

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

By MM. ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN,

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

PART THE SECOND.

THE COUNTRY IN DANGER.

1792.

IVI.

I fancy I see him now, leaning over the platform, describing in what confusion all these nobles, great seigneurs and great ladies, were; and the quantity of servants who had followed them, to comb their hair, and wash, dress, and undress them, as if they were children; but who could no longer live at their expense, for they had not a sou.

Nothing was ever heard like it. Gossard, imitated their grimaces among these poor Germans, who could not understand a word they said. He imitated an old marchioness in her furbelow, long cane, and knick-knacks, in an hotel at Worms. This old woman had some money left, so she ordered them about right and left; the chambermaids looked at her, and kept saying—

"Wass? wass?"

"Wass! wass!" cried the old woman, "I only told you to warm my bed, you fools!"

All our club burst out laughing.

And then he imitated the old seigneurs, who danced about to give themselves a dissipated and careless air, as if they were at Versailles; young ladies who were looking after their husbands; the astonishment of those who rushed to the post-office expecting to receive bills on Amsterdam or Frankfurt, and who found letters with nothing in them, in which their intendants informed them that monsieur's chateau, woods, and lands were sequestered by the nation.

Gossard opened his eyes wide and let his face fall; we could see these people who had lived so long at the expense of other people tormented for six weeks by the waiters for money. And then, at the Hôtel du Rhin, he described to us the terrible General Bender—who was to bring us to all reason—relating his last Belgian campaign, where he had hanged and shot the patriots so that the country was now in a perfect state of tranquillity. But the best part of it was the despair of the elector when he learned that the émigrés had quartered our princes in his palace without asking his permission, as if they were his masters. Maître Jean held his sides with laughing, and Chauvel said he had never been more amused.

Joseph Gossard gave the same entertainment at all the clubs on his road; he was received with shouts of applause everywhere; that man might have made money by giving representations of his journey to Coblenz; people would have willingly paid to see it, but he did it all out of patriotism, and was satisfied to amuse them and sell his wine.

I tell you this story to show you the sort of people who lived on the labour of the French nation before '89; and what puts their want of good sense in a stronger light is the answer which Monsieur, afterwards Louis XVIII., gave to the National Legislative Assembly, which invited him to return to France if he wished to retain his possible right to the regency.

Here is his answer:—

"Members of the French Assembly styling itself National. Sound reason, in virtue of Heading 1st, Chapter 1st, Article 1st, of the impréscriptible laws of common sense, directs you to return to your senses again within the delay of two months, dating from this day, failing which and at the expiration of the said delay, you will be considered to have relinquished your right to the qualification of reasonable beings, and you will only be considered as lunatics worthy of a madhouse."

This is the answer given by a royal prince to the nation which offered him the regency in case of his brother's death. It was well worth the trouble of crushing a great people with such a terrible weight of taxation and leave it the burden of millions of debts, to bring up creatures of such limited understanding. The poorest village had would have profited more by the money expended on his education. All these émigrés together would not have been a mouthful to the nation; but the sovereigns of Europe, frightened at the awakening of a sensible people, which might set an example of courage to others, still threatened us. One talked of nothing but war, and the dispute began at the Jacobins, between Brissot and Robespierre. Brissot was for immediate war with the émigrés, the King of Prussia, and the Emperor of Austria. Robespierre said our real danger was at home, and that we ought first to fight the traitors who were waiting to betray their country in order to recover their privileges. This was the ground of his speech, which Chauvel sold by thousands; citizens, soldiers, and peasants, every one wanted it; his shop was constantly full; Margaret had hardly time to sell them.

This struggle became fiercer; the club was divided; Danton, Desmoulins, Carra, Billaud de Varennes, sided with Robespierre; they said the king, the queen, the court, and the émigrés wanted a war to recover themselves; that they were driving us into it; that it was the last resource of vanquished despotism; that we out to be on our guard, and not risk losing what we had won. Brissot persisted; he belonged to the Legislative Assembly, which at that time, was

divided between the Girondins and the Montagnards. The Montagnards wanted to finish everything at home first, the Girondins wanted to begin abroad.

Louis XVI. inclined to the Girondins; he had nothing to lose by them. If we conquered, victory would put into his hands a great force to stop the progress of the revolution. Armies always side with a king who wins battles and has promotion to bestow. If we were beaten, the King of Prussia and the Emperor of Austria would establish everything with us as it had been before the States-General. That was what Queen Marie-Antoinette desired. She hoped to owe her throne to our enemies.

The Girondins, therefore, Brissot, Vergniaud, Gaudet, Gensonné, &c., were in the interest of the court, and the Jacobins, Robespierre, Danton, Couthon, Billaud de Varennes, Desmoulins, Merlin (de Thionville) were on the national side. That is all I can tell you about it.

The nearer war approached the more terrible was the agitation; the greater the distrust felt for the king, the queen, their ministers, and their generals. We saw plainly their interest was not ours, and what ruined the Girondins in the minds of the people was the fact that at last Louis XVI. chose his ministers from among them. But these things are all well known, and I will only speak of our own province, and what I have seen myself.

