

THE ADMINISTRATION OF LOUIS XVI OF FRANCE

BY

CLARA PANCAKE.

The conditions which faced the Monarch of France, in the reign preceding the Revolution, were such as would test the ability of the most gifted statesman. Such ability was not possessed by Louis XVI, nor was his training that which would develop any latent faculties with which he may have been endowed.

The only son of Louis XV was born in 1754 and grew to manhood uninstructed in the affairs of government and the responsibilities awaiting him. Shy and awkward he avoided the court and was preserved from the contamination of its tainted moral atmosphere. Hunting and lockmaking were his favorite pastimes.

Louis XVI came to the throne with a desire to serve his nation, and he labored more arduously than his father had done, at the duties which encumbered his position. However, Louis XVI was weak in will and yielded first to one and then to another of the influences brought to bear upon him. During the latter years of his reign, his queen, Marie Antoinette, exercised considerable control over him. Of inferior mental capacity, tending to indulge his own inclinations to excess, and yet feeling to a certain extent the obligations of his position; such was the man to whom was entrusted the welfare of France at a critical period of its history.

The king, while virtually absolute in power, was subject to some slight restrictions. One of these lay in the right of the Parliament of Paris to register the edicts of the sovereign.

The highest courts of the monarchy were the parlements. Twelve of these were provincial. That of Paris held jurisdiction over central France. It was the most important of these bodies, and though not connected with the provincial organizations, was warmly supported by them. It was composed of about two hundred members and

included the Peers of France, the legal profession, and church dignitaries.

The powers of the Parliament of Paris were limited. It administered justice, with the king's sanction, and registered his ordinances. Its strongest right was that of remonstrance.

When the king issued an edict, he sent it to the Parlement of Paris, or the parlement concerned, for registration. This body had the choice of accepting it and entering it on the books as a law, or refusing to record it. In the latter event the king would either accede or force the registration. This was accomplished by the Monarch coming in person to the parlement and from the "lit de justice" ordering the counselors to enroll the law. They sometimes refused to comply. Though it was understood they had no legal right to refuse, yet they knew the king did not like to incur their ill will by compelling registration of a law. In some cases where the parlement had been stubborn, it had been exiled, the judges had been imprisoned or a temporary court of justice had been formed.

The Parlement of Paris^{had been abolished} by Louis XV, but was recalled by his son upon his accession. This body as well as the courts of justice was controlled by those who had bought their positions or whose places had been transmitted from one generation to another, and no others were admitted except by their consent. As a whole they were decidedly opposed to all reform measures.

The ordinary means of administering justice were lacking in efficiency. A state of confusion prevailed, owing to the fact that Roman statutory and customary laws were in use. The jurisdiction of the courts often conflicted. Moreover the king established a special court whenever he chose to do so. As a rule the officials were cor-

rupt and made no attempt to deal justly, while many took bribes openly.

The more influential classes were favored. By the "writ of *committimus*" a man of high standing could have a case taken from one tribunal to another. "Lettres de cachet" were another means used by such persons to attain their ends. These letters were signed by the king and his minister. The victims against whom they were issued, disappeared without trial, to be confined in some state prison. In ⁱcriminal proceedings the accused was tried in private, and was not allowed defense. The number of transgressions punishable by death were numerous. The wheel was still in use. Torture was inflicted not only on those condemned, but on those suspected as well. Sentences to the galleys for trifling offences were common.

The people who lived under this unequal administration of justice were divided into three great classes: The nobility, the clergy, and the Third Estate.

The nobility included those who did not labor, and the higher legal profession. They numbered about 100,000 persons and represented 25,000 to 30,000 families.

Entrance into this class could be obtained in two ways, i.e., through the purchase of an estate which gave the owner a title, or by serving the Crown officially for a certain period. In the latter case the fourth generation became noble in blood, if in the meantime none of the line had engaged in trade.

