

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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AUTHORS OF "MADAME THERESE," "THE CONSCRIPT," "THE BLOCKADE," &c.

PART THE FIRST.

1789.

V.

"All the regiment rejoiced. I was put under arrest for forty-eight hours for being so unlucky; but our major, the Chevalier de Mendell, sent a basket from his own table to Nicolas Bastien—a basket full of meat and choice wines. That is it! Nicolas has made Royal Allemand win; they would feast him well. From that time I have been respected by my superiors. If you knew what was going on here; how these vagabond citizens are agitating, especially the limbs of the law; if you knew that, you would understand that opportunities of distinguishing oneself are not wanting. No later than 27th of August last the commandant of the watch, Dupois, made us charge the mob on the Pont Neuf, and all that day up to twelve at night we rode over them on the Place Dauphine and the Place de Grève, and everywhere. If you had seen the next day how we massacred them in the Rue Saint-Dominique and the Rue Meslée, you would have said, 'Well done!' I was first on the right of the troop, 3rd rank; every one within reach was cut down. Lieutenant-Colonel de Reinach, after the charge, said the lawyers would not want to make themselves heard any more. I believe you. They have been hit hard. See what a fine thing discipline is! When the command is given, you must go. Father, mother, brothers and sisters may be before you; you ride over them like dirt. I should be sergeant already, only I must be able to write to make my report. But be easy; I have my little affair to settle with Jerome Leroux. A young man of good family, Gilbert Gardet of the 3rd squadron, is teaching me my letters, and I give him lessons in the use of the small-sword. I shall get on, I answer for it. The first opportunity you shall see my writing, and now embracing you and wishing you desire both in this world and the next, I make my mark."

"+ NICOLAS BASTIEN,

"Fencing-master,

"In Royal Allemand Regiment.

"This 1st of December, 1788."

Poor Nicolas saw nothing more meritorious than fighting. His noble officers looked on him as a sort of bull-dog which is let loose at another dog, and on which one wins money, and thought it very fine. I forgave him with all my heart, but I was ashamed to show it to Maitre Jean and Chauvel. All this time I was reading father and mother lifted their hands in admiration, mother especially; she laughed, and cried. "I knew Nicolas would get on! Do you see what progress he makes? It is because we have always lived at Baraque that we are so poor. But Nicolas will be noble—I foretell it—he will be noble."

Father was pleased too, but he saw the danger of fighting duels, and said as he looked down—

"Yes, yes, that's all very well, provided some one else does not run him through just under the right nipple; that would break our hearts. It is terrible all the same; the other one, perhaps, had a father and mother."

"Never mind, never mind!" cried the mother.

And then she took the letter and went and showed it to the neighbours, saying—

"A letter from Nicolas! He is corporal and fencing-master in his regiment; he has already killed several men—no one dares look at him askance now."

And so it went on. Two or three days after he gave me the letter, and as Maitre Jean had asked for it, I was obliged to take and read it in the evening. Chauvel and Margaret were there; I did not dare to raise my eyes. Maitre Jean said—

"What a misfortune to have such rascals in a family, who would cut down father and mother, sisters and brothers, and think, moreover, that it is fine because it is discipline!"

Chauvel answered—

"Bah! What Nicolas tells us there is worth knowing. These charges in the streets, these massacres, we know nothing about them; the gazettes never mentioned them, though I have heard indirectly in my rounds that in the neighbourhood of Grenoble, Bordeaux, and Toulouse, large bodies of troops had been set in motion. All this is a very sure sign; it proves that the current carries all with it, that nothing can stop it. These fights have already obtained for us the dismissal of Loménie de Brienne, and the convocation of the States-General. Fights are not what we have to fear; what are fifty or one hundred regiments when the masses are against them? Only let the people insist on what they want: only let the third estate be of the same mind; the rest is like froth which flies off when a strong wind blows. I am glad to hear all this; let us prepare for the elections, let us be ready, and let good sense and justice show themselves."

