

communicated to the king his mission, and asked if he would consent to go down to the convention. Louis hesitated a moment, and then said, "This is only another piece of violence; to this also I must yield." Accordingly he resolved to appear before the convention, whose power he did not refuse to acknowledge, as Charles I. did that of his judges. As soon as his approach was announced, "Representatives," said Barrère, "you are now about to exercise the right of national justice; let your manner be conformable to your new functions." Then turning towards the tribunes, "Citizens," said he, "remember the terrible silence which accompanied Louis when he was brought back from Varennes—a silence which was the precursor of the judgment of kings by the nations." The countenance of Louis, on entering the hall, was firm and manly, and he looked round upon the assembly, with an air of resolution. As he stood at the bar, the president said to him, with a faltering voice, "Louis, the French nation accuses you: you are now about to hear the reading of the act declaratory of the charges. Louis, sit down." A seat had been placed for him; he sat down. During this long interrogatory, he discovered great calmness and presence of mind. He replied to each question with readiness, and generally in a touching and triumphant manner. He replied to the reproaches addressed to him relative to his conduct anterior to the 14th of July, by reminding the assembly that his power was not then limited;—before the journey to Varennes, by the decree of the constituent assembly, which had declared itself satisfied with his answers;—lastly, before the 10th of August, by throwing the responsibility of all the public acts upon the ministers, and denying all the secret intrigues which had been attributed to him. These denials did not destroy, in the eyes of the convention, facts of which the greater number were proved by papers in the handwriting, or bearing the signature, of Louis; but he made use of the right which is common to every accused person. It was on this principle that he denied the existence of the iron chest, and of all the papers which had been presented to him. Louis XVI. appealed to a law of safeguard, which the convention did not acknowledge, and the convention wished to assure itself of the counter-revolutionary attempts, which Louis XVI. refused to avow.

When Louis XVI. returned to the temple, the convention debated on the demand he had made of a defender. It was in vain that some Mountainists opposed the motion; the convention determined that Louis XVI. should have a counsel. He himself had mentioned Target and Tronchet; the former refused. It was then that the venerable Malesherbes offered himself to the convention to defend Louis XVI. "I have been twice called," wrote Malesherbes, "to be counsel to him who was once my master, at a time when these functions were ambitiously sought by every one;—I owe him the same service when these functions are considered dangerous by many." His demand was acceded to. Louis XVI., in his state of abandonment, was touched by this proof of devotion to his cause. When Malesherbes entered his chamber, he went up to him, embraced him, and said, "The sacrifice you make for me is so much the more generous, as you expose your own life without a chance of saving mine." Malesherbes and Tronchet busied themselves with his defence uninterruptedly, and joined to their number M. Desèze. They endeavoured to reanimate the king's courage, but they found him very little disposed to hope. "They will take my life; of that I am sure: but no matter; let us busy ourselves with our process as if I were sure of gaining it: indeed, I shall gain it; for the memory I leave behind me will be spotless."

At length the day for the defence arrived. The speech was pronounced by M. Desèze. Louis was present; the utmost silence reigned in the assembly and in the galleries. M. Desèze urged in favour of the accused monarch all the considerations of justice and innocence. He urged the inviolability which had been accorded to the king. He insisted that as a king he could not be tried; and that, as accusers, the representatives of the people could not be his judges. In this he advanced nothing which had not been maintained by a part of the assembly. But he principally directed the attention

of the audience to the justification of Louis XVI., and attributed to him intentions that were constantly pure and irreproachable. He ended by these closing and solemn words: "Listen first what fame will say to history—Louis, who ascended the throne at the age of twenty, carried with him there an example of morals, of justice, and of economy: he had no weaknesses, no corrupting passions, and he was the constant friend of the people. The people desired that a disastrous impost should be abolished, and Louis abolished it; the people asked for the abolition of servitudes, and Louis destroyed them; they demanded reforms, he consented to them; they wished to change the laws by which they were governed, he agreed to their demands; the people required that some millions of people should recover their rights, and these he surrendered to them; the people asked for liberty, and he gave it to them. No one can dispute that Louis had the glory of preventing the demands of his people by making these sacrifices; and he it is whom it has been proposed to . . . Citizens, I cannot go on; I pause before history: remember that history will judge your judgment, and that hers will be that of ages to come." But the passions of the assembly were deaf, and incapable of all foresight.

