CHAPTER I

Twelve Terrorists to Be

ANYONE who had business with the government of the Reign of Terror directed his steps to the Tuileries, an old palace of the kings of France on the right bank of the Seine between the Louvre and the Tuileries Gardens, in which then as now children played and chestnut trees blossomed in April. Entering the courtyard on the opposite side of the building from the garden, the visitor saw signs of a government not very sure of itself, for two cannon and a file of soldiers guarded the door. Passing these sentries and climbing what had lately been called the Queen's Staircase, he came into a series of communicating chambers crowded with all manner of people, busy little functionaries of one kind and another, clerks carrying papers to be signed by the great men within, army officers, politicians and contractors waiting for interviews, errand boys, porters, secretaries and factotums, and couriers with the mud of distant provinces still spattered on their boots. If the visitor's business was urgent, or if he was a person of exceptional consequence, he eventually reached the last in the series of chambers, a room which Louis XVI had used as a private office, and which in a few years was to serve Napoleon Bonaparte for the same purpose.

Here if left for a moment alone the caller might reflect on past and present. Outside the window he saw the garden or public park, knowing that beyond the trees, half a mile away, it opened upon the superb Place Louis XV, the finest square in Europe, a triumph of city planning in the last days of the monarchy. He would remind himself to call it the Place de la Révolution—appropriately enough, for at the center of the new square (which we call the Place de la Concorde), in full view of the new Champs-Elysées and the new Madeleine, stood a new invention of late monarchical times, now symbolizing a new order—the guillotine.

Turning from the window he saw more traces of the last Louis, whom this same guillotine had put to death a few months before. The clock bore the inscription, "clockmaker to the King." The rich carpet, the polished mirrors, the glistening chandeliers still kept
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alive the elegance of royalty. But the main object in the room was severely utilitarian, a large oval table covered with green cloth, matching the green paper on the walls. Inkwells and piles of papers littered the table, marking the places for a number of men to work. It was the council table of the Committee of Public Safety, one of whose members would soon appear to receive the visitor, of whom therefore we can now take leave.

The Committee of Public Safety governed France during the Terror, the chaotic France of the year-old First Republic. Twelve men made up the Committee, always the same twelve from September 1793 to the following July 27, or 9 Thermidor of the Year Two in revolutionary parlance. The twelve never once sat at the green table at the same time. One presently ceased to sit at all, for he was put to death by the others. Some were habitually away, stationed in Brittany or Alsace or Flanders. But their presence was felt; their dispatches came in regularly, along with the vast streams of correspondence with which those remaining in Paris had to deal. Of those who sat in the green room, though they had no chairman and recognized no one of themselves as chief, the best known outside its walls was Robespierre.

The Committee transacted its affairs at all hours, but its real sessions took place secretly, behind closed doors, at night. No one knows exactly what happened at these conclaves. Anyone interested today can read, in large clear print, thousands of documents emanating from the Committee, ordinances, proclamations, letters of command, advice and instruction. No one can say what passed over the green table before the decisions were reached. No evidence for these matters exists except a few contemporary innuendos made for political purposes, a few indiscretions, a great many rumors, and a few recollections written down years later by two or three of the survivors. But the debates were undoubtedly lively, and the Twelve had many secrets. They fought and disputed with each other, sometimes differing widely in policy, their nerves on edge from sheer fatigue, their minds inflamed by revolutionary passions. As individuals they were almost all autocratic, jealous and short-tempered. But they managed until near the end to act as a single body, keeping their private differences to themselves.

They ruled a country convulsed in its fifth year of revolution. The National Convention claimed sovereign authority, but in half
of France its authority was denied. The west and south fell apart in civil war. The plans made in the earlier and supposedly wiser phase of the Revolution had broken down. Local and outlying authorities could not be controlled and were now centers of independent agitation. Initiative had fallen into the hands of political clubs and revolutionary committees. Paris was in turmoil. Street orators and demagogues, secret agents both of the government and of its enemies, radicals and counter-revolutionaries of every description roamed the streets. Deserters from the army, disguised priests and strange foreigners jostled with half-crazed patriots and self-appointed saviors of the nation. On the frontiers the armies of England, Holland, Spain, Prussia and Austria were thrusting themselves into France. The ports were practically closed by the British navy. Beyond the battlelines lay a Europe unanimously hostile, stirred up by French émigrés, by conservatives of all nationalities almost hysterical with fear, by the pope and the Catholic hierarchy, and by Catherine the Great of Russia, an old woman near death who urged on the Allies while declining to join them.