Within this class there was ^a more exclusive coterie which formed the higher nobility, and was composed of the descendents of the old families of France whose lives had their origin in feudal days. As the greater noblemen were expected to be present at court, they did not reside on their estates. Their time was given to society while the

baliff managed their affairs to the detriment of both owner and peasant.

The members of the lesser nobility were compelled to live on their lands. They had no part in public affairs and in time came to consider themselves above the consideration of such questions. They led penurious lives, and as they were dependent on their estates for their income, they were hard on the peasants.

It had been the policy of the kings of France to reduce the strength of the nobility wherever possible. Consequently in the time of Louis XVI they had no political powers, but were allowed many privileges and exemptions.

In feudal times the lord furnished military protection to his peasants. In return the peasants paid their lord rent, and numerous other fees, by which means his troops were supported. The time came when the noble no longer performed these services for the peasants but the old fees and requirements were still obligatory on the latter. The lord would not allow the peasant to fence any fields without permission. Neither could the peasant use his own meadows, or cut the grass thereon, during the hatching season of the wild fowls. He could not prevent the destruction of his crops by deer, boars, and pigeons, the last named often being kept in great numbers. When the crop was harvested its disposal was controlled by the lord. Rent, personal service, and occasional dues were also demanded by him. The peasant paid toll when he used the lord's bridge, had his grain ground in the lord's mill, or flour baked in the lord's oven, and was not allowed to use other mills or ovens. The last three exactions on the part of the noble had resulted from that period when no one but the lord could furnish these conveniencies to the peasant.

Aside from these, the noble had public privileges, the best places in the government were open to him, and he was free from the greater burden of the taxes.

The majority of the nobility of the ancient regime lived in idleness and luxury, bringing the nation no adequate returns. As a class they were consumers but not producers of wealth.

The clergy equalled the nobility in importance and exceeded them in power. There were from 100,000 to 130,000 persons who had taken the vows of the church. The great wealth of this class gave it undue influence. As in the nobility, the clergy ^{was} divided into two classes.

The higher clergy included the bishops, abbots, and all other church officials above the cure's and vicaries. The most important places were filled by members of noble families. Their connection with the church estates entitled them to feudal emoluments and minor feudal privileges. Many of these church dignitaries acknowledged that they held their places because of the financial advantages which came from their station. They led lives of luxury and dissipation.

Below these were the cure's and vicaries, who had charge of the parishes. They came from the lower classes and were very poor having almost no income. Hard-working men they held the confidence of the peasants, and stood with them against the higher churchmen. In the electoral assemblies where both classes had a voice in the proceedings the wealthy monasteries and chapters were allowed but one vote each. The bishops were represented in the same way, while the cures could vote in person. This gave them the advantage in numbers and on questions of importance they ignored the wishes of their eccleastical superiors.

In recent times the church had guided the peasants in tem-

poral and spiritual matters and in return claimed certain obligations from them. Later the church exacted a tithe of the income of the peasants. In some cases this took the form of a fixed rent and in others it was a share of the crop. Aside from this the church was allowed annates or "first fruits" a tax equal to a year's revenue on every change of incumbent.

Taxes were not levied upon the church property. The clergy through their assemblies had the power of voting their own tax. This was called the "don gratuit" or "free gift". While the assembly acknowledged that this gift was obligatory it was used, ^{as a means} never-the-less to gain concessions from the government.

Thus the clergy had gradually reached the position where they could exert power through their spiritual and political influence in the lowest and highest ranks of society.

The third class of people contained all of those who were neither of the nobility nor the clergy. It included the Third Estate or middle class and the peasants, and formed a large proportion of the population.

The bourgeois, or middle class, were the tradesmen, manufacturers, professional men and all engaged in business. They had been absorbed with their personal interests, and had not been sufficiently educated to question the condition of the nation. As wealth had accumulated and more leisure and culture had come to them, they began to realize their position in their country. They had amassed great wealth and the monarchy borrowed heavily from them. As a result the Third Estate became interested in the management of governmental affairs.

The peasants comprised the lowest stratum of the social order.

