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The Explosion

Jean-François Varlet

1794

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There is contempt, a violation of human rights, when an inhabitant of the city is plunged into dungeons for having defended the principles of the people's sovereignty.

There is mourning for the country, when the tyrants who oppress it triumph; and when the good citizens who defend it groan.

There is oppressed patriotism, when a victim of Lafayette, of the commission of the twelve, of the revolutionary inquisition, is left in the clutches of the ambitious.

Republicans, will you suffer this? Forget the individuals, but think of the principles of which they were the propagators, and especially when in their disinterested zeal they did good for good's sake.

Do not doubt it, these are the raw truths, said at the tribune of the electoral club that earned me my new retirement at Plessis [prison]. If from the depths of the dungeon my thought can still reach the people, I rejoice; the tyrants will have in vain persecuted me; they will have only increased my zeal, far from rendering it powerless.

Snitches, bailiffs, rulers guarantee, fast on feet: I pass the ball to the ambitious. My candor can offer a vast range of denunciations. Your testimonies will be doubtless. You will have in hand written

proofs... Vile creatures! I have not obeyed the unjust order of which you were the bearer, I have only allowed you to violate my homes in the hope of being treated as equal with the tyrants, your masters, before the tribunal of the people.

I stand accused of counter-revolution. Let me anticipate my appearance before the magistrates; the charge is a valid one... I consider myself convicted, if by counter-revolutionary is meant opposition to revolutionary government. I temporarily obey this tyranny, without forgetting my portion of sovereignty, by the censorship we are all entitled to exercise over the decrees rendered. I will use an unofficial advocate; I will plead against a national government for the declaration of human rights; I will be myself accusing a handful of ambitious men, strong enough perhaps to brave the truth. I will say it.

I immerse myself in the happiness of my country; where there is danger, there is dedication.

The Friend of the people [nicknamed Marat] did not interfere; he named the masked: imitate him.

The most shameless of the agents of the people, Monsieur Billaud de Varennes, places a center of conspiracy in the electoral club, sitting in the above-mentioned bishopric; he speaks with Barere de Vieuzac, with Baron de Montaut, with whom he makes common cause. Yes, Monsieur Billaud de Varennes is right; he must see conspirators in the real insurgents of 31st of May. But if, as at that time, they conspire with the people, the audacity of their new enemies will not guarantee their success. Disgrace and ignominy await them. A remnant of terror prolongs their power for a moment. Engulfed by the power that intoxicates them, they see it eternally in their hands, and proceed with their blindness to the point of forgetting that all the plans of oppression have failed with their authors, against the strength of the people. There are no happy wretches in a people who want to be free, and who will be in spite of everything the movement that Barrere, Billaud, Vadier, Collot, Amar, Voulland, Bourdon of the Oise, Duhem, Ducos, Montaut, Carrier,

spiracy? .. Ashen-faced and undone, they lie in the dust, breathing their last... And are no more.

The French nation breathes again as its many battalions rally around her freely elected authority, forming an impregnable bulwark outside the National Convention: the sordid remnants of its would-be assassins are dispatched. Spirits are lifted and at ease. Joy and enthusiasm are universal; on the ramparts of the temple of the law, waves the tricolour flag, bearing this legend, that ten thousand free men chant in unison to the breeze:

"Long live the rights of the sovereign people! Respect the National Convention! Down with the usurpers!
BETTER THAT THE REVOLUTIONARY GOVERNMENT SHOULD PERISH THAN A PRINCIPLE."

etc. give themselves. And to reach the traitors with a single trick, all the members of the committees of public safety, general security, the revolutionary tribunal, are guilty of complicity or cowardice under the reign of Robespierre, imperator & pontifex.

Republicans, let us not look elsewhere than the revolutionary government for the source of the oppression under which the Republic has groaned since the unforgettable events of 31st of May, 1st of June and 2nd of June. Your confidence at that time nominated me to the insurrection committee; and as it might be concluded from this that I have served the most odious of tyrannies, I owe a frank explanation to the people and to myself.

Among the citizens elected to rescue the motherland in the revolution of 31st of May, there were unleashed patriots chosen by the people, patriots who had risen with it in defence of principle and to establish a republican constitution. There were also schemers, the most destructive emissaries of factionalism. That band of Caligulas looked upon the downfall of the Brissotins [followers of Brissot, a Girondin leader] simply as opening a wider vista to their own ambitions. The insurrection committee contained the seeds of revolutionary government, devised in secrecy beforehand. Unknown to me, the sham insurgents replaced Brissot with Robespierre; and federalism with a disgusting dictatorship dressed up with the title of Public Safety. As for myself, I was too unassuming to be an initiate; I was by-passed.

I was an insurgent, and nothing more. When I saw deputies accosted in the public thoroughfares and clapped in irons, I backed off; I resigned from every post and retreated back into the ranks of the people and completely shunned the revolutionary government, except that from time to time I did my duty by fighting it. The government thought me incapable of fulfilling its views; no power was offered to me. My distancing of myself from the committees and from the revolutionary tribunal, my utter insignificance and my time served in Les Madelonnettes [another prison] after 31st of May are evidence enough, I reckon, to show that I wanted to

be a revolutionary, pure and simple. O my fellow citizens! Do not accuse me of having been the architect of your misfortunes; I did nothing to deserve such a harsh reproach. Robespierre's ghastly dictatorship is scarcely a justification of Brissot's dictatorship; deep down inside me, I find no remorse, I'm at peace with myself... It's something, I think?

