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Talleyrand

Duff Cooper

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About the Book

Duff Cooper’s classic biography charts the remarkable progress of Talleyrand; a silver-tongued master diplomat, infamous turncoat, peacekeeper and libertine. Talleyrand held high office in five successive regimes from France’s Ancient Regime, into the Revolution of 1789, Robespierre’s Terror, Napoleon’s epic wars, and on through restored kings to more revolution. Duff Cooper brings Talleyrand vividly to life and paints an exhilarating picture of this tumultuous period in European history.

See also: *The Prince*

About the Author

Duff Cooper, statesman, diplomat and author, was born in 1890. He won the DSO for conspicuous bravery in the First World War, and entered Parliament in 1924. His life was devoted to politics until 1938 when, as First Lord of the Admiralty, he resigned in protest at the Munich Agreement. Called back to office by Churchill in 1940, he completed his wartime career as Ambassador to France. He wrote six books, including *Old Men Forget, Operation Heartbreak* and a classic biography *Talleyrand*. Duff Cooper became 1st Viscount Norwich in 1951. His wife was the famous beauty Lady Diana Cooper; his son is the writer John Julius Norwich. Duff Cooper died in 1954.

TO H.BELLOC

TALLEYRAND

Duff Cooper

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One

THE OLD REGIME

1

THE childhood of a French nobleman in the eighteenth century was not usually the period of his life upon which he looked back with either affection or regret. The doctrine that parents exist for the sake of their children was not then accepted, and the loving care and hourly attention bestowed upon the children of today would have appeared ridiculous to sensible people. When Rousseau, the first man of sentiment, abandoned all his children, one after the other, to be brought up as unknown foundlings, his conduct was thought odd but not vile. The heir to the richest dukedom in France describes how his education was entrusted to one of his father's lackeys who happened to be able to read, how he was dressed in the prettiest clothes for going out but how at home he was left naked and hungry, and how this was the fate of all the children of his age and class. The modern method reflects greater credit on the parents; but evidence is not yet sufficient to prove that it produces a superior type of individual.

Family feeling, however, which has always existed more strongly in France than in England, was certainly as prevalent and as powerful at that period as it is today. It was a sentiment that cared more for the interests of the family as a whole than for the interests of the separate members of the family. The individual was expected, and often compelled, to make sacrifices in order that the family might benefit. The Bastille, which, under the Old Regime, played such an exaggerated part in the imaginations of the ignorant, was principally used to enable indignant parents to

obtain from their children that measure of obedience which they considered that the interests of the family decreed.

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, who was born in Paris on 2nd February 1754, was in his earliest years a victim of these two apparently contradictory tendencies, parental neglect and family pride. He has set it upon record that, during his whole life, he never spent one week under the same roof as his father and mother; and an accident, which occurred to him in infancy while boarded out in the house of a poor woman in the suburbs of Paris, rendered him permanently lame, and therefore unfitted him, in the opinion of his parents, to inherit his father's many titles, which, it was then arranged, should devolve upon his younger brother.

Yet it is not necessary to assume that these parents were inhuman; they were merely following the fashion of their time. They were most anxious to promote the interests of every member of their family, but they did not believe that the future welfare of a man depended upon constant supervision of his childhood. They desired, and sought to obtain, wealth and honour for each of their children, and they knew of only two channels through which wealth and honour could come to a gentleman—the Army and the Church. But a cripple could not be a soldier, and a priest could not hand on his name and titles to his son, and they therefore decided that the second son should be the future head of the family and that the eldest son should enter the Church.

Soon after the occurrence of this accident, which was to exercise so fateful an influence upon his life, the child was sent upon a visit to his great-grandmother, the Princess de Chalais, who resided upon her estates in the province of Périgord. The months that followed were the happiest of his childhood. He found himself living in a period that had already passed away. The old Princess maintained a state of simple, feudal dignity, which the nobility of France had

forgotten since Richelieu taught them to live at Court and to look for all preferment to the King. The independence of the aristocracy had vanished, but the quick-witted little boy was permitted to behold at Chalais, as he sat on a stool at the great lady’s feet, a survival of the feudal system, and a vision of what France had been more than a hundred years before.

Every Sunday the principal gentlemen from the surrounding country would come to accompany the old lady to church. After the ceremony all the poor and the sick would collect in the hall of the château and they would be received singly by the Princess. Two sisters of charity would interrogate them as to their symptoms and prescribe the remedy. The Princess would then say where it was to be found and one of the gentlemen in attendance would proceed to get it. The château was full of medicines and unguents freshly prepared every year in accordance with ancient recipes. The sick people would take away also some herbs for their ptisan, some wine and other comforts, but what they valued most were the kind words of the lady who helped them and who felt for their sufferings.

