

# A LOST REVOLUTION

## How the Anarchist Gracchus Babeuf Failed to Overthrow the French Government and Establish Communism

THE LAST EPISODE OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION: Being a History of Gracchus Babeuf and the Conspiracy of the Equals. By Ernest Belfort Bax. Small, Maynard & Co.

ONE day early in February of the year 1796, when Robespierre had been a year and a half dead, and France was beginning to draw a somewhat peaceful—if restricted—breath after the Terror, the citizens of the Faubourg St. Honore saw a man rush from the house numbered 29, pursued by an officer of the law, who shouted "stop thief" again and again as the man ran away. It was, perhaps, an ordinary occurrence. But this was no ordinary thief; this was no thief at all. This was a Ménéce to the Government, wanted on a conspiracy charge. This was the revolutionist who first sought to make of France a "Socialist" State. This was the first man to conceive of Communism as a politically realizable ideal in the near future. This was Gracchus Babeuf.

Gracchus Babeuf—who was christened Francois Noel, and who called himself after his favorite Roman hero—is, to the average man to-day, not even a name. Among the great names of the French Revolution his finds no place. Most of us, who think we know history, know nothing of him. His undertakings failed, and he himself was quickly forgotten. Yet for a while he held the French Directory in terror. He revolted against the tyranny of the moneyed bourgeoisie, and he revolted with such enthusiasm and courage that his conspiracy came near to being a success. It was only with the death of Gracchus Babeuf under the guillotine that the Revolution died finally in France. For France and the eighteenth century he was the last of the Revolutionists; for us he is almost the first of the Socialists.

In writing the history of Gracchus Babeuf and his conspiracy, the final gasp of the French Revolution, Ernest Belfort Bax has turned for us a new page in history. It is a thrilling story, made more so because the author's attitude toward Babeuf is thoroughly sympathetic. With the death of Robespierre France fell speedily out of the Terror into the hand of a party of "nouveaux riches." The confiscation of the lands of nobility and clergy had proved an irresistible temptation to unscrupulous money-getting, and the middle-class leaders who had triumphed in the Revolution lived, at its close, much as the nobles had lived in the days of the Three Estates. The just constitution of 1793, which had been accepted by the 41,000 communes of France as well as by the National Assembly, had been set at naught, and a new constitution, not only irregular in its adoption but rich in opportunities for tyranny had been enforced in its place. To Francois Noel Babeuf and his colleagues the Revolution seemed to have accomplished next to nothing; France was free from the burden of Kings, but the people of France seemed as far as ever from the power to control the nation or to get justice before the law.

By all the "patriots" who resented the illegal constitution and the Directory's dictates, who longed more or less openly for the downfall of the existing government and the operation of the constitution of 1793, Gracchus Babeuf had been, within a year of Robespierre's death, recognized as leader. Whole-souled, enthusiastic, a fanatic for the cause of Liberty defied, Babeuf had since his boyhood fought for "the people" in France. His father, dying, had commanded the boy to swear on the sword of his humble house "never to abandon the interests of the people, which are everything." He had, while a young land agent in the town of Roye in Picardy, urged a unified code of law, and lost his position in no time because of his pamphlets against the feudal land tenures. Throughout the course of the revolution he was active in Paris. Immediately after the fall of Robespierre he started his "Journal of the Liberty of the Press" to advocate equality and oppose the Directory's rule. Three months later he was sought by the police as a national menace. He changed the name of his paper to "The Tribune of the People," organized an insurrectionary society, and continued to attack and be pursued by the gov-

ernment. It was becoming plain that he aimed to make the restoration of the constitution of 1793 the toll with which to carve out a communistic state. Gracchus Babeuf, at the age of 35, had become a national figure.

In the year 1796 Babeuf organized his conspiracy and prepared to overturn the government. In the same year his plots were betrayed, his enterprise failed and he and his fellow "patriots" were brought to trial before the Directory's High Court. The next year the last flicker of revolution in France died out with his death.

Babeuf's simple advocacy of "liberty, equality and universal well being" had in it nothing original. He followed the lines of Rousseau's arbitrary "social contract," Morelly's golden age. Babeuf's innovation was his suggestion for the complete abolition of private property, the communistic ideal as the practical working plan for the organization of a state (the communistic ideal itself he undoubtedly derived from the writings of Mably and Morelly). But if Babeuf got little beyond his contemporaries' plea for the repartition of the land, he at least went far enough to proclaim communism as the essential of social regeneration. He drew up his plans for government very definitely, and he hatched his plots with invincible courage. He was not always a wise leader; his insurrection was probably foredoomed from the first to its failure, but he never failed in devotion or bravery. There is compelling interest in the story of his little known revolt.

### JOACHIM MURAT

JOACHIM MURAT. Marshal of France and King of Naples. By A. Hilliard Atteridge. Illustrated. Brentano's. \$3.50.

OF all the men who rose to fame and fortune on the spurs of the great Emperor there is none more attractive to the imagination, none of a more gallant and romantic figure than the Gascon Innkeeper's son who lived to be General and high Admiral, brother-in-law of the Emperor, Prince, Marshal of France, and King of Naples. Mr. Atteridge seems to have felt all the glamour of the rapid and brilliant success of his career and the pathos of its ignominious end. But he does not always succeed in putting his own feeling into what he writes. His attitude toward his subject is kindly and admiring, but strictly just and he does not spare the follies of temperament or the more serious faults of character which finally brought the King-Marshal to his downfall. But his view of Murat and his share in events is like that of a near-sighted man who in order to see clearly must get so close to what he is looking at that it does not stand out as clearly and brilliantly from its background as it ought. But, although he keeps so close to his subject that he loses some of the brilliant coloring and some of the perspective values, he has made a studious and painstaking survey of Murat's strenuous life and has told it in a readable style. It is, indeed, rather his treatment of his background than of his subject that is lacking.

Mr. Atteridge's style is simple and direct and he never allows himself to be tempted into taking the romantic view or seeing the dramatic possibilities of his narrative. But if he is somewhat literal in his presentation of facts he has been careful to verify his statements and make his narrative trustworthy, while he judges events and characters with such shrewdness and mental poise that he soon wins and constantly keeps his reader's confidence. He says:

In the noblest sense of the word, Murat was no hero. But he had the courage both of action and of endurance in a high degree. . . . His reckless daring, his faculty of inspiring it in others, his rapid grasp of the possibilities of the moment amid the danger and confusion of the fight, and his swift decision and unhesitating action made him a great cavalry leader. . . . As a man his faults lie on the surface. . . . The best side of his character was the kindly part of his nature. In the days when men had been steeled against pity by war and revolution there was no cruelty in Murat.