Chauvel from this time no longer pinched up his lips; he seemed full of confidence; and in spite of the famine, which lasted till the end of March, in spite of all, peasants, workpeople, and

citizens held together. Chauvel was right when he said, at the declaration of parliament, that great events were preparing; each man felt stronger and more resolute; it was like a new life; and the most miserable wretch of all, instead of crouching along as formerly, seemed to hold up his head and look the sky in the face.

VI.

Maitre Jean and I, towards five in the evening, we working at the forge, very happy. Every time godfather heated the iron he cried out, his fat face looking quite joyous—

"Well, Michel, so we shall have our States-General!" To which I replied—

"Yes, Maitre Jean, the business is going on right now."

And then the hammers began to work away again without stopping; a joyful heart adds to one's strength.

Out of doors the mud was deeper than we had seen it for a long time; snow was melting, water running, carrying the manure-heaps with it, and filling the cellars. Women came out every moment to stop it with their large brooms. One went leads to another; after having performed *corvées* for the king, the seigneur, and the convent, the idea of paving the village street could not occur to you, you were too happy to rest and live in dirt. Suddenly five or six old Baraquins, Father Jacques Letumier, Nicolas Cochart, Claude Hurf, Gauthier Courtois, in fact, all the notables of the vicinity, stopped before our forge with a majestic air, and uncovered themselves with much ceremony.

"Ha! is that you, Letumier?" cried Maitre Jean, "and you, Hurf? What the devil are you doing there?"

He laughed, but the others were serious, and the tall Letumier, bending his back under the little door, said from the bottom of his throat like the crockery hawkers—

"Maitre Jean Leroux, with all respect to you we have a communication to make you."

"To make me?"

"Yes, to yourself, in respect of these elections."

"Oh, well, come in. You are standing out there in the mud."

Then one after the other they came in. There was hardly room for them to stand. The others were cogitating how to begin their speech, when Maitre Jean said—

"Well, what's the matter? What do you want to ask me? Do not hesitate. You know me well enough, if it be anything I can do."

"Well, this is what it is," said the woodcutter Cochart; you know the three Baraques vote together?"

"Yes. Well?"

"Well, the three Baraques have two hundred houses. We have a right to elect two deputies."

"Without doubt. And then?"

"And then you are the first—that is a matter of course. But the other is a difficulty for us."

"What! do you intend to name me?" said Maitre Jean, inwardly flattered all the same.

"Yes; but the other?"

Then Maitre Jean was quite satisfied and said—

"We are roasting ourselves here at this fire. Let us go into the inn—have a jug of good wine together; that will sharpen our wits!"

Of course they agreed. I meant to remain at the forge; but Maitre Jean called me from the middle of the street—

"Come, Michel, come; a day like this all of us should be of one mind."

And we all went into the large room together. They sat down round the table, along the windows. Maitre Jean called for wine and glasses, a loaf of bread, and some knives. They touched glasses, and as Dame Catherine looked on in surprise, not understanding the meaning of it all, and Letumier was wiping his mouth preparatory to explaining it to her, Maitre Jean cried—

"For myself, I am flattered—I accept; but I must warn you, if you do not name Chauvel at the same time, I shall refuse."

"Chauvel! the Calvinist?" cried Letumier, turning his head and opening his eyes wide.

And the rest looked horrified at one another, and cried.

"The Calvinist! He our deputy?"

"Listen," said Maitre Jean; "we are not now going to meet yonder, so to speak, in council, to discuss the mysteries of our holy religion or the holy sacraments, and the like. We are going there on our own business, and chiefly to relieve ourselves of subsidies, poll-tax, *corvées*, land-tax; to give a turn to our seigneurs, if it be possible, and get ourselves out of the scrape. Well, I am a sensible man—at least, I believe so—but not sufficiently so to win such a great stake as this. I can read and write, and I know where the shoe pinches, and if it was only a question of braying like an ass I could play my part as well as any one belonging to Quatre-Vents, Mittelbronn, or elsewhere. But that is not the business in hand. We shall meet knowing fellows there of all descriptions—attorneys, bailiffs, seneschals, men well educated, who can give us a thousand reasons founded on laws, customs, practices, for this and for that, and if

we cannot reply to them categorically, they will fix the halter round our necks again for ever. Do you see that?"

