



HIPPOLYTE TAINÉ

**THE HISTORY
OF FRENCH
REVOLUTION**

Hippolyte Taine

The History of French Revolution

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PREFACE

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This second part of "Les Origines de la France Contemporaine" will consist of two volumes.—Popular insurrections and the laws of the Constituent Assembly end in destroying all government in France; this forms the subject of the present volume.—A party arises around an extreme doctrine, grabs control of the government, and rules in conformity with its doctrine. This will form the subject of the second volume.

A third volume would be required to criticize and evaluate the source material. I lack the necessary space: I merely state the rule that I have observed. The trustworthiest testimony will always be that of an eyewitness, especially

- * When this witness is an honorable, attentive, and intelligent man,

- * When he is writing on the spot, at the moment, and under the dictate of the facts themselves,

- * When it is obvious that his sole object is to preserve or furnish information,

- * When his work instead of a piece of polemics planned for the needs of a cause, or a passage of eloquence arranged for popular effect is a legal deposition, a secret

report, a confidential dispatch, a private letter, or a personal memento.

The nearer a document approaches this type, the more it merits confidence, and supplies superior material.—I have found many of this kind in the national archives, principally in the manuscript correspondence of ministers, intendants, sub-delegates, magistrates, and other functionaries; of military commanders, officers in the army, and gendarmerie; of royal commissioners, and of the Assembly; of administrators of departments, districts, and municipalities, besides persons in private life who address the King, the National Assembly, or the ministry. Among these are men of every rank, profession, education, and party. They are distributed by hundreds and thousands over the whole surface of the territory. They write apart, without being able to consult each other, and without even knowing each other. No one is so well placed for collecting and transmitting accurate information. None of them seek literary effect, or even imagine that what they write will ever be published. They draw up their statements at once, under the direct impression of local events. Testimony of this character, of the highest order, and at first hand, provides the means by which all other testimony ought to be verified.—The footnotes at the bottom of the pages indicate the condition, office, name, and address of those decisive witnesses. For greater certainty I have transcribed as often as possible their own words. In this way the reader, confronting the texts, can interpret them for himself, and form his own opinions; he will have the same documents as myself for arriving at his conclusions, and, if he is pleased to

do so, he may conclude otherwise. As for allusions, if he finds any, he himself will have introduced them, and if he applies them he is alone responsible for them. To my mind, the past has features of its own, and the portrait here presented resembles only the France of the past. I have drawn it without concerning myself with the discussions of the day; I have written as if my subject were the revolutions of Florence or Athens. This is history, and nothing more, and, if I may fully express myself, I esteem my vocation of historian too highly to make a cloak of it for the concealment of another. (December 1877).

BOOK FIRST. SPONTANEOUS ANARCHY.

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CHAPTER I. THE BEGINNINGS OF ANARCHY.

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I.—Dearth the first cause.

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Bad crops. The winter of 1788 and 1789.—High price and poor quality of bread.—In the provinces.—At Paris.

During the night of July 14-15, 1789, the Duc de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt caused Louis XVI to be aroused to inform him of the taking of the Bastille. "It is a revolt, then?" exclaimed the King. "Sire!" replied the Duke; "it is a revolution!" The event was even more serious. Not only had power slipped from the hands of the King, but also it had not fallen into those of the Assembly. It now lay on the ground, ready to the hands of the unchained populace, the violent and over-excited crowd, the mobs, which picked it up like some weapon that had been thrown away in the street. In fact, there was no longer any government; the artificial structure of human society was giving way entirely; things were returning to a state of nature. This was not a revolution, but a dissolution.

Two causes excite and maintain the universal upheaval. The first one is food shortages and dearth, which being constant, lasting for ten years, and aggravated by the very disturbances which it excites, bids fair to inflame the popular passions to madness, and change the whole course of the Revolution into a series of spasmodic stumbles.