Remembering the scene years afterwards he wrote: ‘More thorough and scientific medicines employed, even equally free of charge, by doctors of the first reputation, would not have brought nearly so many poor people together and, above all, would not have done them so much good. There would have been lacking the main instruments of healing—prevention, respect, faith, and gratitude. Man is composed of a soul and a body and it is the former that governs the latter. The wounded who have received consolation, the sick who have been persuaded to hope are already in a state to be cured; their blood circulates better, their nerves are strengthened, sleep returns, and the body revives. Nothing is more efficacious than confidence; and it is at its fullest force when it springs from the care and attention of a great

lady, around whom are gathered all ideas of power and protection.’

These enlightened views on the relative importance of mind and matter were not all that he took away from his visit to Chalais. For the first time he was treated with real affection and for the first time he felt proud to belong to an ancient family which through long service had earned respect and love. ‘If I have shown, without too much familiarity, some affectionate and even tender sentiments; if I have retained in changing circumstances some dignity without any haughtiness; if I respect and love old people, it was at Chalais and from my grandmother that I derived all the good feelings with which I saw my family was regarded in that province.’ He parted from the old Princess in tears. She had been born when James II was King of England; he was to die in the reign of Queen Victoria.

When he arrived in Paris after a journey that had taken seventeen days, the child of eight was sent direct to school at the Collège d’Harcourt, without even being permitted to pay a visit to his parents on the way. Henceforth his relations with them were limited to a weekly dinner, to which he was conducted by his tutor, and which he never left without receiving the same admonition—‘Be a good boy and do as Monsieur the Abbé tells you.’ But he was not unhappy at school. The shadow of the future had not yet fallen upon him. He was popular with his school-fellows, and already gave proof of that adaptability to circumstances and power of pleasing his contemporaries, which were to stand him in such good stead throughout his career.

It was during a period of convalescence after an attack of smallpox, which left him unmarked, that he first began to wonder upon what lines his parents had decided that his life was to proceed. He was not to be left long in doubt, and from the first announcement his whole nature, which had so little of the spiritual about it, revolted against the prospect of becoming a priest. In the hope that the pomp and

splendour, inseparable at that time from an episcopal residence, might captivate his youthful imagination, he was sent to stay with his uncle at the Archbishopric of Rheims, where no pains were spared to impress upon him what a fine and pleasant thing it was to rise to a high position in the Church. But he remained unimpressed and, after a year spent in these surroundings, it was only out of weariness and in the conviction that to oppose the wishes of his family was impossible, that he finally consented to enter the seminary of Saint Sulpice, with a view to eventually taking Orders.

Here, where he remained for three years, he was no longer popular. His fellow students found him haughty and reserved, whereas in reality he was only unhappy. Readers of *Le Rouge et le Noir* will remember what Julien suffered at the seminary of Besançon, and it does not need the imagination of a Stendhal to conceive all the bitterness, the impatience, the despair, that must pass through the soul of a full-blooded, worldly, intelligent, and ambitious youth during the long days and nights of adolescence in an ecclesiastical college.

In the depression that weighed so heavily upon him the young student discovered two sources of distraction, both of which were to prove of value to him throughout his life. The first was the collége library into which he plunged hungrily, reading principally the works of historians and biographies of statesmen, and feeding his hopes for the future upon the record of the past. The other distraction—more intimate and more personal—he found in his first love affair—the first of many. A chance encounter in a church, an offer to share his umbrella in the rain, led to an intimacy that lasted for two years. She was a young actress whom her parents had forced to go upon the stage against her will; he against his will was in process of becoming a priest. Different as were the roads selected for them by parental authority, they found a bond of union in the fact that they were both

dedicated to a profession that they had not chosen; and the priest who could not love the Church found consolation in the arms of the actress who hated the stage. It is odd that his first romance, like that of Sir Walter Scott, should have begun under an umbrella.

2

The coronation of Louis XVI at Rheims, which Talleyrand attended in 1775, was the occasion of his first introduction into the great world, where he was to play so prominent and so prolonged a part. He was now twenty-one years of age, and although there awaited him still four years of preparation before entering the priesthood, he returned no more to Saint Sulpice, but became a student at the Sorbonne, leading a life of complete liberty in Paris.

