

TRIAL OF STRENGTH

In April of the same year there were already rebellions, looting and unrest in Paris. It is likely that the Duke of Orleans was behind all this. The famous regiment the 'Garde Francaises', long stationed in Paris, is to play an important role during the following time. More than fifty of its officers are freemasons and also the majority of its petty officers. On 12th July protest demonstrations take place, protected by the Gardes Francaises. It is the first time they interfere against the rather reluctant attacking soldiers of the King. Thus they openly take sides with the opposition. At the same time, a committee, which meets permanently in the town hall, decides to establish a citizens' militia to maintain order but also as a defense against the royal troops. A confrontation is expected at any time. This militia, which will soon call itself the National Guard, employs almost exclusively freemasons as officers.

Bro. Marquis de la Salle is appointed as its Commander. Second in command is Bro. Gaulard de Saudray, who later becomes the founder of the Lyceum of Fine Arts in Paris. During the night before 14th July alarm bells ring everywhere. Reports of alleged movements of royal troops come in from all quarters, proving ultimately to be just rumors, spread by the Duke of Orleans. The militia is armed without delay. The Invalides [originally soldiers' refuge built by Louis XIV] is taken by storm, 32,000 muskets are found - but without gun powder and cartridges. Surprisingly, the royal troops are still being held back. The commanding officer, M. Besenval, is a freemason as well and thus sympathetic to the opposition. The crowd moves on towards the Bastille, where days ago the gun powder had been transferred for storage. Upon arrival three messengers are sent to negotiate, all three being freemasons. These negotiations are protracted endlessly. Outside the crowd raves on and finally succeeds in crossing the first draw bridge. The Governor, M. de Launay gives orders to shoot. A further delegation is sent in, all of them freemasons as well, accompanied by a drummer of the Gardes Francaises. The Governor feels trapped and once again issues orders to shoot. Finally the Gardes Francaises mount a massive attack. The second draw bridge comes down and the mob rushes into the Bastille. Many of the defenders are physically torn apart by the fury of the people. The militia gets its gun powder. There are no prisoners to be freed. However, the symbol of royal absolutism has fallen. The crowd has smelt blood for the first time and seen the first heads roll. The previously mentioned self dynamics of a revolution have gone into motion.

In this first and successful trial of strength the freemasons were leading everywhere. However, the inactivity of the King and his party enabled this success. Thus the last chance to save the crown was lost. From now on events follow in rapid succession. As the King realizes the consequences, he again capitulates before the National Assembly, blaming his advisors for everything. Bro. Bailly becomes Mayor of Paris and La Fayette, who is hated by the court, becomes Commanding General of the citizens' militia. The big stirrer, the Duke of Orleans loses all his courage. The first aristocrats leave the country, among them the Duke of Mommerancy-Luxembourg, Grand Master of the Grand Orient. His declaration sums up the whole blindness and tragical condition of the noble class: 'I always wanted a necessary and modest restoration of rights but not a general rebellion nor anarchy.'

Slowly but surely the freemasons lose control of the situation. The majority of them only wanted a change of the constitution in favor of the third class. For the first time a fourth class, the simple people [as distinguished from the bourgeoisie, the small traders, lawyers, merchants etc.,] are united and as such take action, lashed into fury by Mirabeau, Camille Desmoulins, Bro. Marat and followed by the great Danton. Nobody had ever expected this to occur. When the royal Ministers Foulon and Bertier were brutally murdered, against the desperate plea of Bailly and La Fayette, and their heads mounted on pikes are carried through the streets by the mob, Bailly and La Fayette become mere symbols of the movement., The cruel events

simply push them aside. The mob, the fourth class, is about to control all further developments.

On the eve of the 4th August, the National Assembly meets in Versailles. Officially it is still the controlling force. However, the events of the last fourteen days in Paris, immediately repeated by similar acts of brutality in the provinces, happened beyond the control of the delegates and actually very much against their wishes. There is a general feeling that something has to happen. That evening, the young delegate Vicomte de Noaille, brother-in-law and co-fighter with La Fayette during the American Wars of Liberation, triggers a range of suicidal decisions by the noble class. He proposes equal taxes for all classes dependent on income only, abolish of feudal rights, of forced labor and other injustices. One of the biggest landowners of the country, Bro. the Duke d'Aiguillon, boisterously supports these proposals. Bro. de Beauharnais requested the abolition of inequalities with regard to penalties as well as equal rights in the distribution of official positions and titles. The clergy do not want to fall short of this trend and request the abolition of exclusive hunting rights. Centuries old privileges of the state, the cities, the noble class and the clergy all come to an end with a mighty crash. Finally, the clergy give away all their privileges together with contributions to Rome. After six hours the resulting 'Tabula rasa' stands.