The greater weight of the unequal conditions fell upon their shoulders. Their lives were full of poverty and unremitting toil. Taxed by church, nobility, and state, oppressed in numerous ways, they eked out a mere existence. They cultivated their crops in a primitive manner and in case of failure were destitute.

The bourgeois, and the peasants, the large majority of the population of France, were arrayed against the privileged members of society. When the crisis was reached the third class proved to be strong enough in numbers to prevail despite the intellectual and social advantages of the upper classes.

In time of disturbances, and absolute monarch depends upon his troops to sustain his dominion. When these weaken the state is weakened. The army of France consisted of the household troops, proprietary regiments, and ordinary regiments of the line. The first were made up mainly of nobility and veterans. They were well paid and splendidly attired. Louis XVI had incurred the enmity of many of these men by greatly reducing their numbers. The proprietary regiments had been raised for Louis XIV by French noblemen and foreign princes. Louis XVI had reduced these in numbers, also the ordinary regiments of infantry and cavalry had many foreign regiments among them. Beside these there was a militia which did garrison duty in time of war and drilled in time of peace.

All the higher official positions in the army were held by the nobility. They procured their positions through favor, and passed through the ranks to familiarize them with their duties. These officers were well paid, exerted authority, received honor, and had leisure for social life.

Ensigns, lieutenants, captains, majors, and lieutenant-colonels

came from the poorer nobility. They worked hard and received low wages. Their training was obtained in military schools or in camps. Much advancement could not be expected.

Private soldiers were recruited from the worst elements in the population. Many were criminals and adventurers. As the recruiting agent was paid so much per head for each man he secured, some were enlisted by fraudulent methods.

Exemptions from military service were numerous. They were made in favor of the nobility, bourgeois, employes of the administration and of public works, sons of cultivators in easy circumstances, and sons of aged and dependent parents. In fact exemption could be obtained by any one possessing influence.

The number of officials in the army was much greater than necessary. About one-third of the commissioned men were in active service. The officers received in all 46,400,000 livres a year while the common soldiers were paid only 44,100,000 livres. The food of the private was coarse and hardly sufficient. Barracks were close and very crowded. Uniforms were not suited for campaigning, they were seldom renewed before worn out. The pay was embezzled by the more unscrupulous officers who made money out of their men in every way they could.

Discipline depended upon the officers in command. As many of them were indifferent to their duties, the soldiers under them were not well trained. Severe punishments such as flogging with the flat of the sword were not uncommon.

In the navy better conditions existed. The vessels were made after excellent models, though the construction was not good. The officers were noblemen who had been carefully trained, and good discipline prevailed.

It was to such an army, working under an extremely inefficient system, that Louis XVI turned for support, when confronted by the mob.

The means of supporting this army and the government in general were secured through taxation.

It has been estimated that of the lands of France, one-fifth belonged to the crown and communes, one-fifth was in the possession of the nobility, one-fifth was under control of the clergy, one-fifth was owned by the Third Estate, while the rural population held the remaining fifth. This shows that over one-half of the lands were the property of the privileged classes. Moreover, these in the main, were not taxable.

Taxes were assessed very unequally according to one of two methods. One of these was used in the provinces of general assessment, where twenty-four districts were formed, each of which was under the control of an intendent. Some provinces retaining assemblies, held to their ancient rights of self-taxation, or of levying those taxes imposed by the central government, in their own way. Within the provinces the taxes were not distributed at all fairly. The feudal noble had been exempt from paying dues because he was in the service of the ruler. His descendent could no longer ask freedom from taxation on these grounds, but he did claim his right to pay less than his share. He generally succeeded in evading the taxes laid upon him, thus shifting his burden upon those less able to bear it.

Of the direct taxes, the taille, or land tax was one of the most important. In feudal times this tax had been paid by tenants to their lord. Later this had been used by the government to maintain troops.

The taille personelle was assessed on the profits of the land, and on all forms of industry. For the most part the churchmen and nobles were exempt from this.