Wordsworth found it bliss to be alive at the dawn of the French Revolution, and to be young then was, he said, ‘very heaven’. But Talleyrand, whose ideas of bliss and of heaven differed considerably from those of the poet, preferred a slightly earlier period, and asserted that nobody could appreciate the pleasure of living who had not lived *before* 1789. He was well qualified to speak with authority on the subject of pleasure, and his tireless pursuit of it was not hindered by the fact that he was to become a priest, nor by his ordination, which took place in the year 1779.

His ordination, and the livings which he subsequently acquired, and which carried no duties with them, enabled him to be independent of his parents, and to afford a manner of living which became his rank rather than his calling. His first preferment is said to have come to him as the result of a witticism that he let fall in the drawing-room of Madame Dubarry, where he complained that in Paris the ladies were more easily to be won than the Abbeys. But the story is unlikely, for by the time that Talleyrand was

frequenting the salons of Paris, Madame Dubarry had ceased to have any Abbeys at her disposal.

As soon as he was in a financial position to do so, he acquired a small but comfortable house in a quiet and leafy corner of Paris, where he collected a library of precious volumes and entertained a select and brilliant circle of friends. It became a habit for three or four of them to call there every morning for the purpose of conversation, and to remain to luncheon. The dearest of these to Talleyrand, or rather to the Abbé de Périgord, as he was usually called at this time, was Auguste de Choiseul, the nephew of Louis XV's Minister. They had first met as boys at the Collège d'Harcourt and an intimate friendship, which was never troubled by the shadow of a quarrel, united the two men throughout their eventful lives. 'He was,' said Talleyrand, 'the man that I most loved.'

The name of Louis de Narbonne was at the time often associated with those of the other two as forming a trio distinguished throughout the fashionable world of Paris for their wit, their wickedness, and their conquests. The coterie, of which these three were the centre and heart, included amongst its members all those who were most intelligent, most free thinking, most free speaking, and most free living in Paris.

Never before, perhaps, and never since has a society existed so well equipped to appreciate all the pleasures both of the senses and of the intellect. The restraints upon liberty of thought and action which man had constructed for himself in the past were falling away, and those with which he has since replaced them were not yet invented. It was a period of feverish excitement, of daring speculation, of boundless hope. It was the entr'acte between two epochs, and the group that met in the foyer, provided by the house of the lame young Abbé at Bellechasse, were well aware that the next act would differ considerably from the one they had already witnessed. They were sufficiently far-

sighted to foresee, and bold enough to speculate upon and to accept, the lines along which the drama would develop; but meanwhile they had only to flirt, to gamble, and to chatter, until called to their several places by the ringing of the bell that should announce the rise of the curtain.

It was the apogee of the philosophical period and, as was fitting, the patriarch of philosophy arrived in Paris, to receive the adulation of his disciples before it was too late. Voltaire, now a very old man, was welcomed with more than royal honours, and one of the last acts which he performed was solemnly to bestow his blessing upon the Abbé de Périgord, who knelt at his feet, amid the loud applause of the company.

It is too commonly supposed that the French aristocracy before the Revolution was haughty and exclusive, but the barriers that had hitherto opposed the entry into society of men of humble birth, were already disappearing. Talleyrand himself bears witness, not without regret, to the changed conditions beginning to prevail. The love of gambling and the admiration for witty conversation were, in his opinion, the principal causes of this development. Gambling is a great leveller, and a good talker can soon make an audience forget his lack of heraldic quarterings. The Revolution was to proclaim ‘the career open to talent’ as a new gospel, but a social career in Paris was already open, if not to talent, at any rate to the bold punter and the ready tongue.

This was the age of conversation, of free and unfettered discussion upon every subject in heaven or on earth. To talk well was then considered the highest attribute that any person could possess. It was the one art at which all endeavoured to excel, the one channel into which all talent was directed. Such conversation as was then audible in Paris had never, perhaps, been heard since certain voices in Athens fell silent two thousand years before. Nor has it been repeated. To every human development there is, it seems, a

limit set. The days of the age of conversation were already numbered. The age of events was at hand.

There was one quality that was novel in this conversational period, and which distinguishes it from similar periods in the past. Neither Aspasia nor Xanthippe take any part in the dialogues that Plato has recorded. But in the Paris of Talleyrand's youth the great ladies were the leaders of talk as well as of fashion. They were the arbiters not only of elegance, but of ethics, of politics, and of all the arts. No man could rise to prominence except against the background of a salon, and over every salon a woman ruled.

