

The Lion of Lucerne

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THE LION OF LUCERNE.

[Verses written after reading Carlyle's "French Revolution" (Book VI, Chapter VII.)]

In memory of the Swiss who lost their lives in defence of the Tuileries — 10 August, 1792.

Close by Lucerne's enchanting shore,
The lakeside where four cantons meet,
A garden lies, a still retreat,
Redolent of heroic lore.

Here, in the living rock, is wrought
Thorwaldsen's lion, dying, prone,
Majestic symbol, carved in stone,
Of men who but of duty thought.

They knew not glory, nor romance,
Their task was plain, they'd pledged their oath
To fight and die — and they did both —
In service of a King of France.

'Twas three years since the tyrants' knell
Had sounded and the Bastille fell,
Struck down as by a thunderbolt.
The old regime was swept away,
The common people had their say
And France had risen in revolt.

King Louis still clung to his throne,
The noblesse, though, had mostly flown,
All Paris seethed and times were hard.
Alarms and perils might prevail
But he had men who would not fail:
His trusty Swiss, the Royal Guard.

That August morn the faubourgs stirred,
The tocsin shrilled and cries were heard:
"Aux Tuileries! Down with the King!"
The human tide has burst the dykes,
With flintlocks armed, with swords and pikes,
The mob rolls on, the cobbles ring.

The Swiss guard, steady as a rock,
Stood poised prepared to take the shock,
Their muskets primed, in grim suspense.
They had no orders, all they knew
Was duty called, so, staunch and true,
They rallied to the King's defence.

The howling mob had reached the gates
When Parliament sent delegates
To rescue trembling royalty.
The palace may now crash or burn,
They'd left it never to return,
A grave of ill-starred loyalty.

But little did the rabble care:
The Royal palace may be bare
But storm it would they, not retire.
They brought artillery in play
To force the garrison give way.
The Swiss replied with volley-fire.

The sans-culottes dispersed and fled,
Then saw their wounded and their dead
And blazing fury filled their hearts.
Meantime, amid the smoke and din,
The Swiss had brought the cannon in
But found them useless, short of parts.

Now well-armed troops arrived to swell
The crowd that thronged the Carrousel,
On vengeance bent: — the National Guard.
The Swiss stood firm, they meant to hold
The royal fort; their volleys rolled
And thundered 'cross the palace yard.

A looker-on was heard to say:
"With men like these I'd win the day,
Their Bourbon King is faint of heart.
How diff'rent if they had instead
A real leader at their head."
His name, mark you, was Buonaparte.

Then, through the hubbub and the roar,
A messenger came to the door
With orders from the King at last.
"Cease firing," was the King's command,
"Surrender and the guard disband."
Too late, alas, the die was cast.

The Swiss conferred, perplexed, confused,
No order had they e'er refused,
Yet were they young and wished to live.
But how to stem that human flood,
That mob all clamouring for their blood,
A mob that would no quarter give?

The cornered men fought out their way
But found no place where safety lay,
An easy mark in scarlet coats.
And so they faced the frenzied crowd
Whose baleful death-cries, harsh and loud,
Rose shrilly from a thousand throats.

And now, beneath that August sun,
A frightful carnage had begun,
A tragedy of death and pain.
Of hunted beasts theirs was the fate
And few escaped the people's hate
Or saw their mountain homes again.

All praise to you who never swerved;
It was no king of yours you served,
In faithful duty lay your pride.
Six pence a day, that was your price,
The wages of your sacrifice
For which you suffered, fought and died.

Behold, engraved on honour's roll,
Their names, all homely, simple men
From village, mountain-side and glen,
Of whom grim destiny took toll.

Their resting place no one can find,
They sleep somewhere in France's earth,
But not forgotten is their worth,
Their memory is here enshrined.

So, passer-by, ere you depart,
Seek out the shrine; then bow your head
And offer to those gallant dead
The silent homage of your heart.

—J.J.F.S.

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