The twentieth or "vingtiemes", was a 5 per cent tax on incomes. The clergy were not included when this was assessed. Valuations were often made too low and unfair discriminations were common.

Another income tax was the poll tax. It was roughly reckoned. The very poor were supposed to be free from it, but it was generally imposed upon them.

Indirect taxes were farmed. Capitalists combined and rented these taxes. They raised the money necessary to buy out their predecessors, pay for material on hand, and make an advance to the government, this advance drew an exorbitant rate of interest.

One of the taxes which resulted most disastrously for the people was the "gabelle", or salt tax. This was sold to financiers who made all they could out of it. The tax was heavy, moreover each person above seven years of age was compelled to use seven pounds of salt yearly. This encouraged smuggling. The regulations connected with this tax were very annoying. As a consequence of the "gabelle" there were "4,000 seizures, 3,400 imprisonments, 500 sentences to whipping, exile, and the galleys annually."

Food taken into cities was subject to the octroi. This was imposed for the purpose of keeping up the expenses of the town, yet the demands of the king were so great that in many places the revenue was not nearly sufficient. The inhabitants of some towns left for the country to escape these exorbitant charges.

France was divided into three districts according to the different accessions of territory. These districts crossed and re-

crossed each other. The customs which were charged between them bore heavily on the lower classes. Smugglers and brigands were numerous.

The "corvee", or villéin service, was labor exacted of farmers and agricultural men. Originally it had been demanded by the lord for keeping roads and bridges in repair. Later the state used it for building roads and transporting soldiers from one place to another. At first it was attached to the vingtiemes, thus reaching all proprietors, but in Louis XVI's reign it was added to the taille which relieved the proprietor to the disadvantage of the peasant.

Many minor taxes were levied, such as those on wine and tobacco.

From each parish from two to seven persons were appointed even against their will, to apportion and collect taxes. In parishes of the second class, each small proprietor was forced into this work every few years. In some villages laborers and women were compelled to become collectors. Each was personally responsible for all the taxes which had been assessed. If a community paid its taxes promptly, a larger amount was apportioned to it the following year.

Taine asserts that "out of every hundred francs of revenue the direct tax on the tax-payer is fifty-three francs, or more than one-half." Toward the latter part of the eighteenth century though the taxes were growing heavier, the means of meeting them was also increasing. The lower classes were also awakening to a realization of the unfairness of their position. Of the taxes collected, not more than one-fifth reached the treasury of the king.

Where such a misuse of funds is possible the financial basis must be unsound. Such was the condition of the government. The foundation of its financial^{system} was laid on wrong principles.

One of the errors of the financiers of the state was the issuing of anticipations. These were to run for a limited time and were payable out of future revenues. As a result the funds were spent before they were collected, and the administration contracted debts for its ordinary running expenses.

The king had the power of issuing drafts on the treasury, payable to bearer. The controller of finances had no way of knowing for what purpose the orders were drawn. Many persons of rank were favored with large gifts, and permanent pensions were granted to others.

Offices were created and sold by the government to the highest bidder for the purpose of adding to the funds. The salaries received by the holders of these offices, may be looked upon as interest on money loaned to the state. Sometimes fees were connected with the offices in which case the official collected the interest himself. Places were sometimes abolished with or without compensation to the official.

Necker also established a royal lottery. All tickets purchased drew 4 per cent interest on cost, or were repaid in seven to nine years without interest whether the ticket drew a prize.

Notwithstanding all these attempts to enlarge the state funds, the public debt increased rapidly. Under Fleury it reached 34,000,000; Necker added 530,000,000; Joly de Fleury enlarged it by 300,000,000, while the 800,000,000 debt incurred during Calomne's administration of finances brought the public indebtedness up to 1,664,000,000.

In 1755 the interest on the public debt was 45,000,000. By 1776 it amounted to 106,000,000 and in 1789 had reached the sum of 260,000,000.