The years that have since elapsed have witnessed what is called the enfranchisement of woman, but neither from the polling booth nor from her seat in Parliament has she as yet succeeded in exercising the same control over the lives of men and the fate of nations as was hers while she remained merely the centre of a select circle in her own drawing-room.

Already, in the earlier part of the century and in the two centuries before, queens and mistresses of kings had played great parts in public life, but for the first time 'Society', to use the word in the sense in which Talleyrand himself employed it, began to represent an important body of opinion, independent of, and in opposition to, that of the Court.

In feudal times the king had had to reckon with a free and powerful nobility, living upon their own land, and relying upon the support of their own adherents. The struggle between king and landed aristocracy had resulted in France in the defeat of the aristocracy, just as in England it had resulted in the defeat of the king. And just as in England the king had been allowed to retain all the outward trappings of sovereignty after he had lost the reality of power, so in France the aristocracy retained all their old privileges and the glitter and glamour of greatness long after they had

ceased to take any important part in the government of the country.

For a hundred years and more the monarchy in France had been absolute and popular. It was beginning now to lose both power and prestige. A sinister symptom of what was to follow appeared when the higher ranks of society began to lose their respect for the sovereign. It started when Louis XV selected as his principal mistress a member of the middle class, it continued when he chose her successor from the streets. When the feud between Madame Dubarry and the Duke de Choiseul ended in the dismissal of the minister, the road to Chanteloup, his country house, was crowded with carriages, while familiar faces were absent from the Court at Versailles. For the first time in French history the followers of fashion flocked to do homage to a fallen favourite. People wondered at the time, but hardly understood the profound significance of the event. The king was no longer the leader of society. Kings and Presidents, Prime Ministers and Dictators provide at all times a target for the criticism of philosophers, satirists, and reformers. Such criticism they can usually afford to neglect, but when the time-servers, the sycophants, and the courtiers begin to disregard them, then should the strongest of them tremble on their thrones.

The prestige that Louis XV had lost Louis XVI did not recover. It is true that at the opening of the new reign all the auspices were favourable. A young and virtuous king in place of an old and vile one; a young and beautiful queen in place of a horde of mistresses. Unpopular ministers were dismissed and popular ones replaced them. And it is interesting to remember that Talleyrand in his memoirs remarks that the epithet ‘popular’ began for the first time to be associated with ministers. The popularity of ministers was beginning to be a matter of importance.

The new King and the new Government were popular, which means that they were liked by the people. But fashionable society, which was at this time strongly liberal

in sentiment and to whom, as to all Liberals, ‘the People’ was an abstract term rather than a number of individuals, fashionable society, dissolute in morals, elegant in manners, pagan at heart, could show no allegiance to a youthful monarch who was neither intelligent nor elegant, but merely a clumsy, courageous, shortsighted Christian, desperately anxious to do right.

Liberal and progressive politics were professed, with or without sincerity, by a large number of those whose words and actions carried weight in the great world of the day. Nor was there lacking a rallying point around which the most reckless and most radical elements in the aristocracy could gather. Apart from the King’s own children and brothers, the Duke of Orleans, although a distant cousin, was the next heir to the throne. His wealth was prodigious, his intelligence was not mean, his character was despicable but not unamiable, and he made of the Palais Royal, which was his home, a centre for all those who were inclined to criticise the Government, to laugh at the King, to repeat gossip about the Queen, to air revolutionary theories, and to indulge without restraint in all the dissipations that wealth and power and privilege could provide.

Choderlos de Laclos was an intimate member of the Orleans circle, and he has left, in his famous novel, an impressive picture of the corruption of the world in which he lived. Talleyrand soon became a member of that world, and considerable were the attractions which it provided for a young, ambitious, and already slightly embittered man. Here was to be found all that was most amusing and all that was most alluring in Paris. The great wits and the great ladies gave equally of their best. And a young man, whose intelligence forbade him from thinking that love and laughter were the whole of life, could feel that in this particular coterie, while he was enjoying himself enormously, he was also upon the fringe of politics and on the outskirts of public life.

There is a school of historical writers who will represent the whole of the French Revolution as the result of an Orleanist plot, whereas others deny that the Duke of Orleans was anything but a misguided nonentity exercising no influence whatever upon the events that took place. It is not proposed here to examine the theories or the evidence of either school, but it may be stated in general terms that the Palais Royal before the Revolution represented, in a country where parliamentary government was unknown, the headquarters of what in England would be called the Opposition. It was therefore natural that a young man with capacity and without preferment should drift towards that centre, even if it had not possessed so many additional attractions.

