

LETTER XV.

State of France at the Time Louis XVI. ascended the Throne—Distressed Condition of her Finances—Ministerial Changes—Maurepas, Turgot, Malesherbes, Necker, and Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse—Opposition to their respective Measures for relieving the Embarrassments of the Government—Necessity of a Revolution. A. D. 1780—1789.

We are now, my dear son, brought, by the order of events, to enter upon a subject of such fearful magnitude, so portentous in its origin, and terrific in its consequences, that the annals of the human race scarcely present us with its parallel. You will readily anticipate, that I allude to the French revolution—an event which introduced a new state of society in Europe, as the English revolution had been the epoch of a new system of government. In entering upon the history of this phenomenon in the civilized world, you must allow me to go back a little, and take a retrospective view of the causes and events which led to such a fearful issue.

The government of France, from the reign of Louis XIV. to the revolution, was arbitrary rather than despotic; for the monarchs had much greater power than they exercised: their immense authority was resisted only by the feeblest barriers. The crown disposed of the person by *lettres-de-cachet*; of property, by confiscations; of income, by imposts. It is true, certain bodies possessed a means of defence, which they called privileges; but these privileges were seldom respected. The parliament had the privilege of consenting to or refusing an impost; but the king enforced registration by a bed of justice (*lit de justice*), and punished its members by letters of exile. The noblesse were exempt from imposts; the clergy had the privilege of taxing themselves by voluntary grants. Some of the provinces had the privilege of compounding for these imposts; and others that of making the assessment themselves. Such were the small guarantees of France, and even these were still turned to the advantage of the favoured classes, and to the oppression of the people.

France, thus enslaved, was also most wretchedly organized: the excesses of power were less insupportable than their unequal distribution. Divided into three orders, which were again subdivided into several classes, the nation was abandoned to all the evils of despotism, and all the miseries of inequality. The noblesse were divided into courtiers who lived on the favours of the prince, or, in other words, on the labours of the people; and who obtained either the governments of the provinces, or high stations in the army, —upstarts, who directed the administration, and were appointed to intendancies, and made a trade of the provinces; lawyers, who administered justice, and monopolized its appointments; and territorial barons, who oppressed the country by the exercise of their private feudal privileges, which had displaced the general political right. The clergy were divided into two classes, of which one was destined for the bishopricks and abbasies, and their rich revenues, the other to apostolic labours, and to poverty. The *tiers-état*,⁽¹⁾ borne down by the court and harassed by the noblesse, was itself separated into corporations, which retaliated upon each other the evils and the oppression which they received from their superiors. They possessed scarcely a third part of the soil, upon which they were compelled to pay feudal services to their lords, tithes to the priests, and imposts to the king. In compensation for so many sacrifices, they enjoyed no rights, had no share in the administration, and were admitted to no public employments.

This order of things could not continue for ever, and it was the prince himself who was destined to bring it to a crisis. His extravagance had exhausted his means, and destroyed the equilibrium between his necessities and his revenues; by patronising genius, he had invited examination into his

(1) The third estate, or common people.

government, and conferred the power of intelligence on the enslaved and humiliated *tiers-état*; incessantly requiring new imposts, he had made himself dependent, first on those who authorized, and next on those who contributed them; and he provoked the resistance of the nation after having emboldened the opposition of the parliaments. It is thus that courts are tempted to indulge in the prodigality which arbitrary power places within their reach, that extravagance leads to exhaustion, and exhaustion to reform. It is always from this very exuberance of power that a government creates its necessities, and by these necessities that its power is finally subverted.

Louis XIV. had stretched the springs of absolute monarchy too far, and exercised them too violently. Irritated by the troubles of his youth, smitten with the love of domination, he swept away all resistance, and forbade all opposition; that of the aristocracy, which was manifested by revolt; that of the parliaments, which was shown in remonstrances; and that of the Protestants, which exercised itself by a liberty of conscience which the church deemed heretical, and the court held to be factious. Louis XIV. subdued the *grandees* by calling them to court, where they received in pleasures and in royal favour the price of their dependence. The parliament, which hitherto had been the instrument of the crown, wished now to become a counterpoise to it; and the prince haughtily imposed on it a submission and silence of sixty years. The revocation of the edict of Nantes was the finishing stroke to these acts of despotism. But arbitrary power is not content barely with non-resistance; we must, moreover, admire and imitate it. Having annihilated free-agency, it persecutes the conscience, for it must be in action, and hunt out victims when they no longer present themselves. The immense power of Louis XIV. was exercised at home against heretics, abroad against Europe: oppression found ambitious men to counsel it, soldiers to serve it, successes to encourage it; the wounds of France were covered with laurels, and its groans were stifled by the songs of victory. But, in the end, men of genius died, victories ceased, industry emigrated, money disappeared, and he saw full well that tyranny, even in its success, exhausts its means, and that it devours in advance the resources of the future.

The death of Louis XIV. was the signal for reaction: it produced a sudden change from intolerance to incredulity, and from the spirit of obedience to the spirit of discussion. The court prosecuted wars which were ruinous, without being brilliant; it engaged in a silent contest with opinion, an avowed one with the parliament. Anarchy was introduced into its bosom, the government fell into the hands of mistresses, the sovereign power was rapidly declining, and opposition was every day making new progress.

The position and the system of the parliaments had changed. The royal authority had invested them with a power, which they now turned against it. As soon as the ruin of the aristocracy was completed by their common efforts, the parliaments, like all allies after victory, separated themselves from their royal associate. The parliament sought to domineer over the crown, and the crown endeavoured to crush an instrument, which, in ceasing to be useful, had become dangerous. This struggle, favourable to the monarch under Louis XIV., alternating with successes and reverses under Louis XV., terminated only at the revolution. From its very nature, the parliament had only been called on to serve as an instrument. As the exercise of its prerogative, and its ambition as a body, had induced it to succour the feeble, and oppose the strong; it served, in turn, the crown against the aristocracy, and the nation against the crown. Hence it became so popular during the reigns of Louis XIV. and Louis XV., although it opposed the court only in the spirit of rivalry. Opinion demanded no account of its motives; it did not applaud its ambition, but its resistance, and supported the parliament, because by the parliament it had been defended. Emboldened by these encouragements, it became formidable to the sovereign authority. After having stemmed the will of the most imperious and the best obeyed of sovereigns; after having opposed itself to the seven years' war; after having ob-