The expectation of invasion from January 1st, 1792, until March increased daily. Phalsbourg was armed, cannon were mounted on the ramparts; they made embrasures in the turf, and with fascines along the slopes. The war minister, Narbonne, inspected the frontier fortresses to see them put in a state of defence. At last every sensible man saw that danger was at hand. In the meantime the boldness of our enemies at home increased. A Strasbourg deputy loudly complained to the Jacobins that the directory of the upper Rhine had taken no steps to put an end to the outrages. More than fifty patriot priests had been murdered, and citizens who complained were arrested by the very men whose duty it was to protect them. The mayor Dietrich was accused all over Lower Alsace of neglecting his duties. Assignats in consequence of these disturbances went down seventy per cent., which was just what the aristocrats wanted. Judge of the despair of the people and the fury which seized them in consequence.

While patriots were murdered on all the roads foreign spies went about the country spreading false news and circulating forged assignats, which were produced by émigrés at Frankfurt. No strangers were trusted, no news communicated. Even at the club they were careful, and those who wished to join it had to be first proposed. Work still went on at the forge. Maître Jean was always in hopes of beginning to cultivate Picheholtz again; he had only two months to wait, for some seeds are not put in with us till March; but when he thought the war might break out about that time, and the émigrés and their friends the Prussians and Austrians come and burn the barn he had just put to his farmhouse, devastate his fields, and perhaps hang him to some tree in the orchard, this idea so excited his indignation that every evening he could not sufficiently curse the aristocrats, and would cry that instead of waiting their arrival, it would be far better to march to the Rhine, disperse their assemblages of troops, and burn the farmhouses, barns, and crops in the electorate than to see the wretches burn ours, steal our grain, drink our wine, and enjoy themselves at our expense. He sided with the Girondins, and insisted that volunteer patriots would not be wanting for such a service, and declared that in case of necessity he would put himself at the head of his company, descend the valley of the Sarre, and drive all before him who offered any resistance.

Alsatian and Lorraine peasants who happened to be passing the Three Pigeons listened to him with great satisfaction; they made a noise, called for wine, and sang "Ca ira!" in chorus. So the state of things became every day more aggravated.

In February we had rain. Many said the seed would rot in the ground, and we should have a bad year. Reports of famine began to circulate, and there was a scarcity of everything. In the south the dread of famine threw every one into despair, and led the way to those fearful excesses which we have since seen.

In the club the watchword was "No war!" Chauvel was against it; he insisted it would be a very great misfortune, and that we should allow good ideas time to take root, and above all profit by the time which we had at our command to pull up the weeds which were choking the grain. He unceasingly advocated concord and union, of which the enemies of the human race were doing their best to deprive us by keeping us at variance as much as possible, and holding all together themselves to be able to give a good account of us.

"Our only chance," he used to say, "our only chance, do not forget it. If the patriots, workmen, citizens, and peasants unite, there is nothing to fear; divided, they are lost; ancient privileges will reappear; these will again under go all the miseries attendant on existence; those all the enjoyments."

He told us great truths, and, as has been seen since, we profited by them. The patriots remained united, and they have done great things, not only for France but for other countries.

Lafayette was no longer mentioned, nor Bailly, Duport, nor the brothers Lameth, who used to be called the "Feuillants," and were supposed to have sold themselves to the court. After the king accepted the constitution, Lafayette had resigned the command of the National Guard; he afterwards wished to become Mayor of Paris, but the electors having chosen Petion, he had left for Auvergne. The *Courrier* the *Orateur du Peuple*, the *Débats des Jacobins* and other gazettes which Chauvel received, troubled themselves no more about him. When the National Assembly having summoned the electors of Treves and Mayence to disperse the émigrés, these electors refused to do so, and required the reinstatement of those German princes who held possessions in Alsace. The Emperor Leopold declared he would march to the assistance of the electors if they were attacked. The king replied, if these bodies of émigrés were not dispersed by the 15th of January, he would have recourse to arms, and the Assembly decreed an accusation of conspiracy against the king's brothers, the Prince de Condé and Mirabeau the younger. Three armies were organised, each of fifty thousand men, under the command of Luckner, Lafayette, and Rochambeau; from Dunkirk to Philippeville, from Philippeville to Lauterbourg, and from Lauterbourg to Basle.

Every one expected war to break out, but it was delayed until March, and during that time the fury of the royalists burst out against the Jacobin Club; their gazettes called it a brigands' cave, and those of the Feuillants, written by Bar-nave, André Chenier, and some others, repeated the same abuse. But the Jacobins made them no answer; they were no longer worth the trouble. The real struggle lay between the Montagnards and the Girondins. It was in February, 1792, that it began, and we knew it could not only end by the death of one party or the other.

Since the creation of the world, perhaps, never have such orations on war been read; every man of feeling was obliged to take part in this struggle; his own rights, his blood, his life, his family, and his country were at stake. But every one can now read them and judge if I have exaggerated the genius of these men.

Our excitement had become so great, the Parisians and the provinces were so determined to get rid of all those who stood in their way and who annoyed and threatened them; they were so determined to preserve their property and their rights, and had such a detestation of all who either by fraud or force should try to rob them of what they had won, that they would have fallen on them all in a body like wolves, when Leopold, Emperor of Austria, who had just sent