

# 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," &amp;c.

## PART THE FIRST.

1789.

XVII.

"It was on the 6th of May that affairs began to show some decided character; before that sitting, all the ceremonies I have described to you and all the speeches which had been made to us had led to nothing; but now you will really see something new.

"Long live Third Estate of France,  
I'll soon receive preponderance  
O'er royalty and nobility—  
Ahi! the poor nobility!  
Far in advance of priest and judge,  
With knowledge armed, the poorer drudge  
Doth prove the better man is he—  
Ahi! the poor nobility!"

"If they had known we belonged to the Third Estate they were capable of carrying us in triumph. I would be indeed the act of coward to forsake such people as these! And I can tell you, if we were not already decided, the mere sight of this courage, gaiety, and virtues in such distress would have made us feel and swear to fulfil our mission, and recover our rights or die.

"We spent four days with the widow Lefranc; Margaret, with the curé Jacques, has seen all Paris—the Jardin des Plantes, Notre-Dame, the Palais-Royal, and even the theatres. My only pleasure was walking about the streets and squares, going here and there, and along the Seine, where old books are sold; on the bridges, peopled by old clothesmen and dealers in fried fish; talking before the shops with any one; stopping to listen to the open of a blind man, or seeing a play acted in the open air; performing dog were not wanting, nor dentists with a pipe and a big drum; but the play at the end of the Pont-Neuf is the best; they always have the laugh against princes and nobles; they are always mude to talk nonsense; two or three times I have been so pleased that tears came in my eyes.

"I have visited the corporation of Paris, where they were still discussing their memorials. They have come to a wise determination; they have appointed a permanent commission to watch their deputies, to advise and even to caution them if they do not fulfil their mission in a satisfactory manner. This is a good idea, Maitre Jean, and which has unfortunately been omitted in other places. What is a deputy if he is overlooked by no one, who might sell his vote with impunity, and set those who sent him at defiance?—for he is become rich and the others remain poor; he is protected by the power which buys him, and his constituents remain in the right, it is true, but without appeal and without remedy! The part the corporation of Paris has taken ought to be to our advantage; it is one of the articles which ought to head the constitution; that electors should have it in their power to deprive of his seat, proceed against, and cause to be punished, every deputy who is false to his mission, as he who makes a bad use of a power of attorney is punished. Till then we shall be thankful for small mercies. Well, this decision gave me pleasure; now I continue.

"In addition to my joy at seeing this great movement, I had also the satisfaction of observing that people here well know what they want and what they are about. I went in the evening, after supper, to the Palais-Royal, which the Duke of Orleans has thrown open to every one. This duke is a profligate, but at least no hypocrite. After passing the night in a tavern or elsewhere, he does not go to mass and receive absolution, to begin again the next day. They say he is a friend of Siéyes and Mirabeau; he is reproached with having brought a number of scoundrels into Paris to plunder and sack the city; this is not easy to believe, because after so frightful a winter they would have come of themselves to look for food. There is no need of giving locusts a hint to make them fall on the crops.

"The queen and court hate the duke, which makes him many friends; his Palais-Royal is always open; in the interior there are rows of trees, where every one can walk about; four rows of arcades surround the garden, and beneath are the finest shops and most elegant taverns in Paris.

"It is there young men and newspaper writers meet, and make their views known in the most open manner, without scruple. As to what they say, it is not always very brilliant, and generally it goes out of your head as through a sieve; the good which remains is of no great quantity—more straw than wheat. I have listened to them once or twice, and on going away I have been at some pains to remember what they had been talking about—all the same the foundation is good, and some of them show plenty of spirit.

"We had under the trees a bottle of bad and dear wine. Rents are also very high; I have been told the smallest of these shops lets for two and three thousand livres a year—customers must pay for this. This Palais-Royal is in reality a large fair, and at night, when the lamps are lighted, it is really very fine.