Anarchy within, invasion from without. A country cracking from outside pressure, disintegrating from internal strain. Revolution at its height. War. Inflation. Hunger. Fear. Hate. Sabotage. Fantastic hopes. Boundless idealism. And the horrible knowledge, for the men in power, that if they failed they would die as criminals, murderers of their king. And the dread that all the gains of the Revolution would be lost. And the faith that if they won they would bring Liberty, Equality and Fraternity into the world.

This was the situation in which the twelve men who came to the green room acted. Who were the twelve?

They were on the whole not very unusual people—only twelve rather typical men of the old régime, brought into prominence by an upheaval which no one could control. Glowering at each other across the green table, they must sometimes have pondered on the circumstances that had brought them together. Their position was a curious one. No human wisdom could have foretold it. They had been strangers to each other not long before, scattered through France, with small prospect of any political career and with no political experience, each apparently destined for the humdrum
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life of his own occupation, all of them loyal to the “good king Louis” whose headless body now rotted in its grave.

Aristocratic Europe was appalled to see France governed by “nobodies.” Who then, or what, were they in the peaceful years that preceded their great adventure?

At Arras, near the Straits of Dover, shortly before the Revolution lived a lawyer about thirty years old, named Maximilien Robespierre. He was a competent lawyer, a man of integrity, respected. He won most of his cases, partly because he preferred to defend victims of obvious injustice. He was a great believer in progress and the march of reason, which he vindicated by winning the case of a client who had been sued for putting up so ungodly an instrument as a lightning rod. Robespierre had been to Paris, where for many years he enjoyed a scholarship at the University, receiving the best education that the country had to give. Like many others, he was dissatisfied with conditions, though he himself had not been deprived of opportunity.

Robespierre’s home life had been upset since his middle childhood, but he was well brought up by two aunts, and able to go away to school. He turned out to be a very serious and rather lonely man. His expression, his sister tells us, was often smiling, but he was hardly capable of a hearty laugh. He scarcely touched wine; he was unmarried, chaste, and a trifle puritanical. Constant rumination made him extremely absent-minded. His failure to recognize people in the street gained him the reputation of being proud. In company, his attention would wander if the conversation turned to small talk. He was preoccupied with an inner vision, the thought of ills which it seemed to him could easily be corrected, the picture of a world in which there should be no cruelty or discrimination. He was humane to the point of disapproving capital punishment; his sympathies were always with the underdog; he believed in equality seriously and profoundly.

Robespierre had the fault of a self-righteous and introverted man. Disagreement with himself he regarded simply as error, and in the face of it he would either withdraw into his own thoughts, or cast doubt on the motives behind the other man’s opinion. He was quick to charge others with the selfish interests of which he felt himself to be free. A concerted action in which he did not
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share seemed to him to be an intrigue. He had the virtues and the faults of an inquisitor. A lover of mankind, he could not enter with sympathy into the minds of his own neighbors.

At Arras there was a literary society, where the members, besides reading each other orations and odes, often discussed public questions. Their discussions were likely to be bookish and abstract, for few of them, under the bureaucratic monarchy, had ever had any experience in affairs. These societies were numerous in France. They gave future revolutionists practice in expounding their sentiments and ideal ends, but none in parliamentary methods. Robespierre was an active member at Arras. In the club rooms he met an army officer, a captain of engineers stationed in the locality. The acquaintance was only casual at the time, but the two were to be colleagues, years later, on the Committee of Public Safety.

This man was Lazare Carnot, one day to be called the "organizer of victory." He came from Burgundy, but had been living for years in one army post after another. He was not unlike Robespierre. He, too, was austere in manner, rather chilly except to his own friends, inattentive in company, absorbed in his own problems. His private world was a mathematical one, in which he was just short of being a genius. He was the author of abstruse books. The famous Lagrange once admitted that Carnot had anticipated one of his discoveries. The captain, however, was not a mere thinking machine. He could unbend on occasion. His verses were a delight to the local literati. Kind-hearted, he once made use of Robespierre's professional services in a case of the sort that they both enjoyed. A poor woman servant of Carnot's had fallen heir to an unexpected legacy; and Robespierre, acting for Carnot, saw the case through the courts.