3

It is difficult to form in the mind a definite picture of the personal appearance of any individual whom we shall never see. Of Talleyrand we know that he was about the middle height, that he had a slightly retroussé nose, which enhanced a haughty and even insolent expression, and that he walked with a limp. Barras, who hated him, asserts that he strikingly resembled Robespierre; Arnault, who did not love him, said that he concealed the heart of a devil under an angel’s face. Whether or not he could be described as handsome, there is no doubt that his wit and charm of manner made amends for any physical shortcomings, and his numerous successful love affairs were acknowledged, condemned, and envied.

It would be an ungrateful and a graceless task to rummage among the printed libels of the past in the hope of ascertaining exactly what his relationship may have been with one or another of the many women with whom his name was at different times connected. Let it suffice to say

that in that gay and gallant world to which his birth admitted him, he assumed immediately a position almost of leadership, that he loved many women and that many loved him, and that those who loved him were admittedly the most intelligent, the most beautiful, and the most influential. Let it be said also, for fear of falling into panegyric, that in an age of universal latitude and easily condoned licence, his conduct incurred severe condemnation, and that he acquired notoriety even before he acquired fame.

Two incidents connected with this period of Talleyrand's life throw light both upon the epoch and the individual. The Countess de Brionne, daughter of a Prince of Rohan and wife of the Master of the Horse, was one of the most influential and most beautiful women of the day. So much was she impressed by the qualities of the Abbé de Périgord, that she designed to procure for him, at the age of thirty, no less an honour than a cardinal's hat. For his purpose she wrote to the King of Sweden, a Protestant but a very good friend of the Pope's, whose acquaintance she had made a few years previously during his visit to Paris. Gustavus III no doubt did his best and might have succeeded had not a still more powerful protagonist entered the lists from another quarter. The Austrian Government naturally carried more weight at the Court of Rome than any Lutheran monarch, and the Austrian Government was found to be strongly opposed to the candidature of the Abbé de Périgord. To a modern mind it may seem remarkable that the King of Sweden and the Emperor should be so closely concerned in the fortunes of an undistinguished French abbé. The King's reasons for intervention have been referred to, and the Emperor's were not dissimilar. His sister was Marie Antoinette, Queen of France, and there had recently been an ugly scandal connected with the purchase of a diamond necklace by a cardinal, who had been persuaded that the Queen was in love with him. The name of the Cardinal was Rohan, which

was also the maiden name of the Countess de Brionne, who had warmly espoused her cousin's cause throughout the affair. Marie Antoinette had not forgiven her. Word was sent through the Austrian Ambassador at Versailles to the Court of Vienna that the Austrian representative at the Vatican was to oppose the claims of any candidate supported by the Countess de Brionne, the Cardinal de Rohan, or the King of Sweden. The Austrian Ambassador carried out his orders and the Abbé de Périgord was not promoted.

It seemed to Talleyrand, having failed to acquire a cardinal's hat, that a bishop's mitre should be his for the asking, and when he was confidently expecting one it came to him as a rude blow to find that once again his claims had been overlooked. The reason for his failure to obtain preferment upon this occasion must have caused savage sarcasm and bitter mirth amongst the society of the Palais Royal. The young King had, it appeared, acquired from somewhere the absurd idea that a bishop should be a man of virtuous life, and as the open licence of the private life of the Abbé de Périgord was becoming a scandal, His Majesty took the view that another man would be a more suitable occupant of the vacant see.

Subsequently, however, when another bishopric fell vacant, the King was approached on behalf of the Abbé de Périgord from a quarter and in a manner that he was unable to resist. Talleyrand's father was dying. In his youth he had been personal equerry to the father of Louis XVI. He had neglected and disinherited his eldest son, but he could not bear to die without seeing him a bishop. Louis XVI could be obstinate, but he could not refuse the request of a dying man who had been a friend of his father's. So Talleyrand, despite, it is said, the protest of his own mother, who, like others, deplored his way of living, became Bishop of Autun in the year 1788.

A life of idle pleasure, even such pleasure as eighteenth-century Paris could provide, is incapable of satisfying the aspirations of a very intelligent man. And the reason of this is that work is a form of pleasure, and that a man who has never worked has missed one of the greatest pleasures of life. Talleyrand, into whose lap all the simpler pleasures were beginning to fall, realized in good time that his intellect would demand a kind of satisfaction that his senses could never give. Appointed in 1780 to the position of Agent-General of the Clergy, he determined at once to make the most of the appointment. It was one of those many positions, which exist today as they existed then, where a man will be excused for doing nothing, and will probably be blamed for doing much.

