

CORRESPONDENCE.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION.

In reviewing the startling incidents of the terrific social outburst of the French people in the closing decade of the eighteenth century, our first sensation is that of horror and revulsion; our second, a desire to penetrate into the cause of so terrible an effect.

The reign of Louis XIV has been described as the starting point of the series of causes that led up to the tremendous chapter, and we will first examine this proposition and then trace briefly, step by step, each successive force that was marshalled to the conflict.

It has been said that Louis—the grand monarch—loved war for its own sake and was never at a loss for a *casus belli*. His wars were, furthermore, invasive, though described by Guizot as "rational," and victory after victory was the order of his day, especially in his earlier battles. The annexations which he made to the outlying provinces of his kingdom were numerous, and his victories were made by sea as well as by land. Covered with glory, his subjects were thrown into transports of adoration, despite the depleted treasury; and his enemies, which may be said to have included the whole of Europe, were struck with amazement, while almost as much exhausted by the conflict as he.

His grandeur was not, however, limited to his military success. His palace at Versailles had been erected at enormous cost and his court was maintained with an expense an brilliance unrivaled by any other European monarch. The licentiousness and extravagance of this court has become proverbial and must not be forgotten in this review.

Louis was a religious bigot. A series of religious persecutions was inaugurated by the revocation of the edict of Nantes which resulted in the torture and death of many Protestants (called Huguenots in that country). Beside the massacred, fifty thousand families took to flight, and France was thus deprived of much of its best population, including much of its manufacturing skill and industry. While this was the Augustan age of French literature, it was likewise that of absolute despotism and the prerogatives of class distinction. Louis's policy made an absolute and fatal distinction between the noblesse and the peasantry in the army as well as among the people. France was at the height of its glory and that glory surpassed that of any other European power; but the price paid for this pre-eminence was financial exhaustion and almost ruin accompanied by popular murmur. And thus the eighteenth century opened with depression and decay, not alone in the finances of the country but in its institutions and respect in the hearts of the people for existing conditions.

Louis XV was weak, and his court even worse than that of his predecessor. Its profligacy and licentiousness were unbounded and its moral degradation provoked the utter contempt of the people. The country was ruled by the mistress of the king who, heedless of the overwhelming burdens of the hapless people, endeavored to keep up a show of grandeur equal to that of Le Grande Monarque. Things became so weak, discordant and confused that, by the end of his reign, France, instead of being in the van, was found panting to maintain a position at all among the powers of Europe. Wars, continued and almost incessant, had made their

enormous drain which was in itself nearly sufficient to fully exert every cord and tendon of the government; to say nothing of the addition of gross abuses by an outrageously extravagant and reckless court. We need not wonder at the discontent and civil discord that ensued. This was the natural result of so much folly in "high places." The utter depravity of the French nobility excited the contempt of the people and, what was worse for the former, taught them to think. Thoughts sometimes become active things. They grew to formidable dimensions in the French press, the great writers of the land began to sound with ever-increasing force and definiteness the clarion notes that gave warning of the coming outburst. Disgusted with the immorality, hypocrisy and intolerance of the privileged orders, which included the clergy, Voltaire opened up his keen batteries of ridicule and infidelity. We cannot wonder that he saw no beauty or truth in the religion of his day for it was but a system of superstition and outrageous oppression. But his disciples leaped beyond him and denied God, whereas he had been content with a denial of the Catholic forms as he knew them. Rousseau—selfish, mean, weak, frenzied though he was in practical life, was scarcely second to Voltaire in the love and admiration of his countrymen, who knew him through his writings only; and while his passionate declarations of the rights of the humblest sank deep in every peasant heart, his *Contrat Social*, with its communistic doctrines, became the "law and testimony" of the Revolution. The political speculations of Montesquieu, who had been in America and studied its autonomy, played no small part in the battle of intellect, to say nothing of the practical example of the American colonies which France was even now assisting though she could so ill afford it.

