



CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

A HISTORY  
OF FRANCE

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H. E. Marshall

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED



# A History of France

H.E. MARSHALL



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## CHAPTER 1

# HOW THE GAULS BENT THE PRIDE OF ROME

ONE July day, long, long ago, under a blue and cloudless sky, a host of fierce, wild warriors passed through the sunny lands of Italy. These warriors were fair and tall. Their eyes were blue, their hair and moustaches long and rough. They were gaily dressed and gleamed with gold. The huge swords and shields which they carried were decorated with gold, gold collars were about their necks, gold bracelets upon their arms, and from their shoulders hung cloaks of brightly checked and striped cloth.

These warriors were the Gauls. As they passed onward the people of Italy fled before them in terror, and towns shut their gates against them. But the vast host swept on, leaving the people in peace. "We march to Rome!" they cried. "It is against the Romans alone that we fight; all others are our friends."

Onward the Gauls marched, seventy thousand strong. But not until they were within twelve miles of Rome did they meet the Roman army. Here, where the little river Allier throws itself into the Tiber, a great battle took place.

Chanting a wild war song, the Gauls threw themselves upon the Romans, ere they had time to form in battle array. The Roman Legions could not stand against the onslaught. They broke, they fled. Many rushed into the river and found death there, many were slain before they reached it. A few fled even to Rome, carrying with them the news of defeat and slaughter, the news that the barbarians were at the very gates.

Wild despair seized the people of Rome. They knew not what to do. The city was filled with the sounds of mourning, with the weeping of children, with the cries of women wailing for their dead, while men rushed hither and thither in terror, forgetting even to shut the gates. Soon the streets were full of men, women, and children who fled, carrying with them what they held most precious, hiding in haste what they could not take.

But it was chiefly the old and the feeble who fled. Many of the young men remained and gathered together into the Capitol or citadel. This

fortress rose above the town, and was very strong, for it was guarded on three sides by rocks which it was impossible to climb. It was surrounded, too, by high, thick walls. Here as much food as could be collected was hurriedly carried, and here the young men shut themselves in, resolving to die rather than yield.

Soon the city which had been noisy with sounds of grief and terror sank again into silence. The streets were empty and deserted, save for a few old men of noble birth who disdained to flee. These dressed themselves in their most splendid robes. Then each one, taking an ivory staff in his hand, seated himself in an ivory chair in the middle of his hall to await the coming of the enemy.

But not for three days after the battle did the Gauls arrive. For they had stayed to plunder the Roman baggage, to drink and carouse when, had they but known it, the gates of Rome stood open wide and all its treasures at their mercy. When at last they came, passed through these open gates, and into the deserted streets, the silence and the loneliness struck fear to the hearts of the rough soldiers of Gaul.

They clung together, moving warily, fearing a sudden attack from an unseen enemy. But presently gathering courage, they strayed through the open doors of the silent palaces. Here they saw, sitting motionless, old men with long white beards. Their faces were so noble, their dresses so splendid, that the Gauls were abashed.

Who and what were these silent figures? Were they gods? Were they statues? The wild barbarians dared not touch them. They dared hardly whisper in their presence. At length a Gaul more bold than his fellows put out his hand and stroked the long white beard of the silent Roman near him.

Instantly the old eyes flashed fire, the arm that had so often wielded a sword flew upward, and the Gaul fell to the ground stunned from the blow of the ivory staff.

It was a signal for slaughter. With wild cries the Gauls fell upon the old men, and slew them where they sat. Then through all the city they rushed, robbing and burning. But although the city with its palaces was at their mercy, the Gauls could not dislodge the Romans from their Capitol.

For seven months the siege went on, the Gauls hoping that hunger would force the Romans to yield. But instead of that, hunger and disease weakened the besiegers themselves. For in their first wild attack upon the city they had burned and destroyed much of the food it held. Now

they had to suffer for their own ruthless waste. There was hunger, there was death both without and within the fortress.

At length one day a Gaul, passing beneath the rock upon which the Capitol was built, discovered a way by which one man at a time could climb to the top. He told his general of the discovery and led him to the spot.

That evening the general called his officers together. "We believed it impossible to climb the rock," he said, "but we have discovered a way. Where one man can go, an army can go."

Gladly and eagerly the Gauls set forth. The night was dark. One by one they followed each other, clinging to roots and branches of trees and shrubs, finding a scanty foothold among rocks and boulders, till at length, after tremendous efforts, the foremost reached the top, and crouched close beneath the bottom of the wall. Here the wall was low, for the rock was so steep that no attack from this side seemed possible. So secure, indeed, did the Romans feel that the sentinels were fast asleep. Even the lean, hungry dogs, which prowled about the citadel searching vainly for food, gave no warning.

