

GUSTAVUS III

AND HIS CONTEMPORARIES

1746-1792

AN OVERLOOKED CHAPTER OF
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY HISTORY

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FROM ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS

"*Gustavus of Sweden, a shining sort of man.*"—CARLYLE

IN TWO VOLUMES

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INTRODUCTION

BOTH his character and his circumstances made Gustavus III. of Sweden one of the most interesting and extraordinary personages of his day. The political knight-errant, whose restless spirit was such a disturbing element in Continental politics; the social reformer, who changed the customs and almost the character of his people; the adventurous statesman, who won his fame by one revolution only to lose his life by another; the born orator, who was always and everywhere irresistible; the polished writer, who founded the Swedish Academy and created the Swedish drama—few monarchs, nay, few men, have had so many and such various titles to renown as he. Add, too, that his career has all the piquant unexpectedness of a romance. From his very boyhood, when a mischievous and meddlesome Parliament intervened between him and his parents, to the midnight masquerade when the assassin's bullet struck him down in his prime at the Opera House, which he himself had dedicated to the National Muses, his whole life abounds with strange vicissitudes and dramatic incidents. Finally, he is the last of the great Swedish princes, who belong rather to Europe than to Sweden. His influence extended far beyond the limits of his native land; he was intimately acquainted with most of his famous contemporaries, and he left his mark on all the great political events of his day.

Such a man is a tempting subject for a historian, and the literature at the disposal of his biographer is voluminous indeed; yet peculiar circumstances make the task by no means a light one. The essentially twilight shape of "the last of the Vasas" can only be viewed through the distorting medium of the most bitter political controversy. Gustavus III. was at once the ideal of an unreasoning admiration which "sang the king as something more than man," and the victim of a fanatical hatred which pursued him even beyond the grave. For at least half a century after his death, no Swedish historian could be trusted to do him justice. A foreigner, perhaps, is more likely to succeed. At all events, he approaches the subject without bias. To him Gustavus is neither the incarnation of crafty despotism, nor yet the paragon of princes; neither a Tiberius nor a Trajan. He is simply what Carlyle has so happily called him: "A *shining* sort of man."

I will now briefly set out the sources of the subject.

Beginning with original documents, there are, first, the large collection of letters, despatches, &c., so masterly edited by the great historian Geijer (*Konung Gustaf III.'s efterlemnaded papper*), which must be supplemented by the King's own correspondence in Swedish and French, contained in the three last volumes of his collected works, and the smaller collection of his private letters to Count Armfelt, edited by Olof Tegner. Next come the numerous contemporary Swedish memoirs and diaries, all more or less partial one way or other, and of very varying importance. Chief of all are the voluminous historical recollections of the elder Count Fersen (*Historiska Skrifter*), extending over more

than fifty years, and dealing with events in which the writer took a leading part. Then come the *Anteckningar* of Schröderheim, the Swedish Saint-Simon, and the King's one indispensable friend; the *Anteckningar* of Adlerbeth, also a warm admirer of Gustavus; the *Mémoires* of Count Toll; the *Anteckningar* of the great Finance Minister Liljenkrantz; the *Minnen och Anteckningar* of Lars von Engeström, the Swedish Minister at Warsaw, which cast much light on the obscure diplomacy of Russia, Prussia, and Austria; the *Historiska Anteckningar* of the regicide Johan von Engeström; the *Dagboksanteckningar* of G. J. Ehrensvärd, which give such vivid pictures of Gustavus's Court; the *Minnen och Bref* of Bishop Wallqvist, the energetic prelate on whom the King leaned after his rupture with the nobility; Count Tessin's *Dagbok*, *Tessin och Tessineana*, and "Letters to a Young Prince," which tell us much of Gustavus's boyhood; A. Ahnfelt's *Ur svenska hofvets . . . lif*, mostly gossip with a grain of hard historical truth here and there.

Of non-Swedish original documents, the most important are the diaries and correspondence of the younger Fersen, edited by Klinckowström; the *Mémoires du Duc de Luynes*; Broglie, *Le Secret du Roi*, vol. ii.; *Correspondance secrète inédite de Louis XV.*, ed. Boutaric; *Correspondance secrète entre Marie Thérèse et le Cte. de Mercy Argenteau*; Gorani, *Mémoires secrètes*; Feuillet de Conches, *Louis XVI., Marie Antoinette et Mme. Elisabeth*; Grimm, *Correspondance littéraire*; *Mémoires du Comte de Stedingk*; Staël, *Correspondance diplomatique*; Tourzel, *Mémoires*; Bouillé, *Mémoires*; Raumer, *Beiträge zur neuen Geschichte*;