The Girondists were desirous of saving Louis XVI., but they dreaded the reproach of *royalism*, which already began to be addressed to them by the Mountainists. During the whole trial their conduct was extremely wavering; they neither ventured to pronounce for or against the accused, and their indecision ruined themselves without serving him. At this moment his cause, which was no longer the cause of his throne, but of his life, was their own. It was to be decided by an act of justice, or by an act of violence, whether the nation should return to the legal régime, or whether the revolutionary system were to be prolonged. The triumph of the Girondists, or the Mountainists, depended on the solution of this question. The latter made great efforts. They pretended that a rigid adherence to forms was to give up the energy which should be displayed by a republic, and that the defence of Louis XVI. was a course of monarchy addressed to the nation. The Jacobins seconded them powerfully, and deputations came to the bar of the convention to demand the death of the king.

In the mean time, the Girondists, who had not ventured to maintain the king's inviolability, proposed a dexterous measure for preventing the execution of Louis XVI., by appealing from the sentence of the convention to the people. The extreme right still continued to protest against the erection of the assembly into a tribunal. But the competence of the convention having been previously decided on, all efforts were turned in another direction. Sallés proposed to declare Louis XVI. guilty, and to leave to the primary assemblies the application of the punishment. Buzot, fearing that in this way the convention would incur the reproach of weakness, was of opinion that it should itself pronounce the sentence, and appeal to the people from its own judgment. This advice was strongly opposed by the Mountainists, and even by a large number of moderate constitutionalists, who foresaw in the convocation of the primary assemblies all the horrors of a civil war. The assembly had unanimously voted Louis XVI. guilty; when the question of appeal to the people was suggested, two hundred and eighty-four voted for, and four hundred and twenty-four against: ten refused to vote. The next question was the terrible one of the punishment to be inflicted. Paris was in the highest state of agitation: the deputies were threatened even at the doors of the assembly: new popular excesses were looked for, and the club of the Jacobins echoed to furious invectives against Louis XVI., and the party of the right. The Mountainist party, till then the weakest in the assembly, endeavoured to obtain a majority by means of terror, equally decided, nevertheless, if they did not succeed, to sacrifice Louis XVI. At length, after forty hours of nominal appeal, the president Vergniaud said, "Citizens, I have now to proclaim the result of the scrutiny. When justice has spoken, humanity ought to be heard in turn." There were seven hundred and twenty-one voters. The absolute majority was three hundred and twenty-one. Sen-

tence of death was pronounced by a majority of twenty-six votes. The opinions had been mixed: the Girondists had voted for sentence of death—with a provision of delay, indeed: the greater number of members on the right had voted for his imprisonment or exile; and some Mountainists voted with the Girondists. As soon as the result of the scrutiny was known, the president said, with an accent of grief—"I declare, in the name of the convention, that the punishment it decides against Louis Capet is death." His defenders appeared at the bar and seemed deeply moved. They endeavoured to recall the assembly to sentiments of pity, in consideration of the small number of voices by which he was condemned. But the question had been already discussed and decided. "Laws are framed only by means of a simple majority," said a Mountainist. "Yes," said a voice, "but decrees may be reformed, and the life of a man can never be recalled." Malesherbes wished to speak, but could not. His sobs stifled his voice, and the only words that were audible were broken and imploring. His grief touched the assembly. The Girondists now called for delay, as a last resource; but they failed in this also, and the fatal sentence was pronounced.

Louis expected this. When Malesherbes came in tears to announce to him his sentence of death, he found him sitting in darkness, his elbows resting on the table, and in a state of profound meditation. At the noise he made in entering, Louis XVI. rose, and said, "For the last two hours I have been endeavouring to discover whether during my reign I could ever accuse myself of deserving from my subjects the slightest reproach. Well, M. de Malesherbes, I swear to you, in all sincerity of heart, and as a man about to appear before God, that I have constantly desired the welfare of my people, and never formed a wish that was contrary to their happiness." Malesherbes endeavoured to persuade him that the delay required would not be refused, but Louis would not yield to the hope. He begged Malesherbes, as he was retiring, not to abandon him in his last moments: Malesherbes promised to return, and did return several times, without ever being able to obtain admission to his presence. Louis asked frequently for him, and was grieved that he could not see him again. He received without emotion the news of his sentence, which was signified to him by the minister of justice. He asked three days to prepare himself for appearing before God; he required besides to be assisted by a priest, whom he named, and to communicate freely with his wife and children. The two latter demands only were agreed to.