Carnot in these years was no politician. In normal times he might have left a name simply as a scholar, as his two sons did when the hurricane was over. But in the 1780's there were a number of matters which even the most unpolitical army officer could not ignore.

The army was almost monopolized by persons of noble blood. Hardly any of the officers were commoners, except in the engineers where technical knowledge was indispensable. And the tendency was toward more discrimination.
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If Carnot looked to the future he saw his career blocked. As captain, he had already risen as far as the laws allowed a commoner to go. If he looked to the past he could remember restrictions that were absurd in the light of social realities. To be admitted to military school he had had to prove that his family for several generations had "lived nobly," that is, had refrained from degrading commercial occupations. Or he might remember his teacher Monge, now his friend, only a few years older than himself. Monge had been refused admission to the school for want of pedigree. He had then been hired, being very able, to teach the boys with whom he was deemed too low-born to associate as an equal.

The long leisure of garrison life gave Carnot plenty of time for reflection. He drew up plans for making the army more national by opening its ranks to merit. These seem to have been about the only definite reforming ideas that he had. He was too much wrapped up in his own business to be radical. In this respect the Revolution was to change him greatly. It was a different man who became master of the fourteen armies of the Republic.

Robespierre and Carnot were northerners, sober to the point of grimness. Far in the south, at the foot of the Pyrenees, lived a typical son of the Midi, Bertrand Barère. Like Robespierre he was a lawyer and the son of a lawyer, but in personality he was everything that Robespierre was not. He was sociable, popular, a good liver and a man of the world. Urbane and pliant, but a little reserved, he was at ease even in the drawing rooms of Paris, where his smoothness was noted as unusual in a provincial. He liked people too well to believe that those who differed with him were evil men.

Barère became known as one of the most shifty politicians of the Revolution. He was, in truth, not a fanatical party man.

Barère called himself Barère de Vieuzac when such cognomens were still in fashion. His mother had noble blood. The family possessed certain forms of property which the Revolution was to abolish, among them the manor of Vieuzac, where the peasants paid feudal dues. There were other privileges from which young Barère profited. A special dispensation admitted him to the law school at Toulouse at the age of fifteen, years before the age re-
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quired. He could expect to inherit, as another piece of family property, a seat as judge in the court at Tarbes.

His abilities, however, were equal to his opportunities. He was soon a practising lawyer. He had an extraordinary memory, a strong grip on facts, and an interesting way of presenting them to others. Like almost everyone else he took pains to acquire fluency and eloquence—qualities that were to be the making of Barère, but almost the ruin of the Revolution. He won the coveted honor of admission to the Academy of the Floral Games at Toulouse, one of the oldest and most famous of all the literary societies.

"Too bad," said the president of the Floral Games when Barère delivered his entering address, "that he has already sucked in the impure milk of modern philosophy. Be sure of it, this lawyer is a dangerous man."

Barère dangerous? He could be so only in a society that was too rigid for its own good. He was willing enough to compromise and maneuver. He had no dream of a fantastically ideal world. He was no leader; it was his weakness to agree with whichever group was successful. He was a liberal, even in his vacillation. He surrendered his rights as overlord of Vieuzac before they were legally abolished. What he wanted was public participation in government, the rights of citizenship, a curb put upon the position of the nobility and the church. Such demands were enough to make a man dangerous in the circumstances. But the real danger to France, and to the world as it turned out, was rather in the men of inflexible convictions, the conservatives who would accept no change, and the more heated patriots who would accept nothing short of their idea of perfection.

Meanwhile, as Barère and Robespierre were arguing the law and Carnot considering his mathematics, a young man in a small town in Picardy was beginning to experiment with life. Louis-Antoine de Saint-Just became the enfant terrible of the Revolution. Before the Revolution he was hardly more than a bad boy. Undisciplined, impudent and self-willed, he lived with his widowed mother and his sisters. He was handsome, fiery, conceited. He was apparently an unruly child at school. At the age of nineteen he ran away to Paris, taking with him some of his mother's silver. He sold most of it, and spent the proceeds so fast that within a
few days he was appealing for help. His mother thereupon had him arrested, and kept him in protective custody under a lettre de cachet. She soon let him out to allow him to study the law. He took his degree at Reims, but showed little inclination to practise. He stayed idly at home engaging in sundry amours and composing a long narrative poem. Then just as political events in France were moving toward their climax he went off to Paris to look for a publisher. He was not yet quite twenty-two years old.

