CHAPTER XVI

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION (1789–1815)

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The condition of France at the end of the eighteenth century.

IF the seventeenth century, which recalls the names of Richelieu, Colbert, and Louis XIV., was the period of the expansion of France, the eighteenth century, associated with such names as the regent Orleans, Louis XV., and Madame de Pompadour, proved the period of French decay. We have just seen that the Seven Years' War all but completed the ruin of the kingdom; the defeats of the armies of France in Germany destroyed her military prestige, and her maritime disasters overthrew her naval power and deprived her of her colonies. But the loss of her great position was not the worst consequence of the Seven Years' War. The country found itself on the conclusion of the Peace of Paris (1763) in such a condition of exhaustion that even patriots were doubtful if it would ever recover health and strength.

Decay due to system of government.

The case, at first sight, seemed anomalous. Here was a country which in point of natural resources had the advantage over every other country of Europe; its population, which was estimated at 25,000,000, was greater than that of any rival state; and the mass of the nation had no cause to fear comparison with any other people as regards industry,

thrift, and intelligence. If this people, endowed with such natural gifts and inhabiting so fertile a territory, was brought in the second half of the eighteenth century to the verge of ruin, that circumstance cannot be ascribed to any inherent defect in the nation. It was due solely to the system of government which bound the nation together, and to the social iniquities which that government perpetuated.

The king is absolute.

The reader has seen how the French king had gradually absorbed all the functions of government, until, as Louis XIV. himself had boasted, the king had become the state. The local administration, once the prerogative of the nobility, had, with the overthrow of the nobility by Richelieu, been transferred to royal appointees, called *intendants;* the feudal assembly, or States-General, was no longer summoned; and whenever the supreme law-courts of the realm, known as Parliaments (*parlements*), tried, by refusing to register a decree, to exercise the small measure of power which they possessed, the king cowed them by a royal session, called *lit de justice.* In an address delivered on the occasion of such a *lit de justice* (1766), Louis XV. could, without fear of contradiction, make the following assertion concerning the royal prerogative: "In my person resides the sovereign authority. I hold the legislative power and share it with no one. The entire public life is sustained by me." Part and parcel of this limitless claim was the power of arbitrary arrest under a *lettre de cachet.* This was an order signed by the king by virtue of which any subject might be clapped into prison and kept there without a trial at the king's pleasure.

Louis XV. neglects his duties.

It is plain that such extensive duties as are contained in the pronouncement quoted above could be effectively exercised by only a superior person. Louis XIV. never failed at least in assiduity. But his successor, Louis XV., who was weak, frivolous, and incapable of sustained work,

shirked the exercise of the powers which he none the less claimed as his due. Instead of laboring in his cabinet, he allowed his time to be monopolized by hunts and spectacles, and his vitality to be consumed by boundless dissipations. The result was that the business of governing fell to a greedy horde of courtiers and adventuresses, who were principally concerned with fattening their fortunes, and who sacrificed, with no more regret than is expressed by a shrug of the shoulders and a laugh, every interest of the state.

French society. The clergy and nobility.

If under Louis XV. the centralized monarchy lost its respect abroad and its energy at home, the whole social fabric which that monarchy crowned exhibited no less certain signs of disease and decay. French society, like that of all Europe, had its starting-point in the feudal principle of class. In feudal times there had been recognized two great governing classes, the clergy and the nobility, which, in return for certain fundamental services rendered by them to society, such as instruction, spiritual comfort, administration of justice, and defence of the soil, had been granted an authoritative and patriarchal position over the people. The absolute monarchy of France had, to a greater extent than the monarchy of any other country, relieved the nobles of their duties by taking upon itself the administration of justice and the maintenance of the army. But though the nobility was thus deprived of its former *duties*, it was left in possession of many of its ancient *rights*. To illustrate: it was not subjected to direct taxation in feudal times on the ground that it paid taxes in the form of military service; but now, though this service was no longer required, the exemption from taxation continued. Consequently, a right originally grounded in justice had become an iniquity. The other feudal order, the clergy, enjoyed a similar exemption from taxation, but still performed, however imperfectly, its former services.

Clergy and nobility constitute the privileged orders.

We are now in a position to understand why the France of the eighteenth century was divided into privileged and unprivileged classes, or into subjects who paid and subjects who did not pay. Such a division was abominable, but made only the beginning of the woeful tale of confirmed and hereditary injustice. Not only had the feudal orders become mere privileged orders, who did not contribute to the support of the government in a measure even approximately proportionate to their resources, but all the honors and emoluments were reserved to them. The officers of the army, which the money of the commoners supported, were chosen exclusively from the nobility, and all the high and remunerative posts in Church and state were open only to that class In a word, a public career in France was an affair of birth.

