


PIERRE VERGNIAUD

IERRE VICTURNIEN VERGNIAUD, French orator and Revolutionary statesman, was born at Limoges, France, May 31, 1753, and was guillotined at Paris, Oct. 31, 1793. Educated at the Jesuit College of his native town and at the College of Plessis, he studied law, was called to the Bar in 1782, and practiced his profession at Bordeaux. In 1791, he entered the Legislative Assembly, and in the social and political vortex of the time became one of the most radical of the Girondists, though at the outset of his career he seems to have acted with caution and restraint and to have been disposed toward constitutional monarchy. From this conservative attitude, most congenial to his feelings, he passed to a passionate fulmination against the King and the nobility, voting for the death of Louis XVI and the overthrow of the aristocratic class. Opposing, on the other hand, Robespierre and the establishment of the Revolutionary Tribunal, and also the atrocities and anarchy of the Terrorists, he suffered first a temporary proscription, then imprisonment, afterward passing to the guillotine with his allies, for the crime of moderation, at a time of wild and unreasoning frenzy. Vergniaud deserved better things of Liberty and the Republic.

ON THE SITUATION OF FRANCE

AT THE moment when your armies of the north seemed to be making progress in Brabant and were flattering our courage with signs of victories, suddenly they were driven back before the enemy; they are abandoning advantageous positions which they have conquered; they are brought back to our own territory; the scene of the war is fixed there, and nothing will remain from our campaign with the miserable Belgians but the memory of the fires which will have lighted our retreat. On another side and on the banks of the Rhine our frontiers are threatened by the Prussian troops, whose march the ministerial reports have made us hope would not be so prompt. Such is our political and military situation, that never were the wise combination of plans, the prompt

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execution of means, union, the accord from all parties of the power to which the constitution delegates the use of armed force, never were so necessary; never could the least misinformation, the slightest suspension, the most trifling digressions, become so disastrous.

How does it happen that at the very last period of the most violent crisis, on the edge of the abyss which is ready to swallow up the nation, the movement of our armies is suspended; that by a sudden disorganization of the ministry the chain of works has been broken, the bonds of confidence severed, the safety of the empire given up to the inexperience of hands chosen haphazard, the difficulties of execution multiplied, and its success endangered by mistakes which happen, even with the most enlightened patriotism, in the apprenticeship of a great administration? If plans are conceived for facilitating the completion of our armies, for increasing our means of conquest or of making our defeats less disastrous, why are they preceded near the throne by calumny and stifled there by the most perfidious malevolence? Would it be true that our triumphs are feared? Are they eager for the blood of the army of Coblenz or for our own?

If fanaticism excites disorders, if it threatens to deliver the nation up to the simultaneous rending of foreign war, what is the intention of those who with an invincible obstinacy cause all the laws of repression presented by the National Assembly to be rejected? Do they wish to reign over abandoned cities and devastated fields? What is the exact quantity of tears, of misery, of blood, of death, which would satisfy their vengeance? Where are we, any way? Into what abyss do they desire to drag us?

And you, gentlemen, what great thing are you going to undertake for the commonwealth? You whose courage the

enemies of the constitution insolently flatter themselves that they have shaken; you whose consciences they try each day to alarm by qualifying love of liberty as party spirit; as if you could have forgotten that a despotic court gave also the name of factions to the representatives of the people who went to take the oath of the tennis-court; that the cowardly heroes of the aristocracy have constantly lavished it upon the conquerors of the Bastille, upon all those who made and maintained the Revolution, and which the Constituent Assembly believed to have honored by proclaiming in one of its addresses that the nation was composed of twenty-four millions of factious persons; you who have been so calumniated because you are almost all strangers to the caste which the Revolution overthrew in the dust, and in whom the intriguers who desired to re-establish it, and the degraded men who regret the infamous pleasure of crouching before it, have not hoped to find accomplices; you, against whom they inveighed with so much fury only because you form a truly popular assembly, and in you they wished to disgrace the people; you who have been so cowardly accused of blighting the glory of the constitutional throne, because several times your avenging hand struck those who wished to make it the throne of a despot; you who have been infamously and absurdly suspected of intentions contrary to your oaths, as if your happiness was not attached to the constitution; as if, invested with another power than that of the law, you had a civil list to keep the contra-revolutionary satellites in pay; you whom, by the perfidious use of calumny and the language of a hypocritical moderation, they tried to chill in the interests of the people, because they knew that you hold your mission from the people, that the people is your support, and that if by a guilty desertion of their cause you deserved to be aban-