Ultimately, as a climax of this sad irony, the Monarch is awarded the title of 'Restorer of French Liberties.' Truly a miserable self-mutilation of the first two classes, which will cause a severe hangover in the future. The spreading anarchy has to be bridled. Hence the national Guards are formed, absorbing the Gardes Francaises and the many deserters, who are granted a pardon by the King. In September, each one of these sixty battalions receive its own flag, many of them bearing masonic symbols. La Fayette commands the National Guard, approximately 40% of his officers being freemasons. Thus, he can rely on their loyalty and also on the support of masonic groups in the National Assembly and in the provinces. The public service is once again firmly under the control of Bro. Bailly, whose authority (and that of La Fayette) was badly shaken by the murders of Ministers Foulon and Bertier.

Towards the end of August the situation seems stabilized and quiet again. Apparently the right climate to work through the political decisions to create reforms and a change towards a constitutional monarchy. But the impression is deceiving. The intrigues of the Palais Royal, seat of the Duke of Orleans and his followers create a heated atmosphere. The mood of the people reaches boiling point and the well known events of October 1789 takes place in Versailles. The royal family is forced to move to Paris. The mob shouts: 'Long live the father of the people, long live our King of Orleans.' Now is the chance for the Duke of Orleans to reach for the crown but as always, he hesitates at the last moment. Mirabeau, his paid stirrer, is very upset about this and parts company with the Duke.

The General Assembly moves back to Paris to be established in the Manège. There it is even more under the influence and pressure of the mob. Interjections and shouting make work for the delegates very difficult and put them under heavy strain. Many delegates resort to demagoguery just to appease the fourth class. The financial situation of the country worsens dramatically and Minister Necker threatens state bankruptcy at any given situation. Where can the badly needed funds be sourced? Well, let's look at the rich people first. As the noble classes have already been through the bloodletting on the 4th August, the clergy becomes the next choice. The speaker to mount this offensive is strangely enough the Bishop of Autun, Talleyrand. On 2nd November the National Assembly declares: 'The property of the Church belongs to the nation.' This creates a far reaching isolation of the French clergy from the Roman Church. On 28th November the vows of the priests are annulled. A constitution for the church based on civil law, introduced on 2nd November, will keep the National Assembly busy for a long time to come and will be subject to severe emotional problems, especially in the provinces. A law is

decreed on 27th November, obliging the clergy to bind themselves by oath to the civil laws and the authority of the state. This law becomes one of the most unnecessary and nonsensical laws of the French Revolution and provokes a deep split throughout the whole population. The Pope hesitates for a long time before he takes action on this and on 13th April, 1791 declares the civil law based constitution of the church heretical. Nearly half the clergy swore their oath in the previous year and many repented it now.

During these months of discussion, one of the delegates, Robespierre, also raised the problem of celibacy and possible marriage of clergymen. Generally this was rejected, as the revolution was at this stage still in its rational phase, led by men of good will. The National Assembly actually produced some very positive results in those tumultuous days. One of the historical projects is the re-organization of the French territories into departments. Here again freemasons are involved to a large extent and manage to establish themselves in the new administration of the country. The de-centralization of the country under a constitutional monarchy was most certainly a revolutionary step at that time.

1790 could also be called the year of the formation of clubs, a phenomenon of the French Revolution. How did this come about? Many delegates were aware of the fact that open discussion or any useful work in the National Assembly was very difficult under public pressure. It must also be realized that previously the third class had been excluded from any involvement in public affairs and only now was slowly managing to come to terms with the new responsibilities and learning how to handle them. Small working groups were created to work through topics of general importance, i.e. the new constitution.

