

## THE WORLD'S GREAT EVENTS

ALBERT PAYSON TERHUNE

### The Fall of the Bastille

"YOUR majesty, the people are starving for lack of bread!"

"Then," replied Queen Marie Antoinette of France, in utter surprise, "why don't they eat cake?"

The frivolous queen did not ask this question as a joke. She had so little knowledge of poverty and of the needs of a nation that she could not understand how unappeased hunger could exist. This one speech of hers sizes up better than could a whole volume the grievances that led to that red horror, the French Revolution. Those high in authority neither knew nor cared how the great mass of the people existed.

Louis XIV, after impoverishing France by his extravagances, had been succeeded by his great-grandson, Louis XV. The latter had all the "Grand Monarch's" vices and extravagance with none of his genius. He left France almost bankrupt. The clergy and the nobles were exempt by law from taxation. Thus the fearful burden of taxes fell on the tradespeople and peasants. To make matters worse, the taxes were "farmed out," and the collectors wrung the helpless poor still further to obtain "graft" for themselves out of the transaction. So while the court reveled in unheard-of luxury and magnificence the plain people who paid for it all were left to starve.

Moreover, the aristocracy, taking

their cue from the king, oppressed and ill-treated their luckless tenants, grinding them to the dust; unspeakable outrages were perpetrated by the nobles against their defenseless peasants and tradesfolk. Undeserved life imprisonment, torture and death were common occurrences.

And for centuries the people of France had submitted; so long, in fact, that their masters had ceased to regard it as possible that the downtrodden slaves could ever revolt. But, during all these centuries the seeds of revolution were germinating—seeds which were one day to burst into a bloody harvest of retribution that should set the whole world aghast. Among the vilest abuses of the era was the Bastille. This huge fortress was at once the state prison and the citadel of Paris. When a monarch, a nobleman or a man of power had an enemy he could not legally dispose of, he procured (if he had sufficient influence) a secret warrant known as a "lettre de cachet," and had his foe or victim seized and conveyed to the Bastille. There, without trial, without hope of rescue, with his friends ignorant of his whereabouts, the prisoner would linger often for a lifetime. The Bastille was the visible symbol and sign of despotic power, and as such the people of France hated it even as they feared it.

Louis XV had been wise, in his way. He had calculated to a nicety the number of years the people would continue to endure such treatment.

"It will last out my time," said he, "but I pity my grandson!" And the painted, bedizened Duchesse de Pompadour at his side croaked the gruesomely epigrammatic prophecy:

"After us, the deluge!"

And now Louis XV was dead and his grandson, Louis XVI, reigned in

his stead. The sixteenth Louis was an amiable, stupid, weak-willed fellow. He was married to an Austrian archduchess, Marie Antoinette, whose mother had planned the match and had coached the girl queen how to promote Austria's influence at the French court.

Louis XVI had begun his reign with some vague theories as to the rights of the people. But Marie Antoinette and her party at court had soon driven such notions from his stupid head. The people grew to loathe Marie Antoinette and to blame her for their suffering.

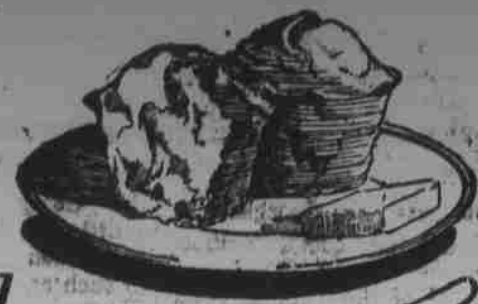
The American revolution had met with warm support from France, but plunged that country into disastrous war with England, and, moreover, fired the people with republican ideas. If America had cut free from the bondage of royal despotism why should not France? The people began to awake—and to think. Famine was rife throughout the rural districts. Throngs of country folk flocked into Paris. Riots and other disturbances sprang up. A national guard was formed by the municipality and Lafayette was placed at its head.

The people were at last aroused. They did not yet dare to turn against royalty itself, but they assailed its most hated symbol—the Bastille. On July 14, 1789, a mob marched on this fortress, calling on the governor, Delaunay, to surrender. Delaunay refused. Then the crowd attacked. Delaunay, a staunch, loyal old soldier, fought them off for hours, till some of the guard came up, with several pieces of artillery, and forced him to yield. The mob (soldiers, peasants and townfolk alike) rushed into the Bastille, released the prisoners (some of whom were insane or dazed from long confinement), killed Delaunay and proceeded to tear down the fortress. On the wall of one cell they found this prophecy scrawled a half-century earlier by Cagliostro, the charlatan magician:

"The Bastille shall be destroyed and the people shall dance on its site."

The latter part of the prophecy was fulfilled by screaming, blood-streaked revolutionists, who accompanied their wild dance with songs of vengeance. The French Revolution had dawned.

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