Another and another man reached the top. The Gauls at length began to scale the wall, and lest the famished dogs should bark they threw some bread to them. The hungry creatures darted upon it and began to devour it greedily. All danger seemed over; the first by man was about to leap into the fortress, when suddenly a flock of geese, aroused by the smell of food, began to make a loud cackling and flapping of wings. These geese were held sacred to the goddess Juno, and so, although the garrison were starving, they had been spared.

Thus it was by a few geese that the Capitol was saved, for their loud cackling awakened the sleeping sentinels.

A soldier named Marcus Manlius was the first to awake. Seizing his weapons he called loudly to his comrades and rushed to meet the foe. With a blow of his spear he felled one Gaul to the ground, at the same time dashing his shield in the face of a second. Backward fell the Gaul upon his comrade behind, hurling him headlong down the cliff.

In a few minutes all the garrison were awake. With stones and spears they fell upon the besiegers, who, crashing one upon the other, were hurled pell mell down the cliff in utter rout. Of all those who had painfully struggled up the height but few regained the camp alive.

The Capitol was saved, but the siege went on; famine and pestilence



ONE BY ONE THE GAULS FOLLOWED EACH OTHER.

still did their work both within and without the walls. In vain the besieged looked for help.

No help came to them. They ate everything, even to the leather of their boots, suffering untold agonies of hunger. Still they would not give in.

Then the Gauls, well knowing that the garrison were starving, offered terms of peace. The Romans proudly refused, and to prove that they were not starving threw their last loaves of bread down among the enemy.

But at length even Roman pride could hold out no longer, and peace was signed. The Romans agreed to give the Gauls a large sum of money, and to provide them with food on their journey homeward. They also gave up some of the Roman territory and promised when they rebuilt the city to leave one gate forever open, in memory of the victory of the Gauls.

All the gold in the city was gathered to pay the ransom, but when it came to be weighed, it seemed not enough. Then the Romans fiercely accused the Gauls of treachery. "The weights are false," they cried.

In answer, the leader of the Gauls drew his sword and flung it into the scale, crying, "Woe to the vanquished!" It was as if he meant to show how impossible it was to outweigh the strength of his sword.

Stung by the taunt, many of the Romans wished to break off the peace and fight once more, this time till death. But the wiser among them said: "Let be. The shame lies not in giving more than we promised; it lies in giving at all. Let us suffer, in silence, insults which we can neither avoid nor avenge."

So the price was paid, the siege ended, and the Gauls marched away, leaving the Romans to rebuild their ruined city.

This siege of Rome took place nearly four hundred years before Christ, and it is perhaps the greatest feat accomplished by these ancient Gauls. And I have told you the story because the Gauls were the ancient inhabitants of France; but in those days the Gauls were a race, not a nation. They belonged to a race of people who were found not only in the country we now call France, but in Italy, Spain, and Portugal. They were to be found eastward as far as the isles of Greece and Asia Minor, northward almost to the shores of the Baltic, westward to the isles of Britain and of Scotia.

They were a wild and warlike people. Like the ancient dwellers in

Britain, they were Druids; they worshipped the sun and the stars and held the mistletoe to be sacred. Like the ancient Britons, many of them dyed their bodies blue. They wore their hair long. They were great talkers, loving to hear news and to listen to the tales of minstrels.

And for many a day after the taking of Rome there was told in the firelight the marvelous tale of how the Gauls had bent the pride of Rome.

## CHAPTER 2

# HOW VERCINGETORIX DIED FOR HIS COUNTRY

THE Gauls had stood at the gate of Rome. They had sacked and burned the city, and had forced the Romans to buy their freedom with gold. But Rome rose from the ashes, and took once more her proud, commanding position. Year by year the Romans grew stronger. Year by year they claimed more of the world for their own. Bit by bit they drove the Gauls out of Italy, out of Spain and Portugal. Then, in order to make their conquests safe and to secure a road from one peninsula to the other, the Romans took possession of the south of Gaul, that is the south of France. Thus the Gauls were shut out of both peninsulas, and were also cut off from the sea. And while the Romans pressed upon the Gauls from the south, wild tribes from the German Ocean and the Baltic pressed upon them from the north. Yet with two great foreign foes to fight, one on the north and one on the south, the Gauls were often at war within their own borders, and so less able to drive away outside foes.

Thus three hundred years and more went past, the Romans always growing stronger, the Gauls weaker. At length Julius Caesar came as Governor of the Roman province of Southern Gaul. He made up his mind not to be content with the south only, but to make the whole of Gaul a Roman province.

So the fight began. Caesar was one of the greatest soldiers and conquerors the world has ever seen. He marched over the country with unheard of swiftness, making roads and building bridges and ramparts wherever he passed. He crossed the wide, swift river Rhine upon a bridge, which had taken only ten days to build, in order utterly to subdue the wild tribes beyond it, who gave help to the Gauls. Next, finding that the Gauls were helped and encouraged by the people from the neighbouring island of Britain, he set sail and landed in Kent. Of that you will read in English history. A few weeks later he was once more in Gaul. So the great General worked and fought, striking a blow now here, now there, until the whole of Gaul was conquered.