These working groups partly changed into so-called clubs, to some degree influenced by the masonic system of work done without the isolation of the lodges, yet without the exclusiveness of issues of politics, religion, etc. as in the case in any masonic lodge. The first club was founded in Paris, the Club de Jacobins, named after the monastery in the Rue St. Honore, where they met initially. Subsequently, further Clubs de Jacobins were formed throughout the country. This was followed by many other clubs under a variety of names and tendencies. Famous names were: La Societe 89, Le Club des Amis de la Constitution Monarchique, La Societe Fraternelle, Le Club des Cordiers, Le Club des Girondins. Some of these were very exclusive, demanding considerable joining fees. Others were also being founded by the fourth class, with rather radical tendencies. Again we find freemasons in these clubs yet with a different priority, as their masonic affiliation takes second place to their political views and the interests of their class. One of the most influential clubs is the Club de Jacobins with its numerous branches throughout the provinces. Again La Fayette is one of its members. Having given up his noble title in 1790, he now calls himself citizen Mottier.

In its two years of existence, the Constitutional Assembly had successfully done more important tasks than any modern legislative Assembly would have done these days. They include:

the Declaration of Human Rights, mainly the work of La Fayette and vastly influenced by his American experience. It became a wonderful declaration of masonic ideas and principles.

the reform of the public service strongly influenced by the brethren of

the third class.
the reform of justice which for the first time establishes the separation

of the three powers [legislative, administrative and judicial]. It abolishes

the possibility of purchasing any position in the public service and introduces the function of a Justice of the Peace. The whole court system

is upgraded to become more just and closer to the people and at the

same

time more independent of the Crown.

tax reform, long overdue, to address and abolish the extreme injustices of the pre-revolutionary era.

All these reforms were urgently needed and of a quite reasonable nature. The authority of the King is also newly defined and somewhat limited, yet he has retained his right to veto but with a time limit. The role of La Fayette becomes increasingly difficult during this time. On the one hand the mob is putting him under constant pressure, on the other hand the royal court is continuously weaving intrigues around him. The religious reforms also create steady problems and increase the confrontations. Then comes the unfortunate day of 20th June 1791 when the royal family try to escape. They are caught in Varenne and brought back to Paris. Everybody now talks of the King's high treason. The Jacobin Club becomes more and more radical and elects lawyer Robespierre as its new leader. Members with more moderate views leave the club in protest, to form a new one.

In the meantime, the French Basic Law is completed and signed by the King, on 13th September 1791. A day after, the King swears allegiance to the nation. Following this, the time of the Constitutional National Assembly comes to an end. Robespierre succeeds in bringing in a law which does not permit the former delegates to be re-elected into the Legislative National Assembly. This new National Assembly meets for the first time on 1st October 1791. Of a total of 766 delegates, there are only 153 freemasons with a very reduced influence. The clubs, in particular the radical Jacobin's Club, control political life. The only thing that now matters to Robespierre is the people as defined by his highly praised friend Rousseau.

Another peculiarity of the times is that the people feel threatened by the movements of foreign powers like Austria, Prussia, England and Sweden. This causes the mob to become increasingly aggressive. At the same time the Girondin Club makes use of the situation to dispose of the recalcitrant clergy. The King and his party in the meantime secretly hope of a victory of the foreign enemies and with this its own restoration. Robespierre alone warns vehemently against the approaching war, which is however declared on 20th April 1792 and which is to last 23 years. The beginning of the war is catastrophic for France and La Fayette is blamed. For him the end of his political career is nigh. He tries to emigrate, is however captured in Austria and imprisoned in Olmuetz until 19th September 1797. La Fayette, idealist and convinced freemason, unfortunately lacked the power of a Cromwell and the daring of a Bonaparte. We owe to him the Declaration of Human Rights, but he did not manage to create the necessary respect for these.

In the residence of Baron de Dietrich, Mayor of Strasbourg, a young Lieutenant Rouget de Lisle sings his famous song called the Marsillaise, later to become the French National Anthem. Both men are freemasons of moderate political direction, and de Dietrich ends his life on the guillotine on 28th March 1793. In Paris a central committee is formed, which then constitutes the Committee of the Revolution. Many freemasons are involved in these committees and they desperately try to maintain public order. This is to no avail, the revolution of the bourgeois is followed by the revolution of the masses. Chaos follows order, cruelty follows idealism. The classes fight for sheer survival, the fourth class, the mob, rules with the iron grip of terror, led by the such as Robespierre, Danton, Marat and Demoulin some of whom finally also end up on the guillotine. Of the three great masonic principles, only equality remains, equality in front of the guillotine.

