

ON THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Hans Axel (1755–1810), Count Fersen, to his father

Paris, 2 January 1789

The country is still in a great ferment, but here great heats pass off in a short time and reflection comes. The grave question which divides all minds at the present moment is whether the deputies of the *tiers état* will equal in number those of the nobles and the clergy; opinions are much divided thereon, even among the nobles, the greater part of whom consent to this equality. The king has just decided that for one member of the nobles and one of the clergy there shall be two of the *tiers état*, which seems just. Meanwhile the public has been inundated with writings and pamphlets; there is not a day that five or six do not appear; most of them have no common-sense and contain nothing but empty words or thoughts that are wholly seditious. Everybody is author and administrator, especially the women; you know, as I do, how they give the tone here and how they like to mingle in everything. They are occupied now with nothing but “the Constitution,” and the young men, to please them and to have an air of good style, talk only of States-general and systems of government, though often enough their waistcoats, their cabriolets, and their jackets make a diversion. I do not know whether the kingdom will gain by all these changes, but society has lost a great deal.

Valenciennes, 26 June 1789

The *tiers état* wants to be alone in the States-general. The origin of the quarrel is that the *tiers état* claimed that the powers of the deputies ought to be verified in common in an assembly of the three orders; whereas the nobles willed that, according to ancient custom each order should verify its powers separately. This dispute heated all brains; part of the clergy joined the *tiers état*; so did some of the nobles; and they have constituted themselves a National Assembly; whereupon the king held a royal session at which he quashed the resolution of the *tiers état*. The National Assembly paid no attention to the king’s action, but continued its sessions. The nobles have joined the king. The excitement is extreme. You know French heads, and you can easily imagine to what lengths they may go; but never could you have conceived the indecency of all that is being done and written. The Archbishop of Paris, a man respectable for his age and conduct, came near being stoned at Versailles as he was entering his house, because he is not on the sides of the *tiers état*. Several of his servants were wounded. Three or four madmen lead the whole thing, and God knows where it will end. The king seems decided to hold to what he has said, and they have brought about 12,000 to 15,000 troops into the neighborhood of Versailles, La Muette, Meudon, etc. What is most grievous is that they are not sure of the French soldier, and they are forced to employ foreigners as much as possible. They have also brought up forty pieces of artillery. It is impossible to foresee the end.

Valenciennes, 22 July 1789

Heads are so heated that firmness is thought more injurious than useful. The Baron de Breteuil is no longer minister. M. de Broglie and de La Vauguyon, who were appointed with him, the first as minister of War, the second to Foreign Affairs have gone too; the king has recalled M. Necker. The troops are sent back to their garrisons. The populace of Paris has seized the Bastille and has murdered the governor, M. de Launay, in a horrible manner. They have captured at the Invalides 36,000 muskets; they have hanged M. de Flesselle, provost of the merchants; all carriages are stopped; every one in Paris is made to go a-foot. The nobles are insulted. The Comte d’Artois and his children, the Princes de Condé, Conti, and Bourbon, with many other persons, among them the Baron de Breteuil, have fled, under assumed names to protect themselves from the people. No one is allowed to leave Paris; all is confusion, disorder, consternation. The assembly of the electors at the Hôtel-de-Ville has little power, as the execution of M. de Toulon and Berthier plainly shows.

At the present moment Paris is rather more tranquil, but not enough so to induce persons to remain in it. Every day great numbers of the inhabitants leave it, and by winter, unless quiet is restored, it will be deserted. The king has gone to Paris in the hope of producing calmness, but the effect has not been all that he expected.

You will see in the "Journal de Paris" and other papers, the details of all this, which are fairly correct; nothing is exaggerated, for it is not possible to exaggerate what has happened, and is still happening. Riots are taking place in all the cities of the kingdom, but they seem to be only a parody of what is going on in Paris. So far all is confined to breaking into the tax offices and opening the prisons, for it is the lowest of the populace who make the disorder. The bourgeoisie was immediately armed and that did much to restore tranquility. We have had our little riot here, but it is all over. Now, the idle scoundrels have spread themselves over the country districts; they are pillaging, or putting under contribution all the abbeys and châteaux; they are hunted everywhere, and yesterday, in one spot, we captured one hundred and nineteen; many more will probably be taken.

That, my dear father, is the sad news of this country; it is in a state of violent crisis; we must now see what the States-general will do; but at this moment all bonds are broken; obedience has disappeared in the army, and I doubt if it will be as easy to restore things as it has been to overthrow them.