His poem appeared on the bookstands in May 1789, the month in which the Revolution may be said to have begun. Neither the author’s nor the publisher’s name was given. The work, called Organt, poem in twenty cantos, was an odd compound of platitude and pornography. Few people read it, but those who did found their attention drawn to interminable love affairs, the raping of nuns, and discourses on the right to pleasure. The author made no secret of his views. He inveighed against kings, courtiers, generals and priests. There was a broad and impertinent satire on the queen of France. Sympathetic biographers have tried to find a budding political philosophy in Organt, but even if there were one the man who would present it in such form would hardly show much promise as a statesman.

A statesman he nevertheless became, or at least a leader, for no one was changed more by the Revolution than Saint-Just. The stubborn child became a man of principle and determination. The self-indulgent youth had a stronger character than his own mother probably imagined.

It is interesting to conjecture how the young Saint-Just, scribbler and playboy, would have impressed one of his future colleagues who was then a Protestant minister. Jeanbon Saint-André was not a man to encourage frivolity. Yet in one respect he resembled Saint-Just. There was something dogmatic and absolute in his manner, an air of positiveness that was sometimes annoying. This we hear from certain Protestants who once considered him for their pastor.

The French Protestants, who formed about five per cent of the population, lived mostly in the south. Jeanbon Saint-André came from Montauban not far from Toulouse. To be a Protestant before 1787 was to be technically a kind of outlaw. That was why Jeanbon, like other Huguenot pastors, changed his name, adding
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the Saint-André. The Protestants despite all laws had not been much molested for some time. They flourished openly, shut out of government and the honorific professions, but distinguishing themselves in commerce and manufacturing. The Jeanbons were an old and conservative family. Jeanbon Saint-André, already nearly forty in 1789, was a man of wide experience. He had studied with the Jesuits, been a merchant and sea captain, gone to a Protestant theological school in Switzerland, and followed his present occupation for several years.

Saint-André had the utmost respect for the government of the king. He looked to it to protect the Protestants from the Catholic hierarchy and from Catholic mobs. He was by temperament a government's man, always seeing the administrator's point of view, though excluded by law from taking part in public affairs. He quarreled with his congregation because, on a local issue, he did not wish to embarrass the royal authorities. Admitting that in earlier times the Huguenots had caused disorder in France, he now, as a step toward winning toleration, tried to restrain the religious zeal of his fellows, who, he said, must “avoid the merest shadow of argument with Catholic priests or others on articles of religion.” For Saint-André religious doctrine had become something not worth disputing over. Calvinism in him was diluted into a generalized morality. He disliked religious excitement because it interfered with public order, and he demanded toleration for Protestants, not as a right, but as a means of making Frenchmen cooperate in worldly and national concerns.

Like most French liberals of the day, Saint-André did not believe that the church should be independent of the state. Religion, it seemed to him as to others, would benefit from supervision by an enlightened government. He recommended that the Bourbon monarchy, in granting toleration, should introduce a system of regulating and licensing the Protestant clergy. This idea was an outrage to old-fashioned Calvinists. But Saint-André was not an old-fashioned Calvinist, suspicious of secular government, preaching the wickedness of kings and the damnation of the ungodly. Had he been so he would have gone into the camp of the counter-revolution, as all the more devout clergy, Catholic and Protestant, eventually did. His real interests were in practical affairs, and though he had a long and amazingly varied career, he was always
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the same in one respect—he always believed in firm government, and he always stood for order.

Billaud-Varenne was an opposite to Saint-André, who became revolutionary in the course of the Revolution. Billaud was a radical from the start. Before the Revolution, Billaud was an ineffec-
tual drifter. Educated to be a lawyer (calling himself "de Varennes" to distinguish himself from his father, who was a lawyer also), the young Billaud could find no practice in his home town, La Rochelle. He wrote a comedy, which failed. He took up teaching, diverting himself by composing more comedies, which no players could be persuaded to accept. The head of his school ob-
served that he knew little Latin, but that his personal habits were above reproach. At the age of twenty-eight he went to Paris on his father's money, and was admitted to the Paris bar. Few clients sought him out. Three years later, in 1787, we find him writing a philosophical tract, The Last Blow Against Prejudice and Super-
stition, aimed at the church. An attack on the government soon followed. In substance neither book was original. It is the tone and manner that are to be noted, for the Last Blow, which was not published until 1789, shows the mind of a revolutionary in some ways fully formed. More than any other of the Twelve, Billaud gave intimations of the terrorist that he was to become.