When a stream is brimful, a slight rise suffices to cause an overflow. So was it with the extreme distress of the eighteenth century. A poor man, who finds it difficult to live

when bread is cheap, sees death staring him in the face when it is dear. In this state of suffering the animal instinct revolts, and the universal obedience which constitutes public peace depends on a degree more or less of dryness or damp, heat or cold. In 1788, a year of severe drought, the crops had been poor. In addition to this, on the eve of the harvest,[1101](#) a terrible hail-storm burst over the region around Paris, from Normandy to Champagne, devastating sixty leagues of the most fertile territory, and causing damage to the amount of one hundred millions of francs. Winter came on, the severest that had been seen since 1709. At the close of December the Seine was frozen over from Paris to Havre, while the thermometer stood at 180 below zero. A third of the olive-trees died in Provence, and the rest suffered to such an extent that they were considered incapable of bearing fruit for two years to come. The same disaster befell Languedoc. In Vivarais, and in the Cevennes, whole forests of chestnuts had perished, along with all the grain and grass crops on the uplands. On the plain the Rhone remained in a state of overflow for two months. After the spring of 1789 the famine spread everywhere, and it increased from month to month like a rising flood. In vain did the Government order the farmers, proprietors, and corn-dealers to keep the markets supplied. In vain did it double the bounty on imports, resort to all sorts of expedients, involve itself in debt, and expend over forty millions of francs to furnish France with wheat. In vain do individuals, princes, noblemen, bishops, chapters, and communities multiply their charities. The Archbishop of Paris incurring a debt of 400,000 livres, one rich man distributing

40,000 francs the morning after the hailstorm, and a convent of Bernardines feeding twelve hundred poor persons for six weeks¹¹⁰². But it had been too devastating. Neither public measures nor private charity could meet the overwhelming need. In Normandy, where the last commercial treaty had ruined the manufacture of linen and of lace trimmings, forty thousand workmen were out of work. In many parishes one-fourth of the population¹¹⁰³ are beggars. Here, "nearly all the inhabitants, not excepting the farmers and landowners, are eating barley bread and drinking water;" there, "many poor creatures have to eat oat bread, and others soaked bran, which has caused the death of several children."—"Above all," writes the Rouen Parliament, "let help be sent to a perishing people.... Sire, most of your subjects are unable to pay the price of bread, and what bread is given to those who do buy it"—Arthur Young,¹¹⁰⁴ who was traveling through France at this time, heard of nothing but the high cost of bread and the distress of the people. At Troyes bread costs four sous a pound—that is to say, eight sous of the present day; and unemployed artisans flock to the relief works, where they can earn only twelve sous a day. In Lorraine, according to the testimony of all observers, "the people are half dead with hunger." In Paris the number of paupers has been trebled; there are thirty thousand in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine alone. Around Paris there is a short supply of grain, or it is spoilt¹¹⁰⁵. In the beginning of July, at Montereau, the market is empty. "The bakers could not have baked" if the police officers had not increased the price of bread to five sous per pound; the rye and barley which the intendant is able to send "are of the

worst possible quality, rotten and in a condition to produce dangerous diseases. Nevertheless, most of the small consumers are reduced to the hard necessity of using this spoilt grain." At Villeneuve-le-Roi, writes the mayor, "the rye of the two lots last sent is so black and poor that it cannot be retailed without wheat." At Sens the barley "tastes musty" to such an extent that buyers of it throw the detestable bread, which it makes in the face of the sub-delegate. At Chevreuse the barley has sprouted and smells bad; the "poor wretches," says an employee, "must be hard pressed with hunger to put up with it." At Fontainebleau "the barley, half eaten away, produces more bran than flour, and to make bread of it, one is obliged to work it over several times." This bread, such as it is, is an object of savage greed; "it has come to this, that it is impossible to distribute it except through wickets." And those who thus obtain their ration, "are often attacked on the road and robbed of it by the more vigorous of the famished people." At Nangis "the magistrates prohibit the same person from buying more than two bushels in the same market." In short, provisions are so scarce that there is a difficulty in feeding the soldiers; the minister dispatches two letters one after another to order the cutting down of 250,000 bushels of rye before the harvest¹¹⁰⁶. Paris thus, in a perfect state of tranquility, appears like a famished city put on rations at the end of a long siege, and the dearth will not be greater nor the food worse in December 1870, than in July 1789.