Valenciennes, 15 August 1789

Disorder is increasing throughout the country, and God alone knows what will come of it. Paris is the focus of trouble, and nearly every one is in haste to leave it. Vagabonds and deserters are taking refuge there, and the number of the latter is very considerable. They are received into the new militia which is being raised under the command of the Marquis de Lafayette; they have better pay than in our regiments and there are no means not employed to entice them. It is said that according to the report of the regiments rendered to the war office, there have been, since 13 July, 12,750 deserters, without counting the Gardes Françaises. The king's authority is totally annihilated, so is that of the parliaments and the magistrates; the States-general themselves tremble before Paris, and this fear greatly influences their deliberations. There are no longer in this kingdom either laws, order, justice, discipline, or religion; all bonds are broken; and how can they be re-established? that is what I do not know, but these are the effects of the progress of the ideas of angomania and philosophy; France is ruined for a long time to come.

Valenciennes, 3 September 1789

All bonds are broken; the king's authority is null; the National Assembly itself trembles before Paris, and Paris trembles before forty to fifty thousand bandits or vagrants established at Montmartre or in the Palais-Royal, from which they cannot be driven. In the provinces the people are intoxicated with the idea, long spread by philosophers in their writings, that all men are equal; and the abolition of feudal rights and others (voted so glibly by the Assembly in three hours time, after a supper) has persuaded them that they have nothing more to pay. Everywhere they are rushing into frightful excesses against the châteaux of the nobles, which they pillage and burn, with all their deeds and papers; they even maltreat the owners if they find them there. You will see the details in the newspapers and there is nothing exaggerated in them. In all the towns the people have broken into the offices and driven away the clerks of the farms; in nearly all the provinces they refuse to pay. The taxes cannot be collected; the troops are won over, or seduced, by the hope of liberty or money. The king will soon be unable to meet his engagements, and bankruptcy is imminent. The nobles are in despair; the clergy are, as it were, struck demented, and the *tiers état* is wholly dissatisfied: it is the *cannaille* who reign, and are satisfied because, having nothing to lose, they can only gain. No one dares to command, and no one is willing to obey.

Such is the liberty of France, and the state in which she is at this moment. One shudders at seeing what is going on, and it is impossible to foresee how these things will end. All this makes me very unhappy. I share with you, my dear father, the attachment you feel for France, and I cannot see its ruin without the keenest sorrow. Many regiments have mutinied; some have even laid hands on their chief officers. In our regiment things have not gone so far as yet, but for three days the soldiers forced the gates of the quarters and of the town, and went to drink in the country, where they committed very horrible excesses. On the third day they would certainly have pillaged and fired the town if the *générale* had not been beaten. Aided by the bourgeois militia, we have now re-established order and quiet.

The extraordinary part is that the same thing has happened in nearly all the garrisons, and that throughout the kingdom the mutinies have all been alike. Secret agents distribute money; these men are known nearly everywhere; the leaders of the seditions, tried and hanged, have denounced them; but whether it be weakness, or fear, or complicity, or the absence of laws, or the lack of means to enforce those that still exist—certain it is that the magistrates dare not take steps; nothing is done against these men, and they are left in peace to stir up anarchy, mutiny, license, and to work for the ruin of the State. The Duc d'Orléans is strongly suspected of being the leader and motive-power of all this.

If I were writing from Paris I should not dare to tell you these things; the epistolary inquisition has been very close; the letters of the king and queen have not escaped it. I think it has ceased at present; but it is more prudent not to trust to this. When you write to me, my dear father, you can freely say what you please; coming from you it can only do good; but you must be kind enough not to refer to what I have written to you on this subject.

Paris, 9 October 1789

All the public papers have told you, my dear father, of what happened at Versailles on Monday, 5th, and Tuesday, 6th, and of the coming of the king of Paris with his family. I was witness of it all and I returned to Paris in one of the carriages of the king's suite; we were six hours and a half on the way. God keep me from ever again seeing so afflicting a sight as that of those two days.

The people seem enchanted to see the king and his family; the queen is much applauded, and she cannot fail to be when they know her, and do justice to her desire for the right, and to the kindness of her heart. The States-general are to come to Paris and begin their sessions; I do not yet know on what day.

Katharine Prescott Wormeley, ed. *Diary and Correspondence of Count Axel Fersen, Grand-Marshal Of Sweden, Relating to the Court of France* (1902):70–76.