Talleyrand worked hard in an office that might have been a sinecure, and, despite his gay life in the great world, he succeeded in making a deep impression upon his contemporaries as a man of affairs and a practical reformer. Two instances may be quoted of the kind of thing that this dissolute Abbé attempted to do in pre-revolutionary France. He had travelled in Brittany. A love affair had taken him there, but he had not been too busy to attend to a grievance that had been brought to his notice. Amongst that seafaring folk the wives whose husbands did not come back from the sea were not allowed by the rules of the Church to consider that their husbands were dead. They had to live out the rest of their lives neither maids, nor wives, nor widows. Talleyrand attempted to change this system and to permit the unfortunate women to assume, after a reasonable interval, the death of their husbands. He failed. His memorandum on the subject was thrown into the fire by the Bishop of Arras, and, as he himself remarks in his memoirs, there had to be a revolution before these poor

Breton women were allowed to re-marry, and many of them had grown rather old in the interval.

As Agent-General of the Clergy, solicitous of the interests both of Clergy and people, he suggested one other reform of an equally practical and popular nature. The State was rapidly going bankrupt, the Church was still extremely rich. One important source of State revenue was the government lottery. Talleyrand, we may assume, had no strong moral objection to gambling, since throughout his life he was a devotee both of the stock exchange and of the card table. But he realized, as every economist has realized, that, for the welfare of the State, the gambling instinct should be discouraged, and, as a member of the Church, he saw how that body could gain prestige, and at the same time assist the Government and benefit the community. He suggested that the Church should purchase from the Government for a large sum the right of raising lotteries and should then abolish them. In the light of subsequent events it appears an admirable suggestion, but such suggestions, however admirable, fall upon deaf ears when revolutions are impending.

The duties of Agent-General of the Clergy were not, however, sufficient to satisfy Talleyrand’s appetite for political activity. Already his mind was attracted towards questions of external policy and already he was dabbling in subterranean diplomacy. Calonne had recently taken charge of the finances of France. He was a statesman with whom Talleyrand found it easy to be friends. A courtier first, he would reply to any request of the Queen: ‘Madam, if it is possible it is done, if it is impossible it shall be done.’ Behind a completely frivolous appearance he concealed ability, and was able to detect it in others. Talleyrand saw in his friendship with the Minister an opening into the world of foreign affairs of which he was quick to avail himself.

One of the principal subjects of political discussion at the time was the Commercial Treaty concluded in 1786 between

France and England, which established something like free trade between the two countries. It was criticized at first in France on the ground that it seemed to be working too favourably for England. Talleyrand defended it. They were living in the age of reason and what could be more reasonable than to abolish tariffs between an agricultural and an industrial country, the one receiving freely the manufactured goods and the other the natural products of the neighbour? So it seemed to the young politician in 1786 who hoped that an era of free exchange was approaching, and a better understanding between the two countries, now that the unhappy events of the American War of Independence were forgotten. Calonne was one of the authors of this policy which Talleyrand supported now and clung to for the rest of his life.

There could not have existed a greater contrast to the suave, rosy, and smiling Calonne than the terrific, frowning, passionate, pockmarked Mirabeau. Yet Talleyrand was equally intimate with both, and persuaded the one to employ the other. Mirabeau, who was, as ever, in urgent need of money, was glad to accept a secret mission to Berlin, there to find out how long the dying Frederick was likely to live, and what would be the policy of his successor. Mirabeau, however, was never meant for a diplomatist, and the mission proved singularly lacking in result. All his reports were addressed to Talleyrand, who communicated them to Calonne.

Mirabeau, while he was in Berlin, began to suspect that Talleyrand was betraying him. A man of violent passions and the greatest orator of the age, for any mood that was upon him he found memorable words: ‘The Abbé de Périgord,’ he wrote, ‘would sell his soul for money; and he would be right, for he would be exchanging dung for gold.’ A report that in his absence Talleyrand was making love to his mistress may have been responsible for the vigour of this denunciation,

and, in spite of it, the two men became again, almost immediately afterwards, the firmest of friends.

