre.'

Here, long acquaintance, a common table, and association for several years, 'converted the hospitality of Duplay into an attachment that became reciprocal. The family of his landlord became a second family to Robespierre, and while they adopted his opinions, they neither lost the simplicity of their manners nor neglected their religious observances. They consisted of a father, mother, a son yet a youth, and four daughters, the eldest of whom was twenty-five, and the youngest eighteen. Familiar with the father, filial with the mother, paternal with the son, tender and almost brotherly with the young girls, he inspired and felt in this small domestic circle all those sentiments that only an ardent soul inspires and feels by spreading abroad its sympathies. Love also attached his heart, where toil, poverty, and retirement had fixed his life. Eléonore Duplay, the eldest daughter of his host, inspired Robespierre with a more serious attachment than her sisters. The feeling, rather predilection than passion, was more reasonable on the part of Robespierre, more ardent and simple on the part of the young girl. This affection afforded him tenderness without torment, happiness without excitement: it was the love adapted for a man plunged all day in the agitation of public life—a repose of the heart after mental fatigue. He and Eléonore lived in the same house as a betrothed couple, not as lovers. Robespierre had demanded the young girl's hand from her parents, and they had promised it to him.

'"The total want of fortune," he said, "and the uncertainty of the morrow, prevented him from marrying her until the destiny of France was determined; but he only awaited the moment when the Revolution should be concluded, in order to retire from the turmoil and strife, marry her whom he loved, go to reside with her in Artois, on one of the farms he had saved among the possessions of his family, and there to mingle his obscure happiness in the common lot of his family."

'The vicissitudes of the fortune, influence, and popularity of Robespierre effected no change in his simple mode of living. The multitude came to implore favour or life at the door of his house, yet nothing found its way within. The private lodging of Robespierre consisted of a low chamber, constructed in the form of a garret, above some cart-sheds, with the window opening upon the roof. It afforded no other prospect than the interior of a small court, resembling a wood-store, where the sounds of the workmen's hammers and saws constantly resounded, and which was continually traversed by Madame Duplay and her daughters, who there performed all their household duties. This chamber was also separated from that of the landlord by a small room common to the family and himself. On the other side were two rooms, likewise attics, which were inhabited, one by the son of the master of the house, the other by Simon Duplay, Robespierre's secretary, and the nephew of his host.

'The chamber of the deputy contained only a wooden bedstead, covered with blue damask ornamented with white flowers, a table, and four straw-bottomed chairs. This apartment served him

at once for a study and dormitory. His papers, his reports, the manuscripts of his discourses, written by himself in a regular but laboured hand, and with many marks of erasure, were placed carefully on deal-shelves against the wall. A few chosen books were also ranged thereon. A volume of Jean Jacques Rousseau or of Racine was generally open upon his table, and attested his philosophical and literary predilections.'

With a mind continually on the stretch, and concerned less or more in all the great movements of the day, the features of this remarkable personage 'relaxed into absolute gaiety when in-doors, at table, or in the evening, around the wood-fire in the humble chamber of the cabinet-maker. His evenings were all passed with the family, in talking over the feelings of the day, the plans of the morrow, the conspiracies of the aristocrats, the dangers of the patriots, and the prospects of public felicity after the triumph of the Revolution. Sometimes Robespierre, who was anxious to cultivate the mind of his betrothed, read to the family aloud, and generally from the tragedies of Racine. He seldom went out in the evening; but two or three times a year he escorted Madame Duplay and her daughter to the theatre. On other days, Robespierre retired early to his chamber, lay down, and rose again at night to work. The innumerable discourses he had delivered in the two national assemblies, and to the Jacobins; the articles written for his journal while he had one; the still more numerous manuscripts of speeches which he had prepared, but never delivered; the studied style so remarkable; the indefatigable corrections marked with his pen upon the manuscripts—attest his watchings and his determination.

'His only relaxations were solitary walks in imitation of his model, Jean Jacques Rousseau. His sole companion in these perambulations was his great dog, which slept at his chamber-door, and always followed him when he went out. This colossal animal, well known in the district, was called Brount. Robespierre was much attached to him, and constantly played with him. Occasionally, on a Sunday, all the family left Paris with Robespierre; and the politician, once more the man, amused himself with the mother, the sisters, and the brother of Eléonore in the wood of Versailles or of Issy.' Strange contradiction! The man who is thus described as so amiable, so gentle, so satisfied with the humble pleasures of an obscure family circle, went forth daily on a self-imposed mission of turbulence and terror. Let us follow him to the scene of his avocations. Living in the Rue St Honoré, he might be seen every morning on his way, by one of the narrow streets which led to the rooms of the National Assembly, or Convention, as the legislative body was called after the deposition of Louis XVI. The house so occupied, was situated on a spot now covered by the Rue Rivoli, opposite the gardens of the Tuileries. In connection with it, were several apartments used by committees; and there, by the leading members of the House, the actual business of the nation was for a long time conducted. It was by the part he played in one of these formidable committees, that of 'Public Safety'—more properly, public insecurity—that he becomes chargeable with his manifold crimes. For the commission of these atrocities, however, he held himself to be entirely excused; and how he could possibly entertain any such notion, remains for us to notice.