"However painful an amputation may be," he wrote in his dis-
cussion of the church, "when a member is gangrened it must be sacrificed if we wish to save the body." This fatal metaphor of the gangrened limb spread like a contagion through French poli-
tics for five years. It was a commonplace in the Jacobin clubs, and it was the justification for the guillotine.

Billaud's ideas on religion were no less radical in 1787 than in 1793. Believing that the Catholic church was a fraud pure and simple, he outlined what he thought should be done to reform it. He went far beyond Saint-André's ideas of government supervi-
sion. All property of the church was to be confiscated. The clergy were to be controlled by the state; the office of bishop should if possible be abolished. The borders of dioceses and parishes should be redrawn. Dogmas should be reduced to one, the "useful" doc-
trine of the immortality of the soul. Ritual should be simplified to the point where the most ignorant observer could understand it, so that the clergy might no longer impose on the people. Vows
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should be forbidden. The clergy should be allowed to marry. Priests should be no different from “citizens.” Everything in Christianity that did not arise from nature and a few simple words of Jesus was to be rejected as mystification invented by cunning priests to entrench their power.

We are not now considering Billaud as a philosopher but as a future political leader dealing with a nation of Catholics. Observe his conclusion:

“It is possible, no doubt, that a vile interest, seconded by a stupid ignorance, may still dare to rise up against so advantageous a reform; but its motives will be too contemptible for anyone to give ear to its clamor. The only cry to be listened to is that which takes for device Conscience and Truth.” When a man in his ordinary moments takes this attitude toward those who oppose his opinions, it is not surprising if he puts them to death a few years later, in a time of crisis and excitement.

Georges Couthon was a provincial lawyer in the mountains of Auvergne. He was a mild-mannered humanitarian, known for his courteous and gentle ways, generally liked and trusted. He got a little political experience in the short-lived Provincial Assembly of 1787. As a member both of the Masonic lodge and the literary society of Clermont-Ferrand, he mingled freely with the people among whom ideas were stirring, men who were proud of the intellectual advance of the eighteenth century, and optimistic about political reform. At the literary society Couthon won applause by a discourse on “Patience.” Of this quality the revolutionary leaders usually had little. Couthon was not patient in politics, but there was a benevolence in his character that did not quite desert him even during the Terror, and an endurance in personal affliction which perhaps entitled him to be called a patient man.

As the Revolution approached, Couthon was fast becoming a cripple, so that by 1793 he was unable to walk. Doctors in 1792 gave a diagnosis of meningitis, in which modern consultants, reexaming the evidence, have concurred. Couthon told his doctors that from an early age he had freely indulged his sexual proclivities. He thought his paralysis might be due to such excesses. He lost the use of one leg shortly after an amorous adventure in which, surprised by the girl’s father, he caught a severe chill while hiding outside her window. He took mineral baths and elec-
tric treatments, but the trouble grew worse, spreading into the other leg. In 1793 he was happily married, but so helpless that he had to be carried from place to place in a chair.

Three of the Twelve we need but name, for little is known of their lives before the Revolution. Robert Lindet and Pierre-Louis Prieur were lawyers; Claude-Antoine Prieur-Duvernois was like Carnot a military engineer. The two Prieurs, who were not related, came to be called, after their home districts, Prieur of the Marne and Prieur of the Côte-d’Or. Lindet, born in 1743, was the oldest man of the twelve; C.-A. Prieur the youngest, except Saint-Just.

All three in the 1780’s were leading busy and undistinguished lives, typical of the anonymous world that lies behind all revolutions.

The eleventh character in our dramatis personae was the only one who had made himself at all conspicuous under the old order. He was also the only nobleman of the Twelve. It was nothing extraordinary to be a noble, for the French nobility, numbering perhaps 400,000, counting men, women and children, included most of the class that in England was called the gentry. The family of Hérault was unusual, however, in boasting of noble blood since the year 1390.

Marie-Jean Hérault de Séchelles, born after his father’s death, possessed the ancestral fortunes from the cradle. He was rich, he grew up among women, and he was spoiled. Good-looking and precocious, he became a much admired young man about town. At eighteen he was king’s attorney in the Paris courts—by special privilege, since the age required by law was twenty-five. All doors opened before him. Everything he undertook seemed to prosper.