Letumier opened his mouth from ear to ear. "Yes—but Chauvel—Chauvel," said he.

"Hear me out," said Jean. "I want to be your deputy; and if any one from amongst us speaks I can and will second him; but answer myself! no. I have neither sufficient instruction, nor sufficient information; and I can tell you that in all this part of the country, I don't care where, there is no one so capable of speaking for us and defending us as Chauvel; he knows everything—laws, customs, warrants, everything. That little man, do you see, is acquainted with every book he has carried on his back for the last five-and-twenty years. When on the road, you think, perhaps, he is looking about him, at the fields, the trees, the hedges, the bridges, and the rivers. Not he. He has his nose over one of his old books as he walks along, or else he is meditating some argument; in fact, if you are not fools, and do not want to keep your *corvées*, land-taxes, and exactions, that is the man you will choose first, even in preference to me. If Chauvel is there I will stand fast by him; but if he is not, you had better not elect me at all, for I refuse at once."

Maitre Jean spoke very plainly, and the others scratched their ears.

"But," said the woodcutter Cochart, "will they let him sit?"

"The notice makes no difference in religion," answered Maitre Jean; "every one is called upon, provided he be a Frenchman, is twenty-five years of age, and is on the list of tax-payers, Chauvel pays as we all do, perhaps more; and did not our good king last year restore their civil rights to Lutherans, Calvinists, and even to Jews? You ought to know that; let us elect Chauvel, and not trouble ourselves farther. I answer for it, he will do us more good and more credit than fifty capucins; he will defend our interests with good sound sense, and courage too. It will be to the honour of the three Baraques, believe. Here, Catherine! another jug."

The others were still doubtful; but when Maitre Jean filled the glasses again, and said—

"This is my last word; if you do not name Chauvel, I refuse; if you do name him, I accept; here is our good king's health!" all seemed affected, repeating—

"Here is our good king's health."

And when they had finished drinking, Letumier said, with a very grave face—

"It will be hard work to get the women to put up with that; but as it has gone so far, Maitre Leroux, here is my hand."

"And mine also," said another, leaning over the table.

And so it went, all round the table.

After that, having emptied the jug, every one rose to go home. They were the notables, and we were sure all the others would do as they did.

"The business is, then, settled?" cried Maitre Jean to them, well pleased, at the door.

"All settled," said they, as they walked off, paddling through the mud.

We then returned to the forge; all this had made us thoughtful. We worked on till seven, and then Nicole called us to supper.

The meeting was for the Sunday following. Chauvel and his daughter had been on their journey for a fortnight; they had never sold so many pamphlets; however, Maitre Jean hoped to find them at the great meeting in the town-hall. That evening nothing fresh occurred—the day had been sufficiently eventful.

As I walked down the old street of Baraques the Sunday following with my father, between six and seven in the morning, the sun rose over the woods of La Bonne Fontaine. It was the first fine day of the year; the thatched roofs and the little chimneys in black bricks, whence the smoke wound into the air, resembled gold; the little puddles along the street glistened as far as one could see, white clouds stretched away in the sky, and one could hear from far, very far, the clarionettes of the villages which were on the road, the drums beating the *rappel* in the town, and the first tinklings of the church bells announcing the mass of the St. Esprit, before the elections. My father, now grown old, sunburnt, feeble, with his grey beard and bare neck, walked next to me, his frock of coarse raw linen thread rolled up round his loins; his trousers, also of linen, fastened by a string round his ankles; and his shoes of unblackened leather, without heels, laced up. He wore on his head, like all peasants of our time, a coarse woollen cap, since carried on the flag of the Republic, and looked pensively out of the corners of his eyes to the right and to the left, as if he expected something to take us by surprise—by dint of suffering one distrusts everything—every instant the poor man said—

"Michel! take care, and say nothing; let us hold our tongues; this will end ill."