The action of the Revolution was in the hands of three parties, into which the Convention was divided—namely, the Montagnards, the Girondists, and the Plaine. The last mentioned were a comparatively harmless set of persons, who acted as a neutral body, and leaned one way or the other according to their convictions, but whose votes it was important to obtain. Between the Montagnards and the Girondists there was no distinct difference of principle—both were keen republicans and levellers; but in carrying out their views, the Montagnards were the most violent and unscrupulous. The Girondists expected that, after a little preliminary harshness, the Republic would be established in a pacific manner; by the force, it may be called, of philosophic conviction spreading through society. They were thus the moderates; yet their moderation was unfortunately ill manifested. At the outset, they countenanced the disgraceful mobbings of the royal family; they gloried in the horrors of the 10th of August, and the humiliation of the king; and only began to express fears that things were going too far, when massacre became the order of the day, and the guillotine assumed the character

of a national institution. They were finally borne down, as is well known, by the superior energy and audacity of their opponents; and all perished one way or other in the bloody struggle. Few pity them.

We need hardly recall the fact, that the discussions in the Convention were greatly influenced by tumultuary movements out of doors. At a short distance, were two political clubs, the Jacobins and the Cordeliers, and there everything was debated and determined on. Of these notorious clubs, the most uncompromising was the Jacobins; consequently, its principal members were to be found among the party of the Montagnards. During the hottest time of the Revolution, the three men most distinguished as Montagnards and Jacobins were Marat, Danton, and Robespierre. Mirabeau, the orator of the Revolution, had already disappeared, being so fortunate as to die naturally, before the practice of mutual guillotining was established. After him, Vergniaud, the leader of the Girondists, was perhaps the most effective speaker; and till his fall, he possessed a commanding influence in the Convention. Danton was likewise a speaker of vast power, and from his towering figure, he seemed like a giant among pigmies. Marat might be termed the representative of the kennel. He was a low demagogue, flaunting in rags, dirty, and venomous: he was always calling out for more blood, as if the grand desideratum was the annihilation of mankind. Among the extreme men, Robespierre, by his eloquence, his artifice, and his bold counsels, contrived to maintain his position. This was no easy matter, for it was necessary to remain firm and unfaltering in every emergency. He, like the others at the helm of affairs, was constantly impelled forward by the clubs, but more so by the incessant clamours of the mob. At the Hôtel de Ville sat the Commune, a crew of blood-thirsty villains, headed by Hebert; and this miscreant, with his armed sections, accompanied by paid female furies, beset the Convention, and carried measures of severity by sheer intimidation. Let it further be remembered that, in 1793, France was kept in apprehension of invasion by the Allies under the Duke of Brunswick, and the army of emigrant noblesse under the command of Condé. The hovering of these forces on the frontiers, and their occasional successes, produced a constant alarm of counter-revolution, which was believed to be instigated by secret intriguers in the very heart of the Convention. It was alleged by Robespierre in his greatest orations, that the safety of the Republic depended on keeping up a wholesome state of terror; and that all who, in the slightest degree, leaned towards clemency, sanctioned the work of intriguers, and ought, accordingly, to be proscribed. By such harangues—in the main, miserable sophistry—he acquired prodigious popularity, and was in fact irresistible.

Thus was legalised the Reign of Terror, which, founded in false reasoning and insane fears, we must, nevertheless, look back upon as a thing, at least to a certain extent, reconcilable with a sense of duty; inasmuch as even while signing warrants for transferring hundreds of people to the Revolutionary Tribunal—which was equivalent to sending them to the scaffold—Robespierre imagined that he was acting throughout under a clear, an imperious necessity: only ridding society of the elements that disturbed its purity and tranquillity. Stupendous hallucination! And did this fanatic really feel no pang of conscience? That will afterwards engage our consideration. Frequently, he was called on to proscribe and execute his most intimate friends; but it does not appear that any personal consideration ever stayed his proceedings. First, he swept away Royalists and aristocrats; next, he sacrificed the Girondists; last, he came to his companion-Jacobins. Accusing Danton and his friends of a tendency to moderation, he had the dexterity to get them proscribed and beheaded. When Danton was seized, he could hardly credit his senses: he who had long felt himself sure of being one day dictator by public acclamation, and to have been deceived by that dreamer, Robespierre, was most humiliating. But Robespierre would not dare to put *him* to death! Grave miscalculation! He was immolated like the rest; the crowd looking on with indifference. Along with him perished Camille Desmoulins, a young man of letters, and a Jacobin, but convicted of advocating clemency. Robespierre was one of Camille's private and most valued friends; he had been his instructor in politics, and had become one of the trustees under his marriage-settlement. Robespierre visited at the house of his *protégé*; chatted with the young and handsome Madame Desmoulins at her parties; and frequently dandled the little Horace Desmoulins on his knee, and let him play with his bunch of

seals. Yet, because they were adherents of Danton, he sent husband and wife to the scaffold within a few weeks of each other! What eloquent and touching appeals were made to old recollections by the mother of Madame Desmoulins. Robespierre was reminded of little Horace, and of his duty as a family guardian. All would not do. His heart was marble; and so the wretched pair were guillotined. Camille's letter to his wife, the night before he was led to the scaffold, cannot be read without emotion. He died with a lock of her hair clasped convulsively in his hand.