Having no worries or reverses, enjoying the freedom given by wealth and station, he had little to do except cultivate himself. He was a good-hearted, agreeable and completely unmoral person, who saw other people chiefly as beings on whom it was advantageous to make a favorable impression. To this end he studied elocution with great care. He was very conscious of his voice. He practised his gestures at home before large mirrors. His interest in church was to observe the eloquence of the sermon. He wrote a book called Reflections on Declamation. In another, the Theory of Ambition, he reveals himself as a smiling egotist, not deceived by his own antics, coining maxims for achieving fame.
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without deserving it, complacent, cheerful and entirely self-centered.

It is as a connoisseur, even as a connoisseur of his own personality, that Hérault is best to be understood. He would indulge himself in anything that satisfied his acute sense of discrimination. He knew wines, clothes, women, tones of voice, books, ideas—and he was fastidious about them all. He travelled to Bordeaux to finger the original manuscripts of Montesquieu, and looked far and wide for the autograph of Rousseau’s *Nouvelle Héloïse*, which he bought in Holland for 24,000 livres. A man can scarcely be imagined more different from Rousseau than this assured and pampered worldling, this “triumph of artifice” as an understanding biographer calls him, who expected to prevail upon men by the way in which he moved his hands.

New ideas attracted the young king’s attorney. He was a serious believer in “physiognomy,” the science then in vogue of reading character in the face. He sent his portrait to Lavater, chief expert in the supposed science, beseeching him for a reading, eager to hear something favorable to himself. Lavater replied with copious flattery, but predicted vaguely (and accurately) that he would have “much to suffer.” Again, Hérault sought out the most eminent real scientist in France, the aged naturalist Buffon, and in a moment of persiflage told him of his plan for a book to review “all the rights of men, all their laws, to compare and judge them, and then to erect the new edifice.”

The new edifice he did in time erect, on paper; for he became the chief author of the republican constitution of 1793, which never went into effect.

Except for Billaud, whom it would be flattering to call a lawyer, a teacher, a dramatist or a publicist, and except for Saint-Just, who was hardly out of his adolescence, the eleven men we have surveyed were all established, in 1789, in one of the more respected professions. The same is not true of the twelfth, Jean-Marie Collot, who, although he called himself Collot d’Herbois, was the nearest of all to being a plain man of the people.

Collot was a native of Paris. Playing his first rôle at seventeen, he became a professional actor. He toured the provinces for years. Actors at the time were social outcasts. Law, custom and religion discriminated against them. Collot was a successful actor, but a
discontented man. He was admitted to bourgeois homes, but was patronized and regarded lightly as an entertainer. Experience made him rather sullen, unsocial and uneven in disposition. He craved recognition, yet was afraid of exposing himself. He wanted to be accepted, yet feared that he might seem too eager. He became impatient and contemptuous of the bourgeoisie on whose favor his standing depended.

He turned to writing, for authors were more highly esteemed, but his plays were only moderately successful. Finally the chance opened up for him to become a theater manager, a position which he filled first at Geneva and later at Lyons. Here he ran into bad luck. He was reasonably capable, but both ventures failed through no fault of his own, unless a rather difficult personality is to be blamed.

From all accounts, he was an excitable person, quick to take offense, resentful and inclined to feel himself persecuted, irritable from being so often snubbed, given to violent gestures and imprudent speech, enjoying dramatic effects, climaxes and tirades, a hearty man of the people whom the more refined would think definitely vulgar. He loved admiration and disdained it at the same time. He had a grievance against the world. His political ideas were of the vaguest, but more than any of his eleven future colleagues, he entered the Revolution with an acute sense of personal frustration.

The lives of these twelve give a glimpse into the old prerevolutionary France. It is a very partial glimpse. Little appears of the Church, hardly anything of the nobility—for Hérald de Séchelles, a Paris lawyer and boulevardier, was not typical of the thousands of noble families. There is above all not an inkling of the peasantry, who constituted four-fifths of the population. Saint-Just’s grandfather had indeed been a farmer, but his father had settled in town, and he himself wished to be a man of letters.