The resources of the privileged.

The membership of the two orders enjoying these extensive privileges was not very large. The noble families numbered 25,000 to 30,000, with an aggregate membership of perhaps 140,000; and the clergy, including the various religious orders and the parish priests, had an approximately equal enrolment. These two castes between them owned about half the land of France, so that it could be fairly claimed by the indignant people that the principle of taxation which obtained in their country was—to relieve those who did not need relief, and to burden those who were already overburdened.

Their style of life.

But if nobility and clergy were, comparatively speaking, very well off, their means were not sufficient to satisfy the demands which their style of life made upon their purses. The great nobles all maintained palaces at Paris or Versailles, where they ruined themselves by lavish entertainments, gambling, and the various excitements of an idle society. The great Church dignitaries, bishops and abbots, who were, for the most part, younger sons of noble families, emulated, and if anything outshone, the secular nobility by

the splendor of their mode of life. The result was that the court swarmed with a bankrupt aristocracy whose one hope of salvation was to plunder the public treasury under the polite form of an office or a pension granted by the king. These pensions, running up into the millions, and lavished upon creatures whose only merit was, as a contemporary writer put it, "to have taken the trouble to be born," were a sore affliction of the budget, and the least excusable factor contributing to the annual deficit.

The upper and the lower clergy.

There is no need to say that prelates who recruited their ranks from the nobility, and like the nobility spent their days in hunting, gambling, and paying visits, were not suited to discharge their spiritual functions. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the careless life of the higher clergy was the rule among the rank and file. In the provinces there were to be found priests, on starvation salaries, who devoted themselves to their parish duties with mediæval fervor and sincerity. These hardly felt that there was any bond between them and their noble superiors, while a thousand ties united them to the people from whom they were sprung. A notable consequence of this fact was that when the Revolution broke out the lower clergy sided with the down-trodden and outraged commoners against the privileged hierarchy.

Progress of the commoners.

The commoners, or members of the Third Estate (*tiers état*), who were shut out from the places of authority reserved to the first two estates of the realm, could win distinction in only two careers, business and literature. Many succeeded in accumulating wealth both in Paris and in the provinces, until their resources, constantly increased through thrift and hard work, far exceeded those of the nobility, who, after the airy fashion of their kind, concerned themselves only with elegantly spending what they had or could borrow. And now the bourgeoisie began to outstrip the nobility in other respects. For increase of wealth brought increase of leisure,

and put at the disposal of the middle classes the means of culture. So it came about that in the course of the eighteenth century the Third Estate had fairly become the intellectual hearth of France. For proof one need look only at the influential authors and journalists of the period, such as Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot, Quesnay, Beaumarchais—they are almost without exception of the middle class.

Misery of the workingmen.

But if the well-to-do middle class, the bourgeoisie, was prospering, the same can hardly be said of the vast majority of French subjects, embracing the two classes of the urban wage-earners and the peasants. The class of wage-earners was to a large extent of recent origin, having been called into existence by the development of manufactures. Uneducated and unorganized, they were completely under the heel of the capitalist middle class, which controlled the commercial and industrial situation by means of its guilds, and shut all but old bourgeois families out of them with as much zeal as the nobles displayed in keeping their ranks free from the defilement of citizen upstarts. With reference to the wage-earners, the middle class was, in its turn, a privileged order, and we can easily understand that the oppression with which the bourgeoisie saddled the laborers was filling that body with increasing discontent.

Misery of the peasants.

But the class of which the condition was most abject was, undoubtedly, the peasants, whose obligations and burdens exceeded all justice and reason. The lord of the manor exacted rent from them, the Church levied tithes, and the king collected taxes almost at will, so that often they did not have enough left over from their toil to satisfy the barest necessities. Considerable sections of the soil of France had, therefore, in the course of the last few decades been deserted by the peasants, and in some of the most fertile regions famine had become an annual guest. An English gentleman, Arthur Young, who made a journey through France just

before the outbreak of the Revolution, saw many smiling districts, but was frequently horrified by the bent, starved, and diseased figures which he encountered on the highways. The misery of the peasants, although real, has been frequently exaggerated by comparison with modern conditions. If we examine their status in the light of eighteenth-century standards, we are obliged to admit that they were better off than their brethren of the other continental countries. Above all, the French peasants were no longer serfs, although the memory of their former serfdom survived in certain vexatious feudal obligations, such as the *corvée*, a compulsory service of a certain number of days each year upon the roads, and the right of the chase which reserved the game to the nobility. The very fact that they were free, and relatively prosperous and enlightened, explains why their protest against irrational and irritating dues was growing constantly more vigorous.