"On the 11th, about half-past two in the

afternoon, we set off well pleased with our journey, and sure that the bulk of the Parisians are in our favour, which is the principal thing. On the 12th, at nine, we were at our posts, and as our commissioners had not been able to come to any arrangement with those of the nobility and the clergy, we saw that they were only desirous of making us lose our time. For that reason, at this sitting we took measures for proceeding to business. The president and his assistants were ordered to make a list of the deputies, and it was decided that every day a commission consisting of a deputy from every province should be appointed to keep order in the conferences, collect and count the votes, take the majority of opinions on each question, &c.

"The next day we received a deputation from the nobles, to signify to us that their order was constituted, that they had named their president and secretaries, opened registers, and taken divers measures, among others to proceed alone to verify their powers. They had quite decided to do without us. The same day the clergy sent us word that they had appointed commissioners to confer with those of the nobles and the Third Estate on the verification of powers in common, and the union of the three orders.

"A great discussion arose; some were for appointing commissioners, others proposed we should only acknowledge as legal representatives those whose powers had been examined in the General Assembly, and that we should invite the deputies of the Church and of the nobility to meet us in the hall of the States-General, where we had been awaiting them for a week.

"As the discussion grew warm, and several deputies wished to speak, the debate was continued the following day. Rabaud de Saint-Etienne, a Protestant minister; Vigulier, deputy from Toulouse; Thourat, advocate to the Parliament at Rouen; Barnave, deputy from Dauphiné; Boissy d'Anglas, from Languedoc, all men of great talent and admirable speakers, above all, Barnave, insisted, some that we should go on, others that we should wait and give the nobility and clergy time to reflect, as if all their reflections had not been already made. At last Rabaud de Saint-Etienne prevailed, and sixteen members were chosen to confer with the commissioners of the clergy and the nobles.

"In our sitting of the 23rd a committee of report was chosen, charged with drawing up the minutes of all that had passed since the opening of the States-General. This proposal was rejected, because this plain exposure might increase the agitation of the country, and showing it the intrigues of the nobility and clergy to paralyse the Third Estate.

"The 22nd and 23rd there was a report that his Majesty would submit to us the project of a loan. By means of this loan they could do without us, since the deficit would thus be provided for, but our children and descendants would have to pay the interest for ever. Troops arrived the same days in large bodies round Paris and Versailles.

"The 26th they finished drawing up rules for the maintenance of good order and discipline, and our commissioners came to tell us that they had been unable to agree with those of the nobles.

"The next day, the 27th, Mirabeau summed up all that had been done till then in these words:—'The nobility will not join us to verify our powers in common. We desire to verify the powers in common. The clergy persists in seeking to conciliate us. I propose to appoint a very numerous and very solemn deputation to the clergy, to adjure them, in the name of the God of Peace, to side with reason, justice, and truth, and to join their fellow-deputies in their common hall.' All this took place in public, the crowd surrounded us, and did not hesitate to applaud those of whom it approved.

"The next day, 28th, a barrier was erected to separate the Assembly from the public, and a deputation was sent to the clergy in the terms indicated by Mirabeau.

"This same day we received a letter from the king. 'His Majesty had been informed that difficulties respecting the verification of powers existed still between the three orders. He saw with pain and uneasiness, the Assembly, which he had summoned to devote itself to the regeneration of the country, abandon itself to a fatal state of inaction. Under these circumstances he requested the commissioners named by these orders to recommence their conferences, in the presence of the chancellor and of commissioners appointed by his Majesty, that he might be especially made aware what overtures had been made for a reconciliation, and be able to contribute directly to so desirable a state of concord.'

"It seems that we, the commons' representatives, were the cause of the States-General's inactivity for three weeks; it was who we wished to form a separate party, and who were defending ancient privileges against the rights of the nation!