It was a lengthy and difficult task to enumerate the men whose minds were slowly but surely nourishing the public mind to the final crisis, the length of which they were not themselves prophetic enough to foresee. But to summarize, we will say: Skepticism had become rife, and Christianity was deposed and compelled to make obeisance to licentiousness; communism, to the last extreme, was lurking in many hearts and nourished with cruel thoughts of blood; deference to royalty and nobility had changed to contempt, weariness and hate. Speculative intellect was all in vogue. Equality before the law; the sovereignty of the people; the blessedness of freedom; equal responsibility in the burdens of government; these were the key notes of war—complemented with a zealous love and a vigorous energy in behalf of these principles, which filled the hearts of the people with an earnestness that would lay down life in their defense, the movement became irresistible. Add to these the destitution and suffering of the poor, their oppression and misery, unfelt by those in "pleasant places," and the barriers between the classes, raised by the nobility themselves—and we have the secret of the leaven that fermented the lump to a stage of running over beyond all bounds—even beyond that of humanity.

Voltaire had broken the strange spell which superstition had exercised over the middle ages. Rousseau had planted in almost every heart the idea of the "inalienable rights" of God's poorest child, which has since become so proverbial with us, and had thereby dimmed the prestige of birth and

rank." Legion were the name of speculators on society and its prerogatives and it needed but the hand of a Beaumarchais to "lift the veil" and expose to public view upon the stage (in Figaro) the corruptions that were draining and destroying the life-blood of the nation of France. This was the last gun of intellectual militia that overtopped the "tottering edifice" of absolute despotism.

Louis XVI was singularly virtuous and pure. His was not a strong character, however, though he clung tenaciously to his traditional absolute rights. Upon his accession the national debt summed up no less than the enormous sum of six billion lires. Unlike himself, his queen and court, striving to imitate the ostentation of the grand monarch of preceding times, were extravagant and brilliant. And thus, he found his kingdom upon the verge of irretrievable ruin. The taxes were wholly laid upon the lowest classes and the extensive clergy shared immunity from taxation with the nobility. We have seen that the tinder was ready for the spark. The people called loudly for the convention of the states general, their national representative legislature, which had not been assembled for upward of a hundred and seventy years. Louis hesitated and his minister called a convention of the notables, representatives of the higher classes. Here was where the inadvertent spark was struck that kindled the fire of popular determination. We will examine into the cause: Throughout the dreary wars of the Spanish, Polish and Austrian successions, the invasions of Louis XIV, the Seven Years war, (the latter waged simultaneously with those of England for the settlement of the American boundaries), the assistance lent the American colonies, and the wars with jealous England for that support—adding to these the wealth lavished upon the successive unworthy courts—the taxes had been wholly unshared by any but the peasant classes—the financial ruin rendered these burdens unusually oppressive, while famine and a rigorous winter rendered them intolérable. The minister proposed, to the assembly just mentioned, that a share of this taxation should be borne by the nobility. This proposition they utterly refused to accept. Their ungenerous attitude sprung the trap upon themselves. Louis was compelled to convoke the states general but there the privileged orders endeavored to control the commons and to settle upon them the cancellation of the national deficit. The commons then united under Mirabeau and forced the king, nobility and clergy to recognize their rights. After a struggle this convention, known as the National Assembly, abolished all feudal rights and prerogatives of rank and declared the equal rights of man. A constitution was formed, establishing government upon the basis of a limited monarchy, without an absolute veto, and giving the right to the nation to order and to the king to execute. Paris and Versailles had declared themselves for the assembly and the new minister attempted to marshal foreign troops to their vicinity. The people flew to arms and organized the national guard under LaFayette. Two days later the Bastille was demolished. The request of the assembly that the foreign troops be dismissed was not acceded to by the minister without the threats of the Assembly and the intercession of the king. We are approaching our limitation of space and must now summarize rapidly: The crowned heads of Europe, becoming alarmed at the progress of French Republicanism, found a coalition to compel the French people to restore Louis to his ancient rights. To enforce this demand they sent