doned in turn it would be easy to dissolve you; you whom they have wanted and, it must be said with pain, have succeeded in weakening by disastrous divisions, but who doubtless in the present crisis, when the nation is fixing her restless eyes on you, will feel the need of gathering together all your forces; who will postpone our noisy quarrels, our miserable dissensions until after the war; who will lay down our pride, our jealousies, our passions at the foot of the altar of liberty; who will not find it so sweet to hate you for preferring this infernal to the welfare of the country; you whom they wanted to terrify with armed petitions as if you did not know that in the beginning of the Revolution the sanctuary of liberty was surrounded by the satellites of despotism, Paris besieged by an army, and that these days of danger were days of the veritable glory of the Constituent Assembly; you, to whom I have believed I ought to present these swift reflections because at the moment when it is important to create a commotion in public opinion it seemed to me indispensable to do away with all illusions, all errors, which might attenuate the effect of your measures; you, finally, to whom each day discloses a vast horizon of conspiracies, treacheries, dangers; who are placed at the mouth of *Ætna* to avert the thunderbolt,—what are your resources? What does necessity command you? What does the constitution allow you?

I am going to venture to present a few ideas to you; perhaps I might have suppressed a part of them after the new propositions made to you by the king; but the most recent events forbid a suppression which otherwise would have seemed to me base, since attempts have been made to influence our opinions. A representative of the people should be as impassable before bayonets as before calumny.

First, I shall call your attention to interior disturbances,

They have two causes: manœuvres of the nobility, manœuvres of the priesthood. Both tend to the same end, counter-revolution. You will prevent the action of the first by a wise and vigorous police. We must hasten to discuss the bases; but when you have done everything that in you lies to save the people from the terrible influence of the second, the constitution leaves at your disposal only a last resort: it is simple; nevertheless, I believe that it is just and efficacious,— this is it:

The king has refused his sanction to your decree upon the religious troubles. I do not know whether the gloomy spirit of Médicis and the Cardinal de Lorraine is still wandering beneath the arches of the palace of the Tuileries; if the sanguinary hypocrisy of the Jesuits, La Chaise and Le Tellier, live again in the soul of some scoundrel burning to see a repetition of Saint Bartholomew and the Dragonades, I do not know whether the king's heart is disturbed by the fantastic ideas suggested to him and his conscience deranged by the religious terrors which surround him.

But it cannot be believed, without doing him harm and accusing him of being the most dangerous enemy of the Revolution, that he wishes to encourage, by impunity, the criminal attempts of pontifical ambition, and to give to the proud agents of the tiara the disastrous power with which they have equally oppressed peoples and kings. It cannot be believed, without doing him harm and accusing him of being the enemy of the people, that he approves or even looks with indifference on the underhanded tricks used to divide the citizens, to stir up the leaven of hatred in the bosom of sensible souls, and in the name of the Divinity to stifle the sweetest sentiments of which man's felicity is composed. It cannot be believed, without doing him harm and

accusing him of being the enemy of the law, that he refuses the adoption of repressive measures against fanaticism, in order to drive citizens to excesses which despair inspires and the laws condemn; that he prefers to expose unsworn priests, even when they do not trouble the order, to arbitrary vengeance, than to submit them to a law which, applying only to the perturbators, would cover the innocent with an inviolable shield. . . .

Your solicitude for the exterior safety of the empire and the success of the war made you adopt the idea of a camp or of an army placed between Paris and the frontiers. You associated this idea with that of a civic festival which would have been celebrated in Paris the fourteenth of July. You knew what deep impressions the memory of this immortal day would awaken in hearts; you knew with what transports the citizens would have hastened from all the departments to take the conquerors of the Bastille in their arms; with what bursts of joy they would have come among the inhabitants of the city who prided themselves on having given the first impulse towards liberty, to repeat the oath to live free or die. So the most generous enthusiasm, the intoxication of a fraternal feeling would have contributed, with the certainty of danger threatening the fatherland, to accelerate the organization of the new army; and in a certain way you would have tempered the calamities of war by intermingling the ineffable pleasures of a universal brotherhood. The poisoned whisper of calumny blighted this patriotic project. The embraces and festivities were repulsed with a barbarous harshness. The plans of federation and gladness were changed to measures of discord and disastrous events. The king refused his sanction to your decree.

I have too much respect for a constitutional right to propose your making the minister responsible for disorderly movements which might have been the consequence of this refusal; but he ought to be so, at least, if a single one of the precautions which the surety of your territory demanded has been omitted; if it happens before the gathering of the battalions of national guards, the formation of which was proposed to you by the king, that the ground of liberty is profaned by tyrants. The king does not wish to deliver France to foreign armies; he would have been eager to adopt your views if he had been persuaded either that there was no attack to fear from the direction of the Rhine and from the part of the Prussians, or else that we were strong enough to repulse it. Whatever the mistake he has been induced to make, as it will be pleasant to us to praise the ministers if they have placed the empire in a state of honorable defence, it will be also just to charge them with blame if that state of defence is weak enough to compromise us: and in this respect you owe a declaration to enlighten the people about the care to be taken for their glory and tranquillity, and to leave no uncertainty about the punishment of traitors.