"His Majesty took us for children. Several deputies spoke against this letter, among others Cannes. They said that renewed conferences were useless, that the nobility would not listen to reason; that, besides, the commons could not

submit to the jurisdiction of the chancellor, who would naturally take the nobles; that our commissioners would be there, in the presence of those of the king, as pleaders before judges decided beforehand to condemn them; and that what had happened in 1589 would happen now. Then the king had also proposed to pacify men's minds, and he had done so effectually by an edict in council.

"Many deputies were of the same opinion; they considered the letter as a snare. Nevertheless, the next day, the 29th, in order to exhaust all means of conciliation, we sent a very humble address to the king, thanking him for his kindness and goodness, and telling him that the commissioners of the Third Estate were ready to resume their sittings with those of the clergy and nobility. But on the Monday following, June 1st, Rabaud de Saint-Etienne, one of our commissioners, having come to tell us that the minister Necker proposed to them to accept the verification of powers by orders, and to submit themselves in all cases of doubt to the decision of the council, we confessed that Cannes was right. The king himself was opposed to the verification in common; he wanted three separate chambers instead of one; he stood by the clergy and the nobility against the Third Estate! Henceforth we had only ourselves to depend upon.

"All I have related to you up to this point, Maitre Jean, is exact; and that will show you the uselessness of fine words, grand phrases, and flowers of oratory, as they are called. The poorest Barquin, if endowed with sense, sees things distinctly, and all these additions of style are useless and injurious.

"Everything may be explained simply:—You want this—I will have that—you surround us with soldiers—the Parisians are with us—you have powder, guns, Swiss mercenaries, and we have nothing but our commission, but we are tired of being robbed, ground down, and stripped; you believe yourself the stronger; we shall see!

"That is the foundation of the story: all inventions of words and speeches, when right and justice are evident, are superfluous. We have been ridiculed; let us go to facts:—We pay, we will know what becomes of our money; moreover, we will only pay as little as possible; our children are soldiers, we will know who commands them, why they command them, and how we profit by it; you have orders of nobility, and the third order; why these distinctions? in what respect are the children of the one superior to the children of the other? are they of a different species? do they descend from the gods; while ours spring from animals? There, that is what must be made clear.

"Now let us continue. 'The nobility reckoned on the troops; it expected to carry all before it by means of the troops, and rejected our proposals. Being in sitting the 10th of June, after the report of the conferences of our commissioners with those of the nobles had been read, Mirabeau said the deputies of the commons could wait no longer; we had duties to fulfil, and it was time to begin, that a member of the Paris deputation had a motion of the highest importance to bring forward, and he invited the Assembly to give him a patient hearing.

"This member was the Abbé Siéyes, a man from the south, forty or forty-five years of age; he speaks badly, with a weak voice, but his ideas are good. I have sold many of his pamphlets, as you know; they have done much good. This is what he said, amidst deep silence—

"Since the opening of the States-General the commons' deputies have followed an open and calm line of conduct; they have observed all respect compatible with their character for the nobility and the clergy, which the two privileged orders have repaid by hypocrisy and subterfuge. The Assembly can remain no longer inactive without betraying its duties and the interests of its constituents; it must, then, verify the powers. The nobility refuses to do so; when one order declines to advance, can it then condemn the others to inaction? No! The Assembly, then, has nothing else left but for a last time to request the attendance of the privileged orders in the hall of the States-General, to assist at, contribute to, and submit to the verification of powers in common; and then, in case of refusal, to take no notice of them.'

"Mirabeau then said we must take the nobility and clergy in default.

"A second sitting took place the same day from five to eight o'clock; the motion of the Abbé Siéyes was adopted, and it was at the same time decided to read an address to the king to explain the motives of the commons' resolution.

"On Friday, June 11th, it was necessary to resign to the two other orders what had been resolved, and to draw up the address to the king. M. Malouet proposed a draught of an address, written in a properly and vigorous style, but filled with compliments. Volney, who is said to have travelled over Egypt and the Holy Island, answered him—'Let us distrust all praises dictated by flattery and baseness, and engendered by interest. We are here in the abode of plots and intrigues; the air we breathe carries corruption to our hearts! Some representatives of the

nation appear, alas! to be already seriously infected by it.' He continued in this strain, and Malouet said nothing in reply.