Not one of the twelve had ever labored with his hands. Not one of them, except Collot d’Herbois, had ever experienced any economic insecurity. Not one of them in 1789 lived in fear of poverty, for even Collot had worked to the top of the actor’s profession. Hérald was wealthy; Barère well off; Lindet, Carnot and Prieur of the Côte-d’Or had fortunes approaching 50,000
livres before the Revolution. Robespierre in 1781 possessed, jointly with his sister, a small capital of 3,000 livres. It was a trifling amount, especially for two persons. Investment was chiefly in land, though some might be in annuities, as generally brought an income of five percent.

All except Hérault were of the middle class. None, however, except Saint-André for a short while, had ever engaged in trade. They had no personal knowledge of industry. They had no experience with wage-earning people, except in hiring a few clerks or domestic servants or occasional craftsmen. What could they know of the proletariat of Paris, the silk weavers of Lyons, or the iron workers of Le Creusot? Paris then had over 600,000 inhabitants, Lyons over 100,000; but except for Collot, who was born in Paris, and Hérault, who lived there, these future rulers of France were all provincials, used to small town life.

All except Collot had received a good deal of formal schooling. Even Collot had acquired enough learning to become a writer. The others had been exposed to rhetoric and philosophy in the schools, and had in addition graduated from professional studies. Eight of them were lawyers by education. Two were engineers. Saint-André had studied theology at Lausanne. They were certainly not ignorant men.

They were not suffering from want, or from political oppression. They were not deprived of the elements of a comfortable and satisfying life. They were probably better off, most of them, than their fathers had been. They were not maddened by the drive of material need, as many of the peasants and city workers were. Why, then, did they become radical revolutionists?

To answer this question would require more knowledge both of psychology and of the causes of the French Revolution than anyone can be certain of having.

The group was relatively young. Only Robert Lindet was over forty when the Revolution began. Four of them were under thirty. All of them might feel that they still had a career to make. Yet Carnot and C.-A. Prieur were shut out from promotion. Saint-André as a Protestant would remain a mere spectator of events. Collot had had bad luck. Billaud had succeeded at nothing. And eight of them were lawyers! Lawyers were often leaders in their communities, men of opinions, convincing talkers, likely to see
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the seamy side of the government, eager to enter public affairs
themselves, perhaps even concerned about the improvement of
justice.

All twelve were intellectuals. They were steeped in the philoso-
phy of the eighteenth century, a body of ideas so pervasive that
even a Protestant minister and an actor-playwright could hardly
escape it. They were acutely aware of change. Business had been
expanding for a century; new inventions were appearing on every
side. Thinkers set forth elaborate theories of progress. Change
seemed to be easy; the most ingrained customs were to be re-
fashioned by the enlightened reason. Society was artificial; it
needed only to be made more natural. It was confused, a mere hand-
me-down from the past; it should be given a new and purposeful
"constitution." Never had there been an age with such faith in
social planning.

Thousands of people in France, educated, materially well off,
conscious of their powers, were irritated at the paternalism of
government, resentful at the bars of law and etiquette that stood
in their way. The middle classes detested the privileges of the
nobles. Liberty and equality had been freely talked of for years.
The country surged already with a sense of being a nation. Barère
and Robespierre were both French. Why then should they not
practise the same uniform national law, in the shadow of the
Pyrenees and by the Straits of Dover? Saint-André was as loyal
as the Archbishop of Paris. Why then should the Protestants be
treated with suspicion? Carnot knew more than the Count de
Rochambeau. Why should the Rochambeaus reap all the glory?
Lindet and Hérault were both lawyers. Then why should Hérault
get the better job, and Lindet have to defer to him as a noble?
Hérault himself did not know. Many of the aristocracy had lost
faith in the social system.

At the same time, thanks to the philosophy of the eighteenth
century, large elements of the educated classes were estranged
from the Catholic church. Billaud's Last Blow Against Prejudice
was only one of many books of its kind. The church had lost the
intellectual and moral leadership that it had once enjoyed. Many
people thought that it was too powerful as an organized force in
politics. It was widely supposed to possess more landed wealth
than it actually did. It was thought of as a public corporation
which had ceased to perform its functions efficiently, and which
an enlightened government might reorganize and direct. Philoso-
phy was a catchword of the day, and those who took a philosophical
view, besides thinking that the state should be supreme, were very
dubious of revelation, impatient of the claims of any established
clergy, scornful of solemn religious processions, pompous vest-
ments, the consecration of wafers and the clanging of bells. They
preferred a more natural religion, some pure and simple form of
belief which would make people socially conscious, teach them
their civic duties, and still preserve the “consoling doctrines” of
the existence of God and of survival in a somewhat hazy afterlife.