Will it be said that the king's sanction depends on his will alone; that the ministers take no part whatever in this eminent act of power which the constitution delegates to him; that therefore there can be no pretext for responsibility in regard to them? I will reply that I do not mean to make the ministers responsible for the refusal of his sanction; but only for the insufficiency or the non-performance or too tardy execution of the means of surety which the circumstances demand. The king is inviolable, but he alone enjoys his inviolability which is incommunicable. He does not answer for his faults nor for his mistakes: his agents answer for them.

These are the two indivisible bases of the organization of executive power. It is only through them that under a careless prince or a conspirator, and in great danger, the State could be saved. It is only through them that, under a tyrannical prince, the law could be spared the egregious affront of seeing impunity assured to the greatest crimes, and the State preserved from misfortunes the source of which could be such a scandalous privilege. If there are circumstances which the legislative body alone has the force to modify, the pride we have had in believing ourselves free is a delirium and the constitution is only the seal of a shameful slavery.

Will it be said that the ministerial responsibility acquires a character of injustice through the great extension that I seem to give it? I reply that the man who submits himself to it voluntarily, through the spontaneous acceptance of the ministry, renounces the faculty of accusing the law of too much rigor.

But it is not enough to have proved that the ministers themselves must be cast into the abyss which their negligence or their malevolence have hollowed out before liberty. Ah! What will a tardy vengeance signify to the oppressed country? Will the blood of a few guilty ministers expiate the death of the generous citizens fallen, in her defence, under the blows of her enemies? Could scaffolds and punishments console her for the loss of her dearest children?

There are simple truths so great and of such high importance that the enunciation of them alone can, I believe, produce greater effects and more salutary than the responsibility of ministers and spare us the misfortunes which the latter would not be able to repair. I shall speak without any passion but the love of my country and a deep feeling for the evils which desolate it. I beg you to listen to me calmly, not

to be hasty in conjecturing in order to approve or condemn in advance what I have no intention of saying. Faithful to my oath to maintain the constitution, to respect the constituted powers, it is the constitution alone I am going to invoke. Moreover, I shall have spoken in the established interests of the king if with the aid of a few reflections of a striking evidence I tear the bandage which intrigue and adulation have placed over his eyes, and if I show him the goal to which his faithless friends are trying to lead him.

It is in the name of the king that the French princes have tried to arouse all the courts of Europe against the nation; it is to avenge the dignity of the king that the treaty of Pilnitz was concluded and the monstrous alliance between the courts of Vienna and Berlin formed; it is to defend the king that the former companies of body-guards under the flags of rebellion have been seen hastening to Germany; it is to come to the king's aid that the emigrants are soliciting and obtaining employment in the Austrian armies and are prepared to tear the bosom of their country; it is to join those valiant knights of the royal prerogative that other warriors full of honor and delicacy abandon their post in presence of the enemy, betray their oaths, steal the chests, strive to corrupt their soldiers and thus place their glory in dastardliness, perjury, subordination, theft, and assassination; it is against the nation or the National Assembly alone, and to maintain the splendor of the throne, that the King of Bohemia and Hungary makes war upon us, and the King of Prussia is marching towards our frontiers; it is in the name of the king that liberty is attacked, and that if they succeeded in its overthrow they would soon dismember the empire in order to indemnify the Allied Powers for their

expenses; because we know the generosity of kings, we know with what disinterestedness they send their armies to desolate a foreign land, and how far we think they should exhaust their treasuries to maintain a war which will not be profitable to them. Finally, the name alone of the king is the pretext or the cause of all the evils which they are trying to accumulate above our heads, all that we have to fear.

Now, I read in the constitution, chapter II, section 1, article VI:

“If the king places himself at the head of an army and directs the forces of it against the nation, or if he does not oppose by a formal act such an enterprise which is carried on in his name, he shall be deemed to have abdicated royalty.”

I ask you what must be understood by a formal act of opposition; reason tells me that it is the act of a resistance proportioned as much as possible to the danger and made at a time useful to avoid it.

For example, if in the present war a hundred thousand Austrians should direct their march towards Flanders, or a hundred thousand Prussians towards Alsace, and the king, who is the supreme chief of the public forces, should oppose to each of these two redoubtable armies only a detachment of ten or twenty thousand men, could you say that he employed suitable means of resistance, that he fulfilled the vow of the constitution, and made the formal act which it demands of him?

If the king, charged with watching over the exterior safety of the State, with notifying the legislative body of imminent hostilities, informed of the movements of the Prussian army and not making it known to the National Assembly, informed, or at least able to presume, that this army will attack us in a month, is slow in arranging preparations for