

LITTLE CAUSES OF BIG WARS

By Albert Payson Terhune

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A Banquet That Led to a Revolution.

AT Versailles, France, one day in 1789, a gorgeous banquet was given by King Louis XVI, in honor of the foreign officers and soldiers in his service. And thereby the king added just the one push necessary to engulf himself and his monarchy under an avalanche of revolution and of war.

France's affairs for centuries had been run for the benefit of the court and the nobles. The peasantry were wretchedly poor and they suffered more at the hands of their aristocrat masters than ever did the most luckless plantation slaves of the south. Justice was a joke. A man with enough power could have an enemy thrown into the Bastille prison without trial and left there to rot. Taxes were unbelievably heavy. The people at large had no rights.

This sort of thing had once gone on with no especial complaint. But every year the inevitable day of reckoning drew nearer and nearer. Louis XIV. had nearly wrecked both nation and treasury by his wars and his personal extravagances. Louis XV. had still further depleted France in the same way and had said jokingly:

A Tottering Monarchy.

"It will last out my time, but I pity my grandson!"

His grandson (and successor), Louis XVI., was a fat-witted, weak fellow who, with his pretty and silly wife, Marie Antoinette, did his best to demolish what was left of royal power in France. By one act of folly after another the king and queen shook the already tottering monarchy.

It is a miracle that the revolution was so long delayed. For, looking at the story through modern eyes, it does not seem possible that any nation could have continued to endure such gross misrule. But the French were cowed by oppression and dazzled by the glitter of the nobility and of France's vaunted prestige. They grumbled but remained in leash.

In July, 1789, a mob destroyed the Bastille, which the people regarded as the symbol of tyranny. Then they waited. It was the hush before the storm. The people's one taste of blood had not been sufficient to make them crazy for more. Tact and statesmanship perhaps might yet have saved the monarchy. But statesmanship and tact were two qualities utterly lacking in the monarchs and in their chosen advisers.

The court continued to squander fortunes in dissipation, while the poor went hungry. Then, at the very moment when most the king needed the loyalty of his native soldiers, came the costly Versailles banquet to the foreign troops. That was the last straw. That their king should feast foreigners while his own people starved awoke the nation to fury.

On October 5, 1789, the national guard, accompanied by an army of screaming and maddened women, rushed from Paris to Versailles, seized the palace and forced the king, the queen and their children to return to the capital with them. There the royal family were kept virtually prisoners, while the country went mad. Everywhere national guard regiments were mustered. Everywhere armed bands of peasants burned and looted castles and murdered every noble they could lay hands on. The score for long years of tyranny was paid in blood.

A proclamation (somewhat like our own Declaration of Independence and inspired by it) was drawn up, declaring all men equal and abolishing the nobility. The king and queen tried to escape from France. They were caught and dragged back, and later were beheaded.

Foreign powers burst in upon France with armies of invasion. War, civil and foreign, devastated the land. The revolutionists, having crushed the monarchy, turned on each other. France was one vast slaughter house. While her armies were trying to repel those of her neighbors her sons were butchering one another by the thousand.

An Orgy of Slaughter.

In spite of these fearful drawbacks the new French armies thrashed their allied enemies, saving France from dismemberment by the foes who had sought to take advantage of her Reign of Terror.

And at last out of the swelter of blood and graft and anarchy arose the Man of Destiny who was to restore order and greatness and world-power to France. He was Napoleon Bonaparte.