"The nearer the 14th of July approached," says an eyewitness,¹¹⁰⁷ "the more did the dearth increase. Every baker's shop was surrounded by a crowd, to which bread

was distributed with the most grudging economy. This bread was generally blackish, earthy, and bitter, producing inflammation of the throat and pain in the bowels. I have seen flour of detestable quality at the military school and at other depots. I have seen portions of it yellow in color, with an offensive smell; some forming blocks so hard that they had to be broken into fragments by repeated blows of a hatchet. For my own part, wearied with the difficulty of procuring this poor bread, and disgusted with that offered to me at the tables d'hôte, I avoided this kind of food altogether. In the evening I went to the Café du Caveau, where, fortunately, they were kind enough to reserve for me two of those rolls which are called flutes, and this is the only bread I have eaten for a week at a time."

But this resource is only for the rich. As for the people, to get bread fit for dogs, they must stand in a line for hours. And here they fight for it; "they snatch food from one another." There is no more work to be had; "the work-rooms are deserted;" often, after waiting a whole day, the workman returns home empty-handed. When he does bring back a four-pound loaf it costs him 3 francs 12 sous; that is, 12 sous for the bread, and 3 francs for the lost day. In this long line of unemployed, excited men, swaying to and fro before the shop-door, dark thoughts are fermenting: "if the bakers find no flour to-night to bake with, we shall have nothing to eat to-morrow." An appalling idea;—in presence of which the whole power of the Government is not too strong; for to keep order in the midst of famine nothing avails but the sight of an armed force, palpable and threatening. Under Louis XIV and Louis XV there had been

even greater hunger and misery; but the outbreaks, which were roughly and promptly put down, were only partial and passing disorders. Some rioters were at once hung, and others were sent to the galleys. The peasant or the workman, convinced of his impotence, at once returned to his stall or his plow. When a wall is too high one does not even think of scaling it.—But now the wall is cracking—all its custodians, the clergy, the nobles, the Third-Estate, men of letters, the politicians, and even the Government itself, making the breach wider. The wretched, for the first time, discover an issue: they dash through it, at first in dribbles, then in a mass, and rebellion becomes as universal as resignation was in the past.

II.—Expectations the second cause

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Separation and laxity of the administrative forces.

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Investigations of local assemblies. —The people become

aware of their condition.—Convocation of the States-

General.—Hope is born. The coincidence of early Assemblies

with early difficulties.

It is just through this breach that hope steals like a beam of light, and gradually finds its way down to the depths below. For the last fifty years it has been rising, and its rays, which first illuminated the upper class in their splendid apartments in the first story, and next the middle class in their entresol and on the ground floor. They have now for two years penetrated to the cellars where the people toil, and even to the deep sinks and obscure corners where rogues and vagabonds and malefactors, a foul and swarming herd, crowd and hide themselves from the persecution of the law.—To the first two provincial assemblies instituted by Necker in 1778 and 1779, Loménie de Brienne has in 1787 just added nineteen others; under each of these are assemblies of the arrondissement, under each assembly of the arrondissement are parish assemblies¹¹⁰⁸. Thus the whole machinery of administration has been changed. It is the new assemblies which assess

the taxes and superintend their collection; which determine upon and direct all public works; and which form the court of final appeal in regard to matters in dispute. The intendant, the sub-delegate, the elected representative¹¹⁰⁹, thus lose three-quarters of their authority. Conflicts arise, consequently, between rival powers whose frontiers are not clearly defined; command shifts about, and obedience is diminished. The subject no longer feels on his shoulders the commanding weight of the one hand which, without possibility of interference or resistance, held him in, urged him forward, and made him move on. Meanwhile, in each assembly of the parish arrondissement, and even of the province, plebeians, "husband-men,"¹¹¹⁰ and often common farmers, sit by the side of lords and prelates. They listen to and remember the vast figure of the taxes which are paid exclusively, or almost exclusively, by them—the taille and its accessories, the poll-tax and road dues, and assuredly on their return home they talk all this over with their neighbor. These figures are all printed; the village attorney discusses the matter with his clients, the artisans and rustics, on Sunday as they leave the mass, or in the evening in the large public room of the tavern. These little gatherings, moreover, are sanctioned, encouraged by the powers above. In the earliest days of 1788 the provincial assemblies order a board of inquiry to be held by the syndics and inhabitants of each parish. Knowledge is wanted in detail of their grievances. What part of the revenue is chargeable to each impost? What must the cultivator pay and how much does he suffer? How many privileged persons there are in the parish, what is the amount of their fortune, are they

