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## From Madame de Staël, *Considerations on the Principal Events of the French Revolution, Vol. 2*

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### CHAPTER XI.

#### ***Bonaparte Emperor. The Counter-Revolution, effected by him.***

WHEN Bonaparte, at the close of the last century put himself at the head of the French people, the whole nation desired a free and constitutional government. The nobles, long exiled from France, aspired only to return in peace to their homes; the Catholic clergy invoked toleration; as the republican warriors had effaced by their exploits the splendor of the distinctions of nobility, the feudal race of ancient conquerors respected the new victors, and a revolution had taken place in the public mind. Europe was willing to resign to France the barrier of the Rhine and the Alps; and the only thing that remained was to secure these advantages by repairing the evils which the acquisition of them had brought along with it. But Bonaparte conceived the idea of effecting a counter-revolution to his own advantage, by retaining in the state nothing new except himself. He re-established the throne, the clergy, and the nobility; a monarchy, as Mr. Pitt said, without legitimacy and without imitation; a clergy, who were only the preachers of despotism; a nobility composed of old and new families, who exercised no magistracy in the state, and served only as a gaudy decoration of arbitrary power.

Bonaparte opened the door to ancient prejudices, flattering himself that he could arrest them precisely at the point which suited his omnipotence... Absolute power is the scourge of the human race; and all the French governments which have succeeded the Constituent Assembly have perished by yielding to this seduction under some pretext or other....

The principal moving power of the French Revolution was the love of equality. Equality in the eye of the law partakes of justice, and consequently of liberty: but the desire of annihilating every superior rank is one of the littlenesses of self-love. Bonaparte well knew the influence of this failing in France, and this is the mode in which he availed himself of it. The men who had shared in the Revolution were not willing that there should be classes above them. Bonaparte rallied them round his standard by promising them the titles and dignities of which they had stripped the nobles. "Do you wish for equality?" said he to them, "I will do better still—I will give you inequality in your own favor...."

Bonaparte had read history in a confused way: little accustomed to study, he made much less use of what he had learned from books than of what he had picked up by his observation of men. There remained however in his head a certain respect for Attila and Charlemagne, for feudal laws and oriental despotism, which he applied right or wrong, never making a mistake as to what would instantaneously promote his power....

In life, the balance of human motives to good or evil is usually in equilibrium, and it is conscience which decides. But, when under Bonaparte, more than forty millions sterling of revenue and eight hundred thousand armed men threw their weight into the scale of bad actions, when the sword of Brennus was on the same side with the gold to make the balance incline; how powerful was the seduction! Yet the calculations of ambition and avarice would not have been sufficient to render France submissive to Bonaparte: something great is requisite to excite masses of people, and it was military glory which intoxicated the nation, while the nets of despotism were spread out by some men, whose meanness and corruption cannot be sufficiently branded. They treated constitutional principles as a chimera, like the courtiers of the old governments of Europe, whose places they aspire to occupy. But their master, as we shall soon see, coveted more than the crown of France, and did not limit himself to that plain vulgar despotism with which his civil agents would have wished him to be satisfied at home.