

True till death

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TRUE TILL DEATH.

The French Revolution, like a volcanic eruption, shook the very foundations of European Society and reverberated throughout the world. In its course, dark and inhuman deeds were perpetrated, and well might Madame Roland bitterly exclaim, as she did, at the foot of the scaffold "Oh liberté, que de crimes sont commis en ton nom." By contrast, many acts of heroism and devotion are recorded among which the defence of the Tuileries by the Swiss stands out as a shining example.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, a Swiss bodyguard formed part of the French royal establishments, the first regiment having been recruited in 1616. At the time of the revolution, the Swiss Royal Guard was stationed partly in Versailles, partly in Courbevoie, a suburb of Paris. When, after the unsuccessful flight to Varennes, the King was brought back to Paris, and took residence in the Tuileries, the Swiss garrisoned the palace and were responsible for the safety of the royal family.

Louis XVI was a slow-witted, phlegmatic sort of man, good-hearted enough but lacking strength of character. He seemed to know or understand little of what was happening outside his court. When, late at night on the 14th July, 1789, the news of the storming of the Bastille was brought to Versailles by the Duke of Liancourt, the King exclaimed, "Mais c'est une révolte." "Sire, replied Liancourt, it is not a revolt, c'est une révolution!"

During the next three years, the King remained in the uneasy occupation of a tottering throne. His weak and precarious reign came to an end when, on 10th August, 1792, he left the Tuileries and abandoned the Swiss to their fate. His days were numbered, anyway; imprisonment and the guillotine awaited him.

All through the night of the 9th August, Paris was in a condition of ferment. The Legislative Assembly and the Municipality were in permanent session, a state of insurrection had been proclaimed, Mandat, the commandant of the National guard who was suspected of loyalty to the King, was murdered as he stepped out of the Town Hall, and at midnight the tocsin was rung calling the people to arms. On Friday the 10th August, a beautifully sunny morning, an armed mob from the faubourg St. Antoine and from every other section began to march on the Tuileries, at their head the 600 men from Marseilles who, under

the command of Barbaroux, and with three cannon, had arrived in Paris a few days earlier. By eight o'clock, they came in sight of the royal palace, an excited and uncontrolled body of men and women, armed with pikes, sabres and muskets, vociferating and threatening. The National troops posted around the palace made no attempt to stop them; no one in authority dared give the order. Before, however, the crowd had reached the palace, a delegation from the Legislative persuaded the King to take refuge in the Salle de Manège. The royal family left the Tuileries under escort, through the silent ranks of the Swiss, never to return.

The Swiss, calm and steady, stood at their posts in orderly ranks. They occupied the outer staircase, the corridors and the windows, tense, alert and with their muskets loaded. They had received no orders, but they knew it was their duty to protect the King's residence. Summoned to make way, they refused to stir from their posts. The Marseillais pleaded with them, Westerman, the Alsatian, addressed them in his dialect, the crowd yelled and clamoured, all to no avail: the Swiss stood firm. Realizing that entrance could not be gained peaceably, the Marseillais brought their three cannon into action. Badly aimed, the first shots rattled harmlessly over the roofs.

The moment had come for a decision. Should the Swiss fight or withdraw? They resolved to fight, taking it to be their duty to do so, and before the cannon could be reloaded, they fired a volley across the square of the Carrousel. The human tide receded, in a minute the Carrousel was deserted and the cannon left unattended. A party of Swiss rushed out and succeeded in seizing the pieces. They brought them in and tried to fire them when the attack was resumed but as the linstocks and other parts were missing the guns were of no use to them.

Soon the crowd returned to the attack, joined by the National troops with their artillery who now openly sided with the attackers. The Swiss kept up a steady fire, volley after volley thundered from their muskets, the dead and dying lay around, the wounded were carried away, bleeding, through the streets, the mob roared with fury and pandemonium reigned. So deadly was the Swiss fire that at least 1,200 of the attackers were killed and many more wounded.

Towards midday a messenger from the Legislative Assembly was seen making his way through the bullet-swept approaches to the palace. He carried a written

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order from His Majesty the King to cease firing. This order, which can still be seen in the Musée Carnavalet, reads: "Cessez le feu et rendez vous."—

What were the poor Swiss to do now? Why was there no order not to begin? Their position, if they obeyed, was desperate. They ceased firing but not to be fired at. Could they find shelter anywhere? One party broke out by the rue de l'Echelle, it was immediately set upon by the infuriated mob and all were murdered. Another rushed the gardens through a keen fusillade and some of them found sanctuary in the National Assembly. A third, several hundred strong, made towards the Champs Elysées, hoping to join up with the Swiss in Courbevoie but none of them escaped, they were all murdered, singly and in groups, fighting from street to street. In justice to the Marseillais, it must be said that they took no part in the killings and even tried to save. A few of the Swiss found refuge in private houses and one Clémence, a wine merchant, led a rescued Swiss to the bar of the Assembly and there offered to adopt him. But most were slaughtered and their bodies mangled. Fifty were marched as prisoners to the Hotel-de-Ville, the people burst through the escort and killed them to the last man. The scarlet uniform worn by the Swiss made them a conspicuous target and whenever a red-coat showed, he was fired at and hunted down. A pile of dead, stripped of their uniforms, lay in the streets two days before being carted away. Thus perished these gallant and unfortunate men, victims of their devotion to duty.

Some doubt exists as to their burial place. According to Desclozeaux (quoted by G. Lenotre) whose house adjoined the Madeleine cemetery, most of the Swiss were buried there; it is probable that some of them were taken to Monceau and other cemeteries. But wherever they may rest, the memory of these brave men is kept alive by Thorwaldsen's beautiful monument in Lucerne. Carved in the rockface, it represents a dying lion still protecting, in its last agony, the drooping lilies of France.*

The tragic events of the 19th August, outcome of terror and mass-hysteria, form a confused and violent pattern difficult of adequate description. They have been reconstructed mainly from the accounts of eye-witnesses and onlookers. Among the latter was no less a person than young Bonaparte who, according to Las Cases, expressed the opinion that the Swiss, had they had a commander, would have won the day.

Thomas Carlyle, in his masterly History of the French Revolution, devotes to the Swiss of the 10th August a special chapter from which the following lines are well worth quoting:


"Honour to you," he writes, "brave men; honour and pity, through long times! Not martyrs were ye, and yet almost more. He was no King of yours, this Louis, and he forsook you like a King of shreds and patches. Ye were but sold to him for some poor sixpence a-day, yet would ye work for your wages, keep your plighted word. The work now was to die; and ye did it. Honour to you, o kinsmen, and may the old Biederkeit and Tapferkeit, and Valour which is Work and Truth, be they Swiss, be they Saxon, fail in no age." —

J.J.F.S.

* * *

* A poem "The Lion of Lucerne" was published in the "Swiss Observer," 22nd December, 1944.

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