Feudal obligations.

The demand for reform.

A government without power, dignity, and character; a society broken up into mutually hostile classes—these are the main features of the picture we have just examined. French public life in the eighteenth century had become so intolerable that its dissolution was the only possible escape out of the perennial misery. This the thinking element began to see more and more clearly; and a school of writers, known as the philosophers, made themselves its mouthpiece, and clamored loudly and ever more loudly for a radical reform of the existing order.

The intellectual revolt.

The eighteenth century is everywhere in Europe a century of criticism. Men had begun to overhaul the whole body of tradition in state, Church, and society, and to examine their institutional inheritances from the point of view of common-sense. If things had been allowed to stand hitherto because they were indorsed by the past, they were to be permitted henceforth only because they were serviceable and

necessary to the present. Reason, in other words, was to be the rule of life. This gospel the philosophers spread from end to end of Europe. They opened fire upon everything that ran counter to reason and science—upon the intolerance of the Church, upon the privileges of the nobility, upon the abuse of the royal power, upon the viciousness of criminal justice, upon the oppression of the peasantry, and a hundred other things.

The leaders.

Although the revolt against the inheritances of a feudal past was universal in the eighteenth century, the leaders in the movement were Frenchmen. Montesquieu, Diderot, D'Alembert, are some of the brilliant writers of the period; but outshining them in fame and achievement are Voltaire and Rousseau. Although their names are commonly coupled, it is impossible to imagine two men less alike. Voltaire[1] was a man of swift intelligence, caustic wit, and, above all, a penetrating understanding of human society, while Rousseau was a dreamer, who shut his eyes upon an artificial and repulsive civilization in order to fashion with his mind a society founded upon justice, goodness, liberty, and equality. Each set in motion a current of revolt which gradually undermined the existing Church, government, and society, and left them standing as a hollow shell, to fall, at the outbreak of the Revolution, like the walls of Jericho at the first blast of the trumpet.

The chronic deficit.

A society which has become thoroughly discredited in the minds of those who compose it, is likely to go to pieces at any moment and through any chance occasion. The agency which directly led up to the French Revolution, and sounded the signal, as it were, for the dissolution of the

[1] *Voltaire* (1694–1778) wrote tragedies, epics, tales, and other pieces of pure literature, but is now chiefly remembered by his historical labors, such as The Age of Louis XIV., The Age of Louis XV., and the Essay on Manners. *Rousseau* (1712–78) wrote one novel, La Nouvelle Héloise, but his most famous productions are a treatise on government, called The Social Contract, and a wonderful autobiography, The Confessions.

ancien régime, was the state of the finances. The debts of Louis XIV. had been increased by the wars and extravagances of Louis XV., so that by the middle of the eighteenth century France was confronted by a chronic deficit. As long as Louis XV. reigned (1715–74), the deficit was covered by fresh loans, a device which, though dangerous, did not arouse any apprehension in that monarch's feeble mind. "Things will hold together till my death," he was in the habit of saying complacently, and his friend Madame de Pompadour added, with an air of indifference, "After us, the deluge!"

Louis XVI. succeeds his grandfather in 1774.

When Louis XVI. (1774–92) succeeded his grandfather, the question of financial reform would not brook any further delay. The new king was, at his accession, only twenty years old. He was honestly desirous of helping his people, but he had, unfortunately, neither the energy nor the intelligence necessary for developing a programme and carrying it through in spite of opposition. His queen, Marie Antoinette, the daughter of Maria Theresa of Austria, was a gossamer creature, lovely and vivacious, but young, inexperienced, and utterly thoughtless.

Louis XVI. attempts reform.

The fifteen years from Louis's accession to the outbreak of the Revolution (1774–89) constitute a period of unintermitted struggle with the financial distress. The question was how to make the revenues meet the expenditures. New taxes proved no solution, for excessive taxation had already reduced the country to starvation, and where there was nothing to begin with, no tax-gatherer's art could squeeze out a return. Plainly, the only feasible solution was reform. The lavish expenditure of the court would have to be cut down; the waste and peculation in the administration would have to cease; and the taxes would have to be redistributed, so as to put the burdens upon the shoulders that could bear them. For the consideration of these matters Louis at first

called into his cabinet a number of eminent men. Among his ministers of finance were the economist Turgot (1774–76) and the banker Necker (first ministry, 1778–81; second ministry, 1788–90). Both men, especially Turgot, who was a statesman of the first order, labored earnestly at reform, but both failed to overcome the opposition of the courtiers, who would consent neither to retrench their expenses nor to give up their privileges.