I have just defended myself as an accused. Have I forgotten that I am accusing myself!

Republicans; the enemy of the Brissotins abhors and exonerates the Robespierrens. Their leader is no longer: We conspire to attack... whom? Pitt? Coburg? Foreigners? Pitt, Cobourg and foreigners are good for something; but behind them I perceive ambitious deputies disputing over the ruins of factions, the possession of the throne. Despotism has passed from the palace of the kings to the precincts of the committees. It is neither the royal robes, nor the crown, nor the scepter that have made kings hated; but rather ambition and tyranny. In my homeland there has merely been a change in costume. Frivolous, fickle nation! How much longer will you remain in thrall to names instead of things? I believe that I see clearly: I will not extend the respect owed to the National Convention to disloyal delegates if, at their instigation, a lawfully constituted authority hands down decrees that subvert all social harmony. Am I to touch a slavish forelock to a revolutionary code, palladium or tyranny? Am I to yield to hastening fear? Am I to give obedience to this despotic order? Silence or death! I will not be so craven. The principles enshrined in the declaration of our rights over-ride all decrees; they scream to me that above all else we must be free, to make our stand between the respect due to the bulk of the people's delegates and the respect that is even more legitimately due its sovereignty.

Before my eyes I keep this motto:

"Long live the rights of the sovereign people! Respect to the National Convention! Down with the usurpers!

ending with these words: War, terror, revolutionary government, stand by your posts. You sleep! And the society of Jacobins, perverted by the ringleaders, is at the mercy of the ambitious who, from there, rule the entire populace. There, they are tribunes; the ruled rulers. This society serves as a mainstay of the conspiratorial government, feeding factionalism and acting as a stepping-stone for intriguers. Its inherent vice is having two peoples in its assembly: the people who pay, speaking inside the hall; and the people that do not pay, the real people, the public, is silent in the tribunals. A no less fundamental vice is the admission of deputies into this society. The people are no longer left to its own devices; the predominant delegates come to the Jacobins to be made party leaders; they go there to plot yet another 9th of Thermidor against the National Convention. Republicans, you sleep! And the eighty five departments, overrun by revolutionary tyranny reaching into every nook and cranny, are unaware of what is going on here and do not report to you the oppression beneath which they groan.

You sleep! The Republic is in irons... Citizens! Citizens! Shake off your slumbers! Wake up! Our tearful motherland looks to you patriots who have escaped the flames of the revolutionary tribunal to TAKE ENERGETIC ACTION for the love of liberty and in self-defence. The aristocracy back-stabs and a price is put upon your heads. Shoulder arms! Take up your pens! Close ranks! Audacity against audacity! This is where we must attack, harry and bring severe pressure to bear on the enemy, giving him no respite. Let us hold tyranny up to ridicule and publicize its misdeeds; let us thwart its sinister designs and not wait until it launches a surprise attack on us.. LET US DARE! ...And the danger is no more; forgetting about ourselves can save the motherland; dangers and obstacles scatter in the face of courage, devotion eludes them. Tremble! Tyrants in your masks of popularity, for thought is coming into its own after lengthy suppression, it will hit you like saltpetre packed into a pipe. The free man unleashes his hatred of oppressors and the press fires its guns... And where are the ringleaders of the con-

slanderers, it is cowardice not to transfer Lecointre to the revolutionary tribunal. You sleep! Prisons open to slaves, and are closed to free men: Fouquier de Tinville, executor of the tyrant's legal massacres, is left alone. You sleep! And misery stabs you in the back and you make no effort to discover which demon has rendered sterile a soil rich in nature's gifts. You sleep! And the aristocracy sees with a secret joy, the temple, to conceal in Paris the stone of waiting for royalism; & Meudon, a strong castle mysteriously forging the conjuring thunders. The popular deputy, who dares to conceive of some doubt, is a Pitt, a Coburg. You sleep! And in all the walls of Paris, the ambitious already have their beams, their lictors, their praetorian guard. You sleep! And this Barrere de Vieuzac, noble and conspirator born, lulls you with feigned victories. I believe in republican worth: I do not believe in Barrere. This deceiver, who for ten months has been shouting fanfare at the tribune of the National Convention, that he is giving the nation countless amounts of gunpowder, manufactured and gone on the frontiers, at the moment when Condé and Valenciennes are caught almost without a blow. To fight; let him say whether a single rifle has entered the bosom of the people, in spite of this million devoted to arming the interior; let him say where these arms go, which are forged daily by many factories. If, as Barere has announced so many times, we have arsenals, magazines, camps for the enemy; if many vessels taken from the English, have returned to our ports laden with food, the armies must have fed on booty from without, the consumption of the interior being less. The people of the artisans, on whom the public misery weighs, did not feel these happy effects. He asks Barere a general state of the catches made; he wants him to indicate the deposits that contain them. Barere! O Barere! you are no longer so victorious. Republicans, you sleep! And the murderous Vendee rises from the ruins, more formidable than before; that corner of the earth, soaked in the purest blood, still threatens to engulf new defenders. You sleep! And the sovereign voice of the people is supplanted by lying speeches, tissues of vile sycophancy, all of them

Perish revolutionary government rather than a principle!"