residents, and what their exemptions amount to? In replying, the attorney who holds the pen, names and points out with his finger each privileged individual, criticizes his way of living, and estimates his fortune, calculates the injury done to the village by his immunities, inveighs against the taxes and the tax-collectors. On leaving these assemblies the villager broods over what he has just heard. He sees his grievances no longer singly as before, but in mass, and coupled with the enormity of evils under which his fellows suffer. Besides this, they begin to disentangle the causes of their misery: the King is good—why then do his collectors take so much of our money? This or that canon or nobleman is not unkind—why then do they make us pay in their place?—Imagine that a sudden gleam of reason should allow a beast of burden to comprehend the contrast between the species of horse and mankind. Imagine, if you can, what its first ideas would be in relation to the coachmen and drivers who bridle and whip it and again in relation to the good-natured travelers and sensitive ladies who pity it, but who to the weight of the vehicle add their own and that of their luggage.

Likewise, in the mind of the peasant, athwart his perplexed brooding, a new idea, slowly, little by little, is unfolded:—that of an oppressed multitude of which he makes one, a vast herd scattered far beyond the visible horizon, everywhere ill used, starved, and fleeced. Towards the end of 1788 we begin to detect in the correspondence of the intendants and military commandants the dull universal muttering of coming wrath. Men's characters seem to change; they become suspicious and restive.—And just at

this moment, the Government, dropping the reins, calls upon them to direct themselves.[1111](#). In the month of November 1787, the King declared that he would convoke the States-General. On the 5th of July 1788, he calls for memoranda (des mémoires) on this subject from every competent person and body. On the 8th of August he fixes the date of the session. On the 5th of October he convokes the notables, in order to consider the subject with them. On the 27th of December he grants a double representation to the Third-Estate, because "its cause is allied with generous sentiments, and it will always obtain the support of public opinion." The same day he introduces into the electoral assemblies of the clergy a majority of curés[1112](#), "because good and useful pastors are daily and closely associated with the indigence and relief of the people," from which it follows "that they are much more familiar with their sufferings" and necessities. On the 24th January 1789, he prescribes the procedure and method of the meetings. After the 7th of February writs of summons are sent out one after the other. Eight days after, each parish assembly begins to draw up its memorial of grievances, and becomes excited over the detailed enumeration of all the miseries which it sets down in writing.—All these appeals and all these acts are so many strokes, which reverberate, in the popular imagination. "It is the desire of His Majesty," says the order issued, "that every one, from the extremities of his kingdom, and from the most obscure of its hamlets, should be certain of his wishes and protests reaching him." Thus, it is all quite true: there can be no mistake about it, the thing is sure. The people are invited to speak out, they are

summoned, and they are consulted. There is a disposition to relieve them; henceforth their misery shall be less; better times are coming. This is all they know about it. A few months after, in July,¹¹¹³ the only answer a peasant girl can make to Arthur Young is, "something was to be done by some great folks for such poor ones, but she did not know who nor how." The thing is too complicated, beyond the reach of a stupefied and mechanical brain.—One idea alone emerges, the hope of immediate relief. The persuasion that one is entitled to it, the resolution to aid it with every possible means. Consequently, an anxious waiting, a ready fervor, a tension of the will simply due to the waiting for the opportunity to let go and take off like an irresistible arrow towards the unknown end which will reveal itself all of a sudden. Hunger is to mark this sudden target out for them.

The market must be supplied with wheat; the farmers and land-owners must bring it; wholesale buyers, whether the Government or individuals, must not be allowed to send it elsewhere. The wheat must be sold at a low price; the price must be cut down and fixed, so that the baker can sell bread at two sous the pound. Grain, flour, wine, salt, and provisions must pay no more duties. Seigniorial dues and claims, ecclesiastical tithes, and royal or municipal taxes must no longer exist. On the strength of this idea disturbances broke out on all sides in March, April, and May. Contemporaries "do not know what to think of such a scourge;¹¹¹⁴ they cannot comprehend how such a vast number of criminals, without visible leaders, agree amongst themselves everywhere to commit the same excesses just at the time when the States-General are going to begin their

sittings." The reason is that, under the ancient régime, the conflagration was smoldering in a closed chamber; the great door is suddenly opened, the air enters, and immediately the flame breaks out.