Turgot and Necker.

In consequence, there was nothing to do but continue the old ruinous policy of covering the deficit by means of loans, and by persistence in this insane policy to undermine the national credit and march helplessly toward bankruptcy. When even loans were no longer to be had, the king, driven into a corner, appealed, as a last resort, to the nation. The step was in itself a revolution, for it contained the admission that the absolute monarchy had failed. In May, 1789, there assembled at Versailles, in order to take counsel with the king about the national distress, the States-General of the realm.

Absolutism breaks down.

The States-General was the old feudal assembly of France, composed of the three orders, the clergy, the nobles, and the commoners. As the States-General had been relegated to the garret by the absolute monarchy and had not met for one hundred and seventy-five years, it was not strange that nobody was acquainted with its mode of procedure. So much was certain, however, that the assembly had formerly voted by orders, and that the vote of the privileged orders, being two against one, had always been decisive.

The States-General.

The first question which arose in the assembly was whether the feudal orders should be allowed this traditional supremacy in the revived States-General. Among the members of the Third Estate, as the commoners were called in France, there was, of course, only one answer. These men held that the new States-General was representative not of the old feudal

The States-General converts itself into the National Assembly.

realm, but of the united nation, and that every member, therefore, must have an equal vote. In other words, the commoners maintained that the vote should not be taken by orders but individually. As they had been permitted to send twice as many delegates (six hundred) as either clergy or nobility (three hundred each), it was plain that their proposition would give them the preponderance. The clergy and nobility, therefore, offered a stubborn resistance; but after a month of contention the Third Estate cut the knot by boldly declaring itself, with or without the feudal orders, the National Assembly (June 17th). Horrified by this act of violence the king and the court tried to cow the commoners by a sharp summons to submit to the old procedure, but when they refused to be frightened, the king himself gave way, and ordered the clergy and nobility to join the Third Estate (June 27th). Thus, at the very beginning of the Revolution, the power passed out of the hands of the king and feudal orders into the hands of the people.

The National Assembly (1789–91).

The National Assembly is generous, intelligent, but without experience.

The National Assembly, which thus began its work with the avowed purpose of regenerating France, was composed of the most intelligent men the country could boast. Moreover, the members were animated by a pure enthusiasm to serve the nation. In fact, it was impossible to live in that momentous year of 1789 without feeling that an unexampled opportunity had arrived for helping France and all mankind forward on the road of civilization. In this magnanimous spirit the Assembly directed its labors from the first day. Unfortunately, a fatal defect seriously detracted from this generous disposition. The Assembly, composed of theorists totally inexperienced in the practical affairs of government, was prone to treat all questions as occasions for the display of an emotional eloquence, and to formulate decrees beautiful in the abstract, but hopelessly out of relation to the concrete facts.

The leaders.

When the Assembly convened there existed as yet no political parties. But gradually parties began to form about the men who, by virtue of their talents, took the lead. Only a few of these can be pointed out here. The Marquis de Lafayette had won a great name for himself by the magnanimous offer of his sword, when a young man, to the cause of freedom in America. Though a nobleman by birth, he sympathized with the people and rallied all generous hearts around himself. No man during the first stage of the Revolution had a greater following within and without the Assembly. The best representative of the current dogmatic and philosophical spirit was the Abbé Sieyès. He carried to absurd lengths the idea that government was a clever mechanism, capable of being constructed in accordance with preconceived ideas. When one constitution failed, he was always ready, like a political conjurer, to shake another out of his sleeve. Then there was the lawyer Robespierre. His circle, though not large at first, made up for its smallness by the stanchness of its devotion to the dapper little man who made it his business to parade on all occasions a patriotism of an incorruptible Roman grandeur. But the member who rose head and shoulders above the rest of the Assembly was Count Mirabeau. Mirabeau was a born statesman, perhaps the only man in the whole Assembly who instinctively knew that a government could not be fashioned at will by a committee of philosophers, but to be worth anything must be the natural outcome of the moral, economic, and historical forces of the nation. He wished, therefore, while preserving the monarchy, to *nationalize* it by injecting into its dry arteries the fresh blood of the people. Abolition of privileges and a constitution with a strong