"Finally, after a great struggle, it was decided that the address to the king drawn up by M. Barnave, containing an account of all that had taken place since the opening of the States-General and the resolutions of the Third Estate, should be presented by a deputation. Our deputation returned without having seen the king, who was hunting, when another deputation from the nobles came to tell us that their order was deliberating on our propositions. M. Bailly, deputy for Paris, replied—

"Gentlemen, the commons have waited a long time for you gentlemen of the nobility.'

"And without allowing any delay to be occasioned by this fresh ceremony, which, like all the others, had but the object in view of putting us off from day to day and from week to week, we began to call over the balliwicks, after having appointed M. Bailly provisional president, and having desired him to name two members as secretaries to draw up a report of the call of the house which they were about to make, and of the other proceedings of the assembly.

"The call began at seven and finished at ten. Thus we were constituted, not as a States-General as the others wished, but as a States-General. The two privileged orders were only private assemblies: we were the assembly of the nation.

"We had lost five weeks through the ill-will of the nobles, and you will now see what they still did to impede our proceedings.

"I will not tell about questions of words which were debated, and which occupied three entire sittings, to settle whether we would entitle ourselves representatives of the French people, according to Mirabeau; the lawful assembly of the representatives of the majority of the nation, acting in the absence of the minority, as Monnier suggested; or acknowledged and verified representatives of the French nation, as Siéyes required. I should have quietly adopted the old name of States-General. The nobles might refuse to appear—that regarded them alone. We were none the less the representatives of ninety-six hundredths of France.

"At length, according to a draft suggestion of Siéyes, the title of 'National Assembly' was adopted.

"One very good result of our declaration was that every day some good curés left the assembly of the bishops, and came and verified their powers before us. On the 13th, three came from Poitou, the 14th, six more, the 15th, two, the 16th six, and so on. Imagine our joy, our enthusiastic shouts, our embracings! Our president took up half the sittings in paying compliments to these good curés with tears in his eyes. Among the first was the Abbé Gregoire, of Embermenil, to whom I have sold more than one of my little books. On seeing him arrive I ran to meet him, and while embracing him I whispered in his ear—

"Well and good! You follow Christ's example, who frequented neither princes nor high priests, but the people.'

"He laughed. I fancied I saw the bishops' looks in the hall close by. What a break up; After all, is not the heart of the people the same under the priest's cassock as the peasant's frock?

"Or the 17th, in the presence of four or five thousand spectators, the Assembly declared itself constituted, and each of the members took this oath: 'We swear and promise to fulfil the duties committed to us with zeal and fidelity.' Bailly was confirmed president of the National Assembly, and it was unanimously decreed—'The Assembly declares that it consents provisionally for the nation to the levying of existing taxes—through illegally established and levied—until the day only of the separation of the Assembly, from whatsoever cause it may happen.'

"Think of that, Maitre Jean, and make the notables of our country fully understand it. Our distress for so many years has arisen from the fact that we were dull and timid enough to pay taxes which had not been voted by our representatives. Money is the sinew of war, and we have always given our money to those who put the rope round our necks. Now, he who would pay taxes after the dissolution of the National Assembly would be a most miserable wretch; he would betray father, mother, wife, children, and himself and his country, and those who would levy them could not be regarded as Frenchmen but as banditti. This is the first principle laid down by the National Assembly of 1789.

"The sitting was broken up at five, and postponed to the same evening of June 17th.

"You may conceive how the king, the queen, the princes, the court, and the bishops opened their eyes when they heard this proclamation of the Third Estate. During the sitting M. Bailly had been requested to attend the chancery there to receive a letter from his absence; the Assembly refused to consent to his being; at the evening's sitting M. Bailly read us the letter from the king, who did not approve of the expression 'privileged orders' which several deputies of the Third Estate had used in designating the nobility and clergy. The words did