Thus, upon the eve of the Revolution, the Bishop of Autun was already a man of considerable importance in Paris. Thirty-five years of age, celebrated for his wit, his profligate life, and his practical ability, he had already achieved an ascendancy in the salon and a secure footing in the political arena. Noble birth, influential connections, and a powerful intelligence, supported by high ambition and unburdened by scruples, all seemed to designate him as a worthy successor to the great ecclesiastical statesmen who in the past had controlled the destiny of France.

Two

THE REVOLUTION

1

In 1789, with bankruptcy staring the Government in the face, Louis XVI took the momentous decision to summon the States-General. This meant nothing less than the calling together of representatives of the whole people. Upon the face of it the step was fraught with danger. Changes in method of government should be gradual. For a hundred and fifty years France had been the most autocratic, as England was the most democratic, state in Europe. Yet at this crisis in her affairs it was decided to bring together for purposes of consultation a body far more democratic than the House of Commons as it then existed or than any contemporary assembly in the world.

The States-General had not met since 1614, and anyone born, as Talleyrand was, in 1754, must have grown up in the belief that they would never meet again. But the unexpected happened; and for those men, who were still young, who were conscious of their abilities and spurred by their ambition, but whose activities had hitherto been, of necessity, confined to backstair diplomacy and Court intrigue, there opened suddenly a new, broad, and honourable roadway to political preferment and power.

At Rheims, in 1783, Talleyrand had met in his uncle's house the young William Pitt, who was by five years his junior, who had already been Chancellor of the Exchequer, and was shortly to become Prime Minister of England at the age of twenty-five. His French contemporaries, obsessed as many of them were with democratic notions of government and the fashionable anglophilism which was particularly

prevalent at the Palais Royal, must often have reflected that, given similar opportunities and conditions in their own country, they would certainly have distinguished themselves as rapidly as the morose and sickly young Englishman had done. Now the opportunity was at hand.

The first thing was to secure a constituency. Three Orders were to be represented, the Clergy, the Nobility and the Third Estate. There was no hereditary chamber, each order elected its own representatives. Many of the Clergy and of the Nobility were elected to represent the Third Estate, but the clearly indicated constituents of the Bishop of Autun were the clergy of his own diocese, and, in order to make sure that there should occur no hitch in an arrangement so obviously right and proper, the Bishop decided to tear himself away from Paris and to visit, for the first and last time in his episcopal career, the centre of his see.

His sojourn at Autun lasted for a month, and during that time he did everything in his power to acquire the support and good will of the local clergy. All witnesses are agreed as to the exceptional powers which he possessed of rendering himself agreeable to those whom he wished to please. He who had already conquered the salons and the alcoves of Paris found t a simple task to charm and to convince the Burgundian priesthood. Throughout his life he was an epicure of the table as well as of other pleasures, and he was able to entertain his future constituents as they had never been entertained before.

Nor were the inducements which he held out for their support limited to the excellence of his table and the brilliance of his conversation. More solid reasons for approval were provided for those who demanded them. To the assembled clergy of the diocese he delivered a speech, in which he boldly stated what he considered to be the principal abuses that then existed, and drew up a whole programme of practical reforms. It was the custom for those who were represented at the States-General to furnish their

representatives with a memorial of their complaints and grievances, and in the old days the representative, who had been little more than the agent of his constituents, had hardly any other duty to perform than to transmit this memorial or ‘cahier’ to the Sovereign after it had been incorporated in a general ‘cahier’ for the whole estate.

The Clergy of Autun when they came to compile their ‘cahier’ upon this occasion found that they could not do better than transcribe, almost word for word, the address that had been delivered to them by their Bishop. And so Talleyrand, not for the last time in his career, received, before departing upon a mission, instructions of which he was himself the author.

Some idea of his political opinions at that time may be obtained from a brief summary of this address. He is in favour of regular sessions of the States-General and of codification of the law. No law should be passed and, above all, no taxation should be imposed, without the consent of the people. Public order, he maintains, is based upon two foundations—property and liberty. Property is sacred, but—and there follows a very far-reaching and far-sighted limitation to the doctrine—it may be necessary to inquire whether the term ‘property’ has not come to be applied to certain objects which could only come under it by a violation of the laws of nature, and also whether in some cases it is not still applied although the causes of its original application have disappeared. He seems here to be leaving himself a loophole for consenting to the nationalization of Church lands.