Having thus cleared away to some extent all those who stood in the way of his views, Robespierre bethought himself of acting a new part in public affairs, calculated, as he thought, to dignify the Republic. Chaumette, a mean confederate of Hebert, and a mouthpiece of the rabble, had, by consent of the Convention, established Paganism, or the worship of Reason, as the national religion. Robespierre never gave his approval to this outrage, and took the earliest opportunity of restoring the worship of the Supreme. It is said, that of all the missions with which he believed himself to be charged, the highest, the holiest in his eyes, was the regeneration of the religious sentiment of the people: to unite heaven and earth by this bond of a faith which the Republic had broken, was for him the end, the consummation of the Revolution. In one of his paroxysms, he delivered an address to the Convention, which induced them to pass a law, acknowledging the existence of God, and ordaining a public festival to inaugurate the new religion. This fête took place on the 8th of June 1794. Robespierre headed the procession to the Champ de Mars; and he seemed on the occasion to have at length reached the grand realisation of all his hopes and desires. From this *coup de théâtre* he returned home, magnified in the estimation of the people, but ruined in the eyes of the Convention. His conduct had been too much that of one whose next step was to the restoration of the throne, with himself as its occupant. By Fouché, Tallien, Collot-d'Herbois, and some others, he was now thwarted in all his schemes. His wish was to close the Reign of Terror and allow the new moral world to begin; for his late access of devotional feeling had, in reality, disposed him to adopt benign and clement measures. But to arrest carnage was now beyond his power; he had invoked a demon which would not be laid. Assailed by calumny, he made the Convention resound with his speeches; spoke of fresh proscriptions to put down intrigue; and spread universal alarm among the members. In spite of the most magniloquent orations, he saw that his power was nearly gone. Sick at heart, he began to absent himself from committees, which still continued to send to the scaffold numbers whose obscure rank should have saved them from suspicion or vengeance.

At this juncture, Robespierre was earnestly entreated by one of his more resolute adherents, St Just, to play a bold game for the dictatorship, which he represented as the only means of saving the Republic from anarchy. Anonymous letters to the same effect also poured in upon him; and prognostics of his greatness, uttered by an obscure fortune-teller, were listened to by the great demagogue with something like superstitious respect. But for this personal elevation he was not prepared. Pacing up and down his apartment, and striking his forehead with his hand, he candidly acknowledged that he was not made for power; while the bare idea of doing anything to endanger the Republic amounted, in his mind, to a species of sacrilege. At this crisis in his fate, therefore, he temporised: he sought peace, if not consolation, in solitude. He took long walks in the woods, where he spent hours seated on the ground, or leaning against a tree, his face buried in his hands, or earnestly bent on the surrounding natural objects. What was the precise tenor of his meditations, it would be deeply interesting to know. Did the great promoter of the Revolution ponder on the failure of his aspirations after a state of human perfectibility? Was he torn by remorse on seeing rise up, in imagination, the thousands of innocent individuals whom, in vindication of a theory, he had consigned to an ignominious and violent death, yet whose removal had, politically speaking, proved altogether fruitless?

It is the more general belief, that in these solitary rambles Robespierre was preparing an oration, which, as he thought, should silence all his enemies, and restore him to parliamentary favour. A month was devoted to this rhetorical effort; and, unknown to him, during that interval all parties

coalesced, and adopted the resolution to treat his oration when it came with contempt, and, at all hazards, to have him proscribed. The great day came, July 26 (8th Thermidor), 1794. His speech, which he read from a paper, was delivered in his best style—in vain. It was followed by yells and hootings; and, with dismay, he retired to the Jacobins, to deliver it over again—as if to seek support among a more subservient audience. Next day, on entering the Convention, he was openly accused by Tallien and Billaud-Varennes of aspiring to despotic power. A scene of tumult ensued, and, amid cries of *Down with the tyrant!* a writ for his committal to prison was drawn out. It must be considered a fine trait in the character of Robespierre the younger, that he begged to be included in the same decree of proscription with his brother. This wish was readily granted; and St Just, Couthon (who had lost the use of his legs, and was always carried about in an arm-chair), and Le Bas, were added to the number of the proscribed. Rescued, however, from the gendarmes by an insurrectionary force, headed by Henriot, Robespierre and his colleagues were conducted in triumph to the Hôtel de Ville. Here, during the night, earnest consultations were held; and the adherents of Robespierre implored him in desperation, as the last chance of safety for them all, to address a rousing proclamation to the sections. At length, yielding unwillingly to these frantic appeals, he commenced writing the required address; and it was while subscribing his name to this seditious document, that the soldiers of the Convention burst in upon him, and he was shot through the jaw by one of the gendarmes. At the same moment, Le Bas shot himself through the heart. All were made prisoners, and carried off—the dead body of Le Bas not excepted.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.