I was more confident. The habit of hearing Maitre Jean and Chauvel discuss the affairs of the country, and of reading myself which took place at Rinnes, Marseilles, and Paris, gave me more courage; besides at eighteen the work of the forge at spread out my shoulders; the big twelve-pound hammer was not too heavy for my hands; I had hardly any beard; but that

did not prevent me looking a man in the face, whether soldier, citizen, or peasant. I liked to be well dressed; on Sundays I wore a cap of blue cloth, long boots, a velvet waistcoat after the smith's fashion; and, since I must own it, I looked at the pretty girls with pleasure; I found them handsome; it is not forbidden to do so!

All the village was astir as we came near the inn. Maitre Jean and Valentine in the great room, the windows wide open, were drinking a bottle of wine and eating a crust of bread together before starting. They had both their best cloths on; Maitre Jean in his master's coat, with wide skirts, red waistcoat, his breeches buckled round his great calves, and silver buckles on his round-toed shoes; Valentine in a grey linen blouse, the collar and breast ornamented with red binding; a large silver heart fastened to his shirt, his peasant's caps tucked over his ear. They saw us and cried—

"Here they are."

We went in.

"Now, Bastien, our good king's health!" cried Maitre Jean, filling the glasses, and my father, with tears in his eyes, answered—

"Yes, yes, Jean, to our good king's health! Long live our good king!"

It was the fashion to believe then that the king did everything; he was looked upon as a sort of god who watched over his children, consequently my father loved his king.

We drank our wine, and the notables soon arrived. They were the same as the evening before, with Grandfather Letumier, so old that he could hardly see, and he had to be led every step to prevent his falling. Nevertheless he insisted on voting; and while they were gone to fetch wine, were filling glasses, and every one was talking and crying, "Here we are, it's settled, the Baraquins will make themselves known; be easy, they will all vote together!"—while they were shaking hands, and laughing, and drinking, the poor old man said—

"Ah! life is long, life is long! but never mind, when I see such a day as this, I don't think of my own ill."

Maitre Jean answered—"You are right, Father Letumier; we no longer heed the days of hail and snow when once harvest is come; here are the sheaves! they have cost us some labour, it is true; but now we are going to thrash, winnow, and sift them; we have bread, please God, and our children too; long life to the king!"

And we all repeated, "Long life to the king!" Glass met glass, they embraced all round; then they set off arm-in-arm, my father and I last.

All the Baraquins, assembled round the fountain, followed us with clarionettes and drums. I never heard anything like it; the whole country was full of music and bell-ringing; on all sides you could see along the roads rows of people dancing, waving their hats, throwing their caps in the air, and singing—

"Long live the good king! the father of his people."

The bells answered one another from the height of the mountain to the far end of the plain; it never ceased; and the nearer we came to the town, the louder was the din; flags of white silk, embroidered with golden lilies, waved from the church, from the barrack windows, over the hospital, everywhere. No, I never saw anything so fine. In later times of Republican victories, the cannon roaring on our ramparts made one's heart beat, and one was proud to shout, "Vive la nation! vive la République!" But on this occasion it was not a question of killing people; they thought to win everything at once by embracing one another.

These things are not to be described!

As we came near the town, M. the Curé Christopher arrived at the head of his parishioners where the two roads meet; then they stop again, raise their hats and shout again, "Long live the king!"

The curé and Maitre Jean embrace; and then laughing, singing, clarionettes playing, drums beating, the two parishes continue their advance to the entrance, already crowded with people. I see now the sentry of the Le Fere Regiment, in his white coat and grey facings, his enormous cocked hat on his powdered wig, his heavy musket on his arm, who motioned to us to halt. The bridges were encumbered with carts and carriages; all the old people had themselves conveyed to the town-hall; they all wanted to vote before they died; many of them cried like children.

After that, let those that like say that men of our time had not very great good sense; from the first to the last, all wanted their rights.

We had to wait there twenty minutes before crossing the bridge, there was such a crowd. Inside the town was the sight, the streets full of people, innumerable flags from all the windows; there you should have heard the cries of "Vive le roi!" sometimes beginning in the square, sometimes near the arsenal at the Gate de l'Allemagne, and go round the ramparts and glacis like the rolling of thunder.

When we had once passed the old portcullis, you could go neither forward; nor backwards, nor see four paces before you. The inns, taverns, breweries, St. Christopher, Cœur Rouge,