These religious ideas were to bring the revolutionary intel-
gentsia into conflict with the majority of the people of France,
the peasants and others who still respected their priests.

Intellectuals were not only out of sympathy with the world in
which they lived; many of them were attached emotionally to a
world of their imagination. They looked to America, and saw
thirteen small republics of simple manners and exemplary virtues.
They remembered their ancient history, or moral episodes which
they took to be history, and they saw more idealized republics, the
polished citizenry of Athens, the stern patriots of Sparta, the
incorruptible heroes of early Rome. They did not expect to duplic-
ate any such society in France. They did not even have much
practical belief in a republic. But their conception of statesmanship
was patterned on their dream. Their ideal statesman was no tacti-
cian, no compromiser, no skilful organizer who could keep various
factions and pressure groups together. He was a man of elevated
character, who knew himself to be in the right, a towering monu-
ment in a world of calumny and misunderstanding, a man who
would have no dealings with the partisans of error, and who, like
Brutus, would sacrifice his own children that a principle might
prevail.

Nor were the ideas to be gleaned from Rousseau more suited
to encourage conciliation. In the philosophy of the Social Contract
the “people” or “nation” is a moral abstraction. It is by nature
good; its will is law. It is a solid indivisible thing. That the
people might differ among themselves was a thought that Rous-
seau passed over rather hurriedly. Believers in the Social Contract
thus viewed political circumstances in a highly simplified way.
TWELVE WHO RULED

All struggles were between the people and something not the people, between the nation and something antinational and alien. On the one hand was the public interest, self-evident, beyond questioning by an upright man; on the other hand were private interests, selfish, sinister and illegitimate. The followers of Rousseau were in no doubt which side they were on. It is not surprising that they would not only not compromise with conservative interests, but would not even tolerate free discussion among themselves, or have any confidence, when they disagreed, in each others’ motives. Robespierre in the first weeks of the Revolution was already, in his own words, "unmasking the enemies of the country."

But all the ideas, hopes and ambitions that we may impute to our twelve men, and to others like them, would perhaps never in themselves have been enough to make them revolutionists. None of our twelve was consciously revolutionary before 1789. There was no such thing as a professional revolutionist before the nineteenth century—before the French Revolution set the example. The old régime drifted to its Niagara without knowing it. Its most restless spirits reconstructed society mentally, but they had no planned and organized movement to destroy the existing order. People expected change. But they expected the fortress of the old order to collapse before the horn of reason.

The breakdown of the government and the attendant confusion allowed these optimists to take a hand at revolution. Groaning under its load of debt (acquired largely in the fight for American independence), creaking in every part of its outmoded machinery of taxation, unable to borrow from the bankers, the monarchy of the Bourbons simply failed. So a general election was held; the old Estates-General met for the first time in one hundred and seventy-five years. Among the delegates to Versailles were three of the Twelve: Robespierre, Barère, and Prieur of the Marne.

Events moved rapidly. A constitutional monarchy was instituted. It would not work—because it set up somewhat impractical institutions, because France went to war, because prices soared, because neither the king, nor the royalists, nor the churchmen nor the working classes were satisfied with their new position. On August 10, 1792, a tremendous uprising occurred in Paris. The government yielded, wrote its own death warrant, and summoned a convention to draw up another constitution. It was called
a convention from the precedent of constitutional conventions in the United States.

The elections were held in the next few weeks. Our twelve men, who by this time if not active in Paris were at least prominent local politicians, were all chosen as deputies, along with more than seven hundred others.

The great Convention met on September 20, 1792. Two days later Collot d’Herbois moved the abolition of royalty. The Convention so ordered. Billaud-Varenne proposed and the Convention decreed that September 22, 1792, should be the first day of the French Republic, which was affirmed to be One and Indivisible in defiance of all powers that might tear it to pieces. With the execution of Louis XVI in the following January the men of the Convention made their irrevocable commitment, challenging the monarchies of Europe, horrifying public opinion in France itself, consciously appealing from the world in which they formed a revolutionary minority to the world of the future which they hoped to create. We are of that world. We are the posterity on whose judgment they relied. Whether or not we can give them a perfectly fair judgment, we can at least try to give them understanding.