The moment of the interview was terrible for that unfortunate family; and that of their separation more so. Louis, on quitting them, promised to see them again next day; but on entering his chamber, he felt that the trial was too great for him, and as he walked about the room he said to himself—"I shall not go." This was his last struggle: he afterward thought of nothing but his preparations for death. On the night preceding his execution, he had a peaceful slumber. On being awakened at five o'clock by Cléry, to whom he had given orders to that effect, he made his last testament. He received the communion, charged Cléry with his last words, and with all of which he was allowed to dispose by will—a ring, a seal, and some hair. Already the drums began to beat, and a confused sound of cannons dragged along, and human voices were heard. At length, Santerre arrived. "You are come for me," said Louis; "I only require a moment." He then gave his will to a municipal officer, asked for his hat, and said, in a firm tone of voice, "Let us go."

The carriage took an hour to go from the temple to the square of the revolution. A double line of soldiers guarded the road, and more than four thousand men were under arms. Paris was in gloom. Among the citizens present at the execution, there were neither signs of approbation nor regret apparent: all were silent. On their arrival at the place of execution, Louis descended from the carriage. He mounted, with a firm step, the ladder of the scaffold, and received on his knees the blessing of the priest, who then said to him, as is generally believed: "Son of St. Louis, ascend to heaven!" He allowed his hands to be tied, though with some reluctance; and turning

to the left of the scaffold—"I die innocent," said he; "I forgive my enemies: and you, unfortunate people" At this moment the signal for the drums to beat was given; the sound of their roll drowned his voice, and the three executioners seized him. At ten minutes past ten he had ceased to exist.

Thus perished, at the age of thirty-nine, after a reign of sixteen years and a half, passed in endeavouring to do good, the best, but weakest of monarchs. The revolution was an inheritance bequeathed to him by his ancestors. He was more fitted than any of those that preceded him, to prevent or terminate it; for he was capable of being a reformer before it broke out, or of being a constitutional monarch after it. He perished, the victim of passions which he did not share; of the passions of those about him, to which he was a stranger; and those of the multitude which he had not excited. There are few kings who have left behind them so excellent a memory; and history will say of him, that with more firmness of mind he would have been a model of a king. His execution took place on the 21st of January, 1793, and the consequences of this tragical event were terrible to France, and scarcely less so to all Europe—a horrible tyranny and an almost universal war. But we are now arrived at the momentous period when Great Britain began to take an active part in the troubles which convulsed the continent, and we must for the present interrupt the narrative, that we may pay a little attention to the state of matters at home.⁽¹⁾

LETTER XXIII.

Retrospective View of the domestic Affairs of Great Britain from the Termination of the American War to the Commencement of the French Revolution. A. D. 1783—1793.

The execution of Louis XVI., among many other baneful consequences, served to give form and consistency to the wavering politics of the British cabinet; and at the close of the year 1792, the progress towards hostilities with France became too apparent to admit of any reasonable doubt of the result. But to trace this important subject in order, it will be necessary, my son, to carry you back to the period of the general peace, consequent on the war with the transatlantic colonies,⁽²⁾ and give you a cursory view of the leading events in our history during the interval.

The terms on which the treaty of pacification had been concluded gave rise to very animated discussions in the British senate, and these in their turn produced a succession of changes in the executive government. On the retirement of lord North, in the year 1782, a new ministry was formed upon whig principles—the principles which placed the Brunswick family on the throne of England, which brought about the glorious revolution of 1688, and secured the liberties of the country;—an event which diffused great joy and afforded inexpressible satisfaction to the best friends of the country. It infused fresh vigour into the constitution; for, by combining energy in our fleets and armies with a skilful and united administration at home, it opened upon public view a prepossessing aspect of the state of our national affairs. Unhappily, however, for the country, this pleasing prospect was of short duration. The enchanting illusion vanished; the political horizon became again beclouded; and storms and tempests, not a little destructive of the public weal, succeeded. The marquis of Rockingham, who had been intrusted with the formation of this administration, and who stood during its short career at the head of it, died on the 1st of July, 1782, in the meridian of his days, and while he was at the zenith of his political reputation.

Though by no means distinguished for pre-eminence of talent, lord Rock-

⁽¹⁾ Histoire de la Revolution Française, par A. E. Mignet.—Quelques Notices pour l'Histoire et le Recit de mes Périls, par J. B. Louvet.—Histoire du dernier Règne de la Monarchie Française.—Journal de ce qui passé à la Tour du Temple, pendant la Captivité de Louis XVI., par M. Cléry.

⁽²⁾ See Part III. Letter XIV.