On 10th August the revolutionary commune is brought to life and the famous attack on the Tuiteries, residence of the King, takes place. Many defenders of the King, among them numerous freemasons, lose their lives. For instance almost all officers of the Swiss Guard were freemasons. The King is finally dethroned, stripped of his rights in parliament and imprisoned from then on,. At the end of August, the notorious Welfare Committee is founded, to be chaired by the terrible Marat, who escaped the guillotine by being

assassinated. On 2nd September, the 'bloodbath of September' commences in which prisoners of seven Parisian prisons are brutally slaughtered. Noblemen, many clergy men who refused to swear allegiance to the new Constitution, soldiers who defended the King and even ordinary criminal prisoners were being massacred. The bloodthirsty Marat acts as the leader, however Robespierre controls in the background. Danton arranges for the prisoners of the Orleans prison to be transferred to Paris. On their way, in Versailles, the mob murders most of them. The balance of those shameful days: 1400 people dead, of these 213 clergymen.

What happened to the freemasons of the first, the bourgeois revolution? Fourteen of the noble brethren of the Constitutional Assembly die on the guillotine, many emigrate and many surprisingly manage to disappear until the end of the Reign of Terror. It is similar with the brethren of the clergy. Many emigrate, many leave the priesthood and even marry and some like the terrible Chabot become actively involved in the horrible events.

On 10th August 1792 the third parliament, the National Convention, is formed from the Legislative Assembly. Of the 749 elected members, the records show 247 to be freemasons. The Convention takes over the function of Legislative Assembly after September 1793. On 11th December 1793 it begins a trial of the King and, following a marathon session of 35 hours, condemns him to death. 122 of 247 brethren voted for the death penalty, among them the Duke of Orleans. This is a staggering result, considering the fact that especially the freemasons in the first moments of the revolution vehemently opted for a constitutional monarchy.

LIFE IN LODGES THESE DAYS

Following the taking of the Bastille on 14th July 1789, almost all lodges came to a standstill, due to the general turbulence of the times. Soon however, ritual work was being taken up again. Yet at the end of 1792 to early 1793 with increasing radicalization and power take-over by the fourth class, all lodges virtually come to an end. Freemasons then in positions of power have deserted the high aims and ideals of our brotherhood and simply pursue their own political goals with all the means available to them. The Duke of Orleans, who in the meantime has changed his name to Philippe Egalite, publishes his letter of resignation from the craft in the 'Journal de Paris' on 22nd September 1793. From a freemason's viewpoint, this is a shameful and dishonest document but considering those times, somehow humanly understandable. The Duke of Orleans was never a hero, but rather an opportunist and ambitious plotter, as well as an indecisive weakling. This denial of masonic ideals did not actually achieve anything for him. On 9th November 1793, the past Grand Master and former leader of the Orleanist party of the first parliament is beheaded like so many before and after him.

What follows now are the last attempts, condemned to fail, to somehow salvage masonic life and activities. Instead of using the term brother, the masons address each other now a citizen candidate, the obligation is sworn on the Declaration of Human Rights instead of the Bible, the republican calendar replaces the masonic one, etc. At the end of 1793 the masonic light is practically extinguished. One does not die as a freemason any more, but as a nobleman, a citizen, a Girondin or Montagnard, without in most cases really knowing why. The revolution swallows her fathers. In 1793 the Girondin Club has reached its final days. Most prominent members are condemned as the Group of 21 and executed on 31st October 1793, eight of them being freemasons. Singing the Marseillaise, they march to the guillotine and continue until the last of them dies, the last tunes being absorbed by the screaming and bloodthirsty crowds.

The revolution continues, but Freemasonry has ceased to exist. It will be several years before, under the regime of Napoleon, the Craft returns with a brilliant light. Until then, the masonic ideals which initially moved the revolution, have gone. Freedom has disappeared, equality had to give way to anarchy, and the fraternity lies in chains and dies under the guillotine.

Cambon formulated all this in a most appropriate manner: 'The Constitutional Assembly has illuminated France with a beautiful light, under the Legislative Assembly everything became dark and gloomy again and during the time of the Convention, in this terrible darkness, we have all murdered each other.'

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