

TURGOT

By J. W.

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During the long reign of Louis XV several reforming statesmen held office, but "God forbid," says Morley, "that we should place any other Minister on a level with the high and beneficent figure of Turgot." He was an administrator by heredity, training, and instinct, to whom good government was a religion. In the district inland from Bordeaux he ruled among the peasants for thirteen years. There he opened the first Agricultural College, and besides introducing the potato and the sowing of clover seed, he succeeded in removing the hated "Corvées," and in altering the old Militia laws, which were equally abhorred. He was always "alert to increase the strength of justice in society." When food became scarce, due to a bad harvest, he spent all his own salary in relief before applying to the central authority for help. Compelled to open charity workshops, he urged the importance of keen piecework prices to prevent men earning their "doles" easily, and so to check workers from flocking in from regular jobs.

During his stay at Limoges he wrote his famous letters on Free Trade, but the Controller-General, to whom they were addressed, was not convinced, and finally set up a Government control and police regulation of all buying and selling of corn. Those who urged this scheme declared "the national food could not be abandoned to the unfettered cupidity of commercial people." But rumours, suspicions, and evidence accumulated that cupidity had seized the directors themselves, and this corn scandal paved the way for the entry of honest Turgot into the Council of the new King (Louis XVI) at Versailles.

When the curtain rises upon the great drama of the Revolution the stage setting seems very familiar. There were about one million idle men in the country in Turgot's year of office. Other conditions were a great national debt not diminishing; heavy burden of taxes; cost of living far too high; a helpless Cabinet unable to remove these evils; manufacturers and food producers all combining and fixing prices to their own advantage; trade guilds and corporations with hurtful privileges and restrictions in every branch of industry; the management of these unions usurped by a narrow group of members who imposed fees and rules to further class interests and divisions; apprenticeships difficult to obtain; "the simplest work could often be performed only by applying to workmen of different guilds, and the client had to put up with the slowness, dishonesty, exactions, and caprices of their selfish rules." There was great waste, luxury, and extravagance in high places.

Upon this scene appeared Turgot, aged 47, depending for the success of his drastic proposals upon the support of the young King of 20 years. First of all, Turgot demanded strict economy at the Court; no increase of the taxes; no more loans. The King agreed. Not long after a heavy bill of the Queen was submitted to Turgot. He refused to pay it, and Marie Antoinette became his first bitter enemy. One of his early duties was to "sack the lot" who had manipulated the corn monopoly. Then he set about preparing his decrees for re-establishing free trade in corn; for bringing the nobles and the clergy within the ranks of the taxpayers; and, greatest of all, his decree for unrestricted freedom of labour by the suppression of the trades guilds and corporations. He worked without secrecy, and his oppo-

nents knew his intentions. In his preamble to the decree restoring freedom in corn dealing he wrote: "The more commerce is free, brisk, extended, the more promptly, efficaciously, and abundantly are the people provided for. Victualling by the care of the Government cannot have the same success. The attention of the State, divided between too many objects, cannot be as active as that of merchants who are exclusively occupied with their trade. The State knows later and less correctly both needs and resources. The agents of the Government, having no interest in economy, buy at a dearer market, convey at a greater cost, and preserve with smaller precautions." Voltaire hailed this edict with great delight. His admiration for Turgot never wavered.

Having exposed the abuses of the Guilds of Trades and Artizans, the preamble of Turgot proceeds: "God, when he made man with wants, and rendered labour an indispensable resource, made the right to work the property of every individual in the world, and this is the first, the most sacred, and the most imprescriptible of all kinds of property. We regard it as one of the first duties of our justice, and as one of the acts most of all worthy, to free our subjects from every infraction of that inalienable right of humanity." Then the Decree begins: "Article I. hereby declares that all persons, even foreigners, are free, henceforth, to exercise any trade, profession, or industry they like, and even to exercise several together. All Guilds and Corporations of Trades and Artizans are suppressed."

Six important Decrees were passed at one special sitting, by the will of the King, but against the wishes of the Parliament. But now all Turgot's enemies were astir. The Queen's displeasure was shared by the nobles, the clergy, the Parliament, and the suppressed Masters of the Guilds. Two months later the King himself withdrew his favour, and Turgot was dismissed amid general joy. The common people who should have recognized a friend in Turgot saw only another "King's man" removed, and they joined in the jubilation. Condorcet, the warm-hearted and lonely philosopher of the Revolution, wrote: "This event has changed all nature in my eyes. I have no longer the same pleasure in looking at those fair landscapes over which he would have shed happiness and contentment. The gaiety of the people wrings my heart. They dance and sport as if they had lost nothing."

Marie Antoinette desired that he should be sent to the Bastille, but he quietly retired to his studies and five years later died. His burial was in the little village of his people. Ten years afterwards, when the war raged, and lead was running short, the coffin was dug up to secure the metal lining, and covered again without marking the spot.

The French have well preserved the memory of their hero whose whiff of grapeshot ended the Revolution, and whose sharp sword saved France. The tale is here retold of another would-be-saviour of France, who wielded only an earnest pen with which he strove to remove abuses; with which he taught that man was only a "bundle of wants," and that to fill the wants of man the best means was to perpetuate production along the path of individual freedom.

Visitors with bowed heads contemplate the tomb of the warrior in its marble well, and gaze upwards at the great golden cross suspended like a hovering angel over his dust. But if you seek the grave of the justice-loving statesman, you will not find it. He lies in an unknown corner of a little churchyard in Normandy, and now even his name among ordinary men is wellnigh forgotten.