When news of Cesar's conquests reached Rome, the people cried

aloud in astonishment and admiration. It was the swiftness of Caesar's marches, the boldness and sureness with which he struck his blows that roused their wonder even more than his victories.

But Caesar's work was not done. The Gauls were beaten, but not subdued, and they rose in rebellion in 52 B. C. under a young noble named Vercingetorix. Vercingetorix really means merely commander-in-chief, but it is the only name for the young leader of Gaul that has come down to us. It was in the mountainous part of France that this rising took place, among the hills of Auvergne and in the Cevennes.

Caesar was in Rome when he heard of it, and although it was winter and the snow lay deep upon the Alps, he hastened back to Gaul. He had need of all his haste, for Vercingetorix, with a skill almost equal to Caesar's own, was gathering and drilling his troops. The different tribes of Gaul forgot their quarrels, and joined under their new leader to fight for the freedom of their country.

It was a last, brilliant struggle. The Gauls burned their towns and laid waste their country so that the Romans should find neither food nor shelter. They learned to make their camps in Roman fashion, they fought the Romans with their own weapons. Never before had Caesar met with so skillful and so obstinate an enemy. Battle after battle was fought.

At length, before the town of Gergovia, Caesar was defeated. He lost his sword and left seven hundred soldiers among the slain. Great was the joy among the Gauls. The all-conquering General had been defeated! Gaul they thought would once more be free. They praised their gods for the victory, and hung Caesar's sword in their temple. Long after, Caesar himself saw it there. But when his soldiers would have torn it from the place he smiled and said, "Let it remain; it is sacred."

Meanwhile Vercingetorix gathered his generals and spoke to them. "Now is the time," he said, "the hour of victory has come. The Romans are fleeing in all haste homeward. It is enough for the liberty of the moment; it is not enough for the peace in time to come. Soon they will return in greater force, and we shall never see the end of war. We cannot offer them battle direct, but we must harass their march, make them cast away their baggage so that they die from hunger and want, and flee from Gaul covered with shame."

When Vercingetorix had ceased speaking, a great shout went up from the leaders of the Gauls. With one voice they swore never more to see



their homes, never more to greet their wives, children, and friends until they had twice crossed the enemies' line.

Next day the whole army of the Gauls set forth. But, although the soldiers were brave and their leader skillful, they had to fight against the greatest general in the world. They fought and lost. In a few days the Gauls found themselves shut in the city of Alesia, while Caesar and his legions lay around besieging them. Alesia was built upon a hill, in a very strong position, with two rivers flowing round the walls. Caesar saw that the position was so strong that he could not hope to carry it by storm. So he resolved to starve the Gauls into surrender. Quickly his soldiers set to work to dig a broad trench and build a high wall, so as to shut the city off from all outside help.

For thirty days and more the siege lasted. Then a mighty army, gathered from all parts of Gaul, appeared to help their starving comrades. There was a great battle in which the besieged Gauls took part, but it ended in a victory for Caesar. It was not a mere victory. It was the end of the struggle. The spirit of Gaul was crushed and broken.

Early on the morning after the battle Vercingetorix called together his counsellors. "I fought not for myself," he said, "but for Gaul. Yet I am the cause of this war, therefore I give myself up freely to the conqueror. Let his wrath fall on me, but let him spare my country."

Vercingetorix then put on his most splendid armor and jewels. He mounted his war-horse, the harness of which was gay with crimson and gold. Then the gates of Alesia were opened and he rode forth.

Before the gates Caesar sat in counsel. Vercingetorix on a splendid horse, his jewels and armor gleaming in the sunshine, rode quickly round the tribunal. Then vaulting from his horse he threw his sword and spear at Caesar's feet, and, without a sword, seated himself upon the steps of the throne.

Even the Roman soldiers were touched at the sight of this splendid hero who thus gave himself up for his country. Caesar alone remained cold and cruel. To him Vercingetorix was merely the man who had for one day robbed him of the name unconquerable. A few minutes he gazed at him in silent hatred, then he burst forth into a torrent of wrath. In silence Vercingetorix listened. Then at a sign from Caesar he was bound and led away.

Vercingetorix was sent to Rome a prisoner. There for six long years he lay in a dark and noisome dungeon. Then he was brought forth to



VERCINGETORIX THREW HIS SWORD AND SPEAR AT CAESARS FEET.

add glory to Caesar's triumph. And after having been led through the streets to be jeered at by the Roman multitude, his head was cut off at the foot of the Capitol, while upon its height Caesar knelt to the gods, giving thanks to them for his victories.