Liberty of the subject is to be guaranteed by trial by jury and by *habeas corpus*. Freedom of speech and of the press is to be allowed, and private correspondence is to be inviolable. Education and financial reform are advocated. The latter is to be accomplished without fresh taxation by the abolition of fiscal privileges, by the establishment of a national bank, and, if necessary, by the sale of crown lands,

the raising of loans, and the introduction of a sinking fund. The doctrine of free trade is supported, the persistent heresy of the single tax is denounced, and it is laid down that it should be the duty of wise and enlightened legislation to assure to everybody the right to work, which is described as ‘the only possession of those who have no property’.

That this should have been the political programme of an eighteenth-century bishop belonging to the oldest French nobility may surprise a modern reader. Almost as striking, however, as the modernity of the views expressed in this address, is the absence from it of any of those emotional appeals to sentiment, or vague statements of political theory, which at that time were even more popular than they are today, and which were particularly noticeable in similar addresses prepared by other adherents of the Orleanist faction. Talleyrand, here as ever, confines himself to what is practicable, and he is careful not to commit himself to any opinion with regard to the future Constitution of the country, for his views upon this subject were not those that were generally popular.

Talleyrand left Autun in the early morning of Easter Sunday, 12th April 1789. It was said that he was afraid to officiate in the Cathedral upon so solemn an occasion as his knowledge of Church ceremonial was quite inadequate, and he had already in the conduct of such duties committed blunders that had shocked his subordinates. But there were stronger reasons, once his work at Autun was accomplished, why he should not delay his return to the scene of all his activities and all his pleasures. Already that scene was being set for the production of one of the greatest dramas in history, and we may be sure that as he sped along the road to the north he threw back no regretful gaze upon the red roofs of the picturesque little town he was leaving, for it was with the future that his thoughts were occupied, and he knew that those spring days were pregnant with events.

The opening of the States-General took place at Versailles in the early days of May 1789. The first question that engaged their attention was one of procedure, but upon its settlement the whole future depended. There were three Orders—the Clergy, the Nobility, and the Third Estate, who at first, in imitation of the English, were inclined to style themselves the Commons. The question was, should the three Orders sit together in one assembly, and vote by head or should there be three separate assemblies, each assembly having one vote? The Third Estate out-numbered the other two Orders put together. Upon the decision of this question, therefore, depended whether the Third Estate was to be the dominant and decisive factor, or whether it was to remain an impotent minority of one to two.

It is astonishing that the Government should not have foreseen that this question was bound to arise, should not have appreciated its vital importance, and should not have been prepared with a policy to meet it. The Estates were left to settle it for themselves. No suggestion, no advice, no guidance was given or offered by the Government until it was too late. From the first the Third Estate stood for the principle of one assembly, and refused to proceed further until it was admitted. The Nobility, despite the presence of a small minority of Liberals, were almost equally solid on the other side. The Clergy wavered. They included among their numbers many representatives of the minor Clergy, whose lot was as hard and whose grievances were as numerous as were those of the Third Estate. This was the weak spot in the ranks of the two privileged Orders, and it proved their undoing. Members of the minor Clergy united themselves with the Third Estate and their example was gradually followed by more distinguished members of the hierarchy.

When it became apparent that the victory of the Third Estate was assured the King attempted to intervene. One

morning when the deputies came to their accustomed meeting-place, they found that the doors were shut against them. They met in the nearest convenient building, a tennis court, where they took an oath that they would not separate until their work was accomplished. It was at this juncture that the King for the first time informed them that the Three Orders should sit separately. His authority, which might have prevailed earlier, was now powerless. The Third Estate, who had already assumed the title of National Assembly, had won the day from the moment that the Clergy yielded. The example of the Clergy was finally followed by the Nobility. The command of the King was disregarded and the Revolution was a fact.

In this controversy Talleyrand took no open part. While in favour of reform he was opposed to revolution, and he saw plainly what the result must be if the Third Estate obtained control. He would have liked to set up a two-chamber system on the English model, giving to the Third Estate the powers of the House of Commons, and creating another body composed of the more powerful members of the Nobility and the heads of the Church, which should exercise the control over legislation that was still retained at that time by the House of Lords.

Talleyrand was not among the first of the Clergy, nor even of the Bishops, to throw in his lot with the Third Estate. He did so only when the trend of events became obvious and further resistance would have been useless. His friend and ally at this period was once more Mirabeau, who already dominated the Assembly and who shared his enthusiasm for constitutional monarchy. These two men would have liked to form a Government under such a system and to have become the Pitt and Dundas of a slightly less obstinate and distinctly more progressive George III. One day Mirabeau was descanting upon the particular qualities which a minister in such circumstances should possess, and had enumerated nearly all his own characteristics when