III.—The provinces during the first six months of 1789

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Effects of the famine.

At first there are only intermittent, isolated fires, which are extinguished or go out of themselves; but, a moment after, in the same place, or very near it, the sparks again appear. Their number, like their recurrence, shows the vastness, depth, and heat of the combustible matter, which is about to explode. In the four months, which precede the taking of the Bastille, over three hundred outbreaks may be counted in France. They take place from month to month and from week to week, in Poitou, Brittany, Touraine, Orléanais, Normandy, Ile-de-France, Picardy, Champagne, Alsace, Burgundy, Nivernais, Auvergne, Languedoc, and Provence. On the 28th of May the parliament of Rouen announces robberies of grain, "violent and bloody tumults, in which men on both sides have fallen," throughout the province, at Caen, Saint-Lô, Mortain, Granville, Evreux, Bernay, Pont-Andemer, Elboeuf; Louviers, and in other sections besides. On the 20th of April Baron de Bezenval, military commander in the Central Provinces, writes: "I once more lay before M. Necker a picture of the frightful condition of Touraine and of Orléanais. Every letter I receive from these two provinces is the narrative of three or four riots, which are put down with difficulty by the troops and constabulary,"[1115](#)—and throughout the whole extent of the kingdom a similar state of things is seen. The women, as is natural, are generally at the head of these outbreaks. It is

they who, at Montlhéry, rip open the sacks of grain with their scissors. On learning each week, on market day that the price of a loaf of bread advances three, four, or seven sous, they break out into shrieks of rage: at this rate for bread, with the small salaries of the men, and when work fails,[1116](#) how can a family be fed? Crowds gather around the sacks of flour and the doors of the bakers. Amidst outcries and reproaches some one in the crowd makes a push; the proprietor or dealer is hustled and knocked down. The shop is invaded, the commodity is in the hands of the buyers and of the famished, each one grabbing for himself, pay or no pay, and running away with the booty.—Sometimes a party is made up beforehand[1117](#) At Bray-sur-Seine, on the 1st of May, the villagers for four leagues around, armed with stones, knives, and cudgels, to the number of four thousand, compel the metayers and farmers, who have brought grain with them, to sell it at 3 livres, instead of 4 livres 10 sous the bushel. They threaten to do the same thing on the following market-day: but the farmers do not return, the storehouse remains empty. Now soldiers must be at hand, or the inhabitants of Bray will be pillaged. At Bagnols, in Languedoc, on the 1st and 2nd of April, the peasants, armed with cudgels and assembled by tap of drum, "traverse the town, threatening to burn and destroy everything if flour and money are not given to them." They go to private houses for grain, divide it amongst themselves at a reduced price, "promising to pay when the next crop comes round," and force the Consuls to put bread at two sous the pound, and to increase the day's wages four sous. —Indeed this is now the regular thing; it is not the people

who obey the authorities, but the authorities who obey the people. Consuls, sheriffs, mayors, municipal officers, town-clerks, become confused and hesitating in the face of this huge clamor; they feel that they are likely to be trodden under foot or thrown out of the windows. Others, with more firmness, being aware that a riotous crowd is mad, and having scruples to spill blood; yield for the time being, hoping that at the next market-day there will be more soldiers and better precautions taken. At Amiens, "after a very violent outbreak,"[1118](#) they decide to take the wheat belonging to the Jacobin monks, and, protected by the troops, to sell it to the people at a third below its value. At Nantes, where the town hall is attacked, they are forced to lower the price of bread one sou per pound. At Angoulême, to avoid a recourse to arms, they request the Comte d'Artois to renounce his dues on flour for two months, reduce the price of bread, and compensate the bakers. At Cette they are so maltreated they let everything take its course; the people sack their dwellings and get the upper hand; they announce by sound of trumpet that all their demands are granted. On other occasions, the mob dispenses with their services and acts for itself. If there happens to be no grain on the market-place, the people go after it wherever they can find it—to proprietors and farmers who are unable to bring it for fear of pillage; to convents, which by royal edict are obliged always to have one year's crop in store; to granaries where the Government keeps its supplies; and to convoys which are dispatched by the intendants to the relief of famished towns. Each for himself—so much the worse for his neighbor. The inhabitants of Fougères beat and drive out