The persons who advanced this money were mainly members of the Third Estate. Men who had prospered and grown wealthy by their own efforts. When they saw the careless and extravagant manner in which the administration handled its funds the creditors began to demand information of the condition of the finances.

Under the rule of the last king of the monarchy some few efforts were made toward reform. Louis himself was anxious for changes that would better his subjects, but he did not know how to bring them about. His attempts usually ended in failure.

Turgot, the first controleur general, endeavored to introduce better methods. He at once encountered the opposition of the more powerful classes, whose security was threatened by his measures. However he succeeded in making a few important alterations.

During the famine of 1774 Turgot declared free grain throughout the country, thus relieving the suffering of the people. He abolished trade guilds, forbidding the association of either masters or workmen. The corvee, which had been particularly oppressive on the poor was abandoned. Immediately after these edicts were published, Turgot's enemies succeeded in overthrowing him. His successor Clugny, in his short period of power, reestablished both the guilds and the corvee and thereby aroused the hatred of the common classes.

Upon the death of Clugny, Necker assumed control. He was a good financier but not a statesman, his success was not built upon a substantial foundation, hence permanent beneficial results could not be expected.

One of the most important of the innovations of Necker was the introduction of order, and honesty into the financial system. Many useless offices were abrogated. The manner of collecting revenue

was bettered. Some of the court extravagances were curtailed. Necker also tried to establish provincial assemblies. Another act of his which eventually led to the loss of his position, was the publication of a statement of the financial condition of the government. In an indirect way it was an appeal to the people. It was deceiving in the extreme, giving many false impressions. The nobility resented the figures concerning themselves, and finally secured Necker's dismissal.

Joly de Fleury and d'Ormesson were each in charge of finances for a short time, then Calome assumed control. For three years Calome held the confidence of the people while he contracted loan after loan. When the public lost faith in him he was obliged to follow a new policy which he patterned after that of Turgot. The reforms which this involved were likely to be defeated by the Parlement of Paris, so Calome asked for an Assembly of Notables to act upon the propositions. This the king called together choosing the members from among the privileged class. A second time during Louis' reign the people were appealed to. This assembly acquiesced to the establishment of provincial assemblies, but they would not concede a general land tax on all property. The scheme of Calome was defeated and he was dismissed.

Brienne, Archbishop of Toulouse, was called to take up the duties of controller. Edicts relating to free trade and the redemption of the corvee by money were registered by the Parlement. With the proposal of a general land tax came a struggle. The Parlement demanded the convocation of the States-General, believing that the king would not dare to call it together. The Parlement was exiled, a compromise was made and it was recalled. The contention between Brienne and the Parlement continued. Finally the latter was suppressed and

a "cour Flemise," composed of great nobles, officials, and lawyers, was given the power to register the edicts. Meantime preparations were made to call the States-General, which had not met for one hundred seventy years.

Briener's incompetency became evident and he was replaced by Necker. The latter immediately evoked the edict establishing the "cour pleuiere" and reinstated the Parlement.

On the convocation of the States-General in 1789 the ancient regime may be said to have received its death blow. The people had been called upon to express their opinions, and they were not slow in learning their power, the nobility and clergy were opposed by the masses, who were represented by greater numbers. The entire session was stormy. The king with much difficulty induced the clergy and nobility to join the Third Estate. Through the instrumentality of the queen, Necker was dismissed. As he was a great favorite with the people, they became violent. The Bastille was stormed. The States-General became the National Assembly, and Louis XVI was no longer king of France.

When Louis XVI came to the throne his country had been under the sway of absolutism for several generations. The clergy, nobility, and Third Estate each felt the pressure of the sovereign's power. Louis XIV^{had} made and held his position by his strength of character. Louis XV maintained his authority, though less firmly than his predecessor. Intrigue, corruption, extravagance, and the resulting inefficiency, finally ended in the complete overthrow of the existing government. It remained for Louis XVI who lacked the most necessary qualifications of a monarch, to see the structure erected by his forefathers swept away by the oncoming wave of civilization.