

sessions, were wholly free, though they consented to make voluntary gifts to the Crown; and when, in a time of emergency, the minister Machault required them, in common with all others hitherto exempt, to contribute a twentieth of their revenues to the charges of government, they passionately refused, declaring that they would obey God rather than the King. The cultivators of the soil were ground to the earth by a threefold extortion, — the seigniorial dues, the tithes of the Church, and the multiplied exactions of the Crown, enforced with merciless rigor by the farmers of the revenue, who enriched themselves by wringing the peasant on the one hand, and cheating the King on the other. A few great cities shone with all that is most brilliant in society, intellect, and concentrated wealth; while the country that paid the costs lay in ignorance and penury, crushed and despairing. On the inhabitants of towns, too, the demands of the tax-gatherer were extreme; but here the immense vitality of the French people bore up the burden. While agriculture languished, and intolerable oppression turned peasants into beggars or desperadoes; while the clergy were sapped by corruption, and the nobles enervated by luxury and ruined by extravagance, the middle class was growing in thrift and strength. Arts and commerce prospered, and the seaports were alive with foreign trade. Wealth tended from all sides towards the centre. The King did not love his capital; but he and his favorites amused themselves with adorning it. Some of the chief embel-