those who come from Ernée to buy in their market; a similar violence is shown at Vitré to the in-habitants of Maine.[1119](#) At Sainte-Léonard the people stop the grain started for Limoges; at Bost that intended for Aurillac; at Saint-Didier that ordered for Moulins; and at Tournus that dispatched to Macon. In vain are escorts added to the convoys; troops of men and women, armed with hatchets and guns, put themselves in ambush in the woods along the road, and seize the horses by their bridles; the saber has to be used to secure any advance. In vain are arguments and kind words offered, "and in vain even is wheat offered for money; they refuse, shouting out that the convoy shall not go on." They have taken a stubborn stand, their resolution being that of a bull planted in the middle of the road and lowering his horns. Since the wheat is in the district, it is theirs; whoever carries it off or withholds it is a robber. This fixed idea cannot be driven out of their minds. At Chant-nay, near Mans,[1120](#) they prevent a miller from carrying that which he had just bought to his mill. At Montdragon, in Languedoc, they stone a dealer in the act of sending his last wagon load elsewhere. At Thiers, workmen go in force to gather wheat in the fields; a proprietor with whom some is found is nearly killed; they drink wine in the cellars, and leave the taps running. At Nevers, the bakers not having put bread on their counters for four days, the mob force the granaries of private persons, of dealers and religious communities. "The frightened corn-dealers part with their grain at any price; most of it is stolen in the face of the guards," and, in the tumult of these searches of homes, a number of houses are sacked.—In these days woe to all who are concerned in the

acquisition, commerce, and manipulation of grain! Popular imagination requires living beings to whom it may impute its misfortunes, and on whom it may gratify its resentments. To it, all such persons are monopolists, and, at any rate, public enemies. Near Angers the Benedictine establishment is invaded, and its fields and woods are devastated.[1121](#) At Amiens "the people are arranging to pillage and perhaps burn the houses of two merchants, who have built labor-saving mills." Restrained by the soldiers, they confine themselves to breaking windows; but other "groups come to destroy or plunder the houses of two or three persons whom they suspect of being monopolists." At Nantes, a sieur Geslin, being deputized by the people to inspect a house, and finding no wheat, a shout is set up that he is a receiver, an accomplice! The crowd rush at him, and he is wounded and almost cut in pieces.—It is very evident that there is no more security in France; property, even life, is in danger. The primary possession, food, is violated in hundreds of places, and is everywhere menaced and precarious. The local officials everywhere call for aid, declare the constabulary incompetent, and demand regular troops. And mark how public authority, everywhere inadequate, disorganized, and tottering, finds stirred up against it not only the blind madness of hunger, but, in addition, the evil instincts which profit by every disorder and the inveterate lusts which every political commotion frees from restraint.

IV.—Intervention of ruffians and vagabonds.

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We have seen how numerous the smugglers, dealers in contraband salt, poachers, vagabonds, beggars, and escaped convicts¹¹²² have become, and how a year of famine increases the number. All are so many recruits for the mobs, and whether in a disturbance or by means of a disturbance each one of them fills his pouch. Around Caux,¹¹²³ even up to the environs of Rouen, at Roncherolles, Quévrevilly, Préaux, Saint-Jacques, and in the entire surrounding neighborhood bands of armed bandits force their way into the houses, particularly the parsonages, and lay their hands on whatever they please. To the south of Chartres "three or four hundred woodcutters, from the forests of Bellème, chop away everything that opposes them, and force grain to be given up to them at their own price." In the vicinity of Étampes, fifteen bandits enter the farmhouses at night and put the farmer to ransom, threatening him with a conflagration. In Cambrésis they pillage the abbeys of Vauchelles, of Verger, and of Guillemans, the château of the Marquis de Besselard, the estate of M. Doisy, two farms, the wagons of wheat passing along the road to Saint-Quentin, and, besides this, seven farms in Picardy. "The seat of this revolt is in some villages bordering on Picardy and Cambrésis, familiar with smuggling operations and to the license of that pursuit." The peasants allow themselves to be enticed away by the bandits. Man slips rapidly down the incline of dishonesty; one who is half-honest, and takes part in a riot inadvertently