And I continue, striking out at the rulers.

What a social monstrosity, what a masterpiece of Machiavellianism is this revolutionary government! To any rational being, government and revolution are incompatible, unless the people wishes to set its constituted authority in insurrection against itself, which would be absurd.

Slaves subjected to the law of might; old courtiers bound to the chariot of all tyranny; two-legged species of the egotistical and apathetic; hack writers for whose daily poison the people pay dearly; fanatics, idolaters of error; bigots who see crime where there is difference of opinion, you are the advocates or dupes of revolutionary government. Its authors require some pretext on which they can legitimize dictatorship. In the name of public safety, they conjure an infinity of subsidiary dictatorships answering to the Committee of Public Safety.

In the darkness of night, in silence, in secret, without further ado, caprice and personal rancour clap citizens by the thousands in their Bastilles. The revolutionary kings can reign only if they corrupt: they must make money; the sword of Themis becomes a dagger; the laws of blood are enforced retrospectively; those with the greatest title, charged with phoney conspiracies, are hauled before a murderous tribunal, the pitiless prosecution, deaf to all defence stratagems; the criminal consciences of the panel-members are easily swayed; their ears hear a single cry: Death! Death! The palace of justice becomes the lair of cannibals, and these ogres prattle about humanity.

We have plumbed the depths of degradation of the rights of the people. In the state we see the oppressive and terrifying authority of a few ambitious men, overruling the legitimate authority of the National Convention. We see citizens stripped of their rights,

wretched, quaking and mute before their tyrants; and at this sight we wonder whether France is populated by subjects or republicans.

Citizens, eager to know the laws by which you are governed, do not ask its supporters for a precise description of revolutionary government; licentious without being free, ferocious without vigour; that is how they describe that fine invention.

"Two thirds of citizens are mischievous enemies of freedom: they must be stamped out. Terror is the supreme law; the instrument of torture an object of veneration. If destruction is not constantly on the agenda, if the sword should cease to slaughter; if the executioners are no longer the fathers of the nation, freedom is in jeopardy. Terror aims to rule over heaps of corpses and wade through the blood of its enemies..."

Sensitive men! O my friends! Do not reply. The traveler ranks to make way for the torrent; give reason to the furious, for in the exasperated movements of their hatred, they would victimize you. One must say to oneself:

"Is this to exterminate scoundrels, or to persuade and convince deceived men? Are the thousand and one conspiracies certain? Is it not rather the imaginations that conspire? Can the executor of high works regenerate the nation, or should this care be entrusted to the proper organization of primary schools? Will the revolutionary government bring a solution in public affairs? Does it tend to exterminate factionalism, or is it not the social contract to lead us to an order of lasting things?"

These reflections I indulge in are sweet and consoling. The revolutionaries will cry for moderation. I really like moderantism that

makes me humane, tolerant, thoughtful. Well! Then I am a moderate; I deserve the hatred of the great patriots of the day, and in this I gather according to my vow; for if they esteemed me, I would hold myself to be less.

Patriots, stand firm in your attachment to principle and support the true citizen against money, usurpation and the abuse of power; he trusts and surrenders himself to the justice of your cause. But such placidity! Such stupor! Such lethargy! Silence and oblivion hang over you. Republicans, you sleep! And the counter-revolution sleeps not. Only the tyrant has been banished from Robespierre's tyranny; his ghastly system has survived him; ever since the monstrous decree that outlawed the innocent and the guilty alike, in order to draw a veil over the most deep-seated conspiracy, the delegates who carry on the tyrant's work, these brazen conspirators, despised and feared, letting their masks fall, stand exposed as counter-revolutionaries. You sleep! And, though the ambitious may seem to deal severely with the priests, with the nobles, the priests and nobles hold in their hands the security of a state that they have sworn to overthrow. You sleep! And there was no dagger of Brutus to drive Bourdon-de-l'Oise from the rostrum after he announced in the middle of the Senate that 'What is required is not a dictator, but a dictatorship'. And the dagger of an assassin refutes the opinion of Tallien on the indefinite liberty of the press. You sleep! And seven agents charged with facts of public notoriety, as evident as the enunciative act of the offenses of Capet and Brissot, defend themselves as culprits; some of their colleagues serve as unofficial defenders: if, they say, the seven accused members are guilty, the entire convention has conspired. This is how the respect of the people is abused for the center of legitimate authority, the only rallying point for Republicans! The mantle of inviolability envelops the conspirators. Lecointre, an energetic accuser, is called a slanderer, a madman; we speak of union, of peace, and the order of the day is adopted; the seven accused members do not wash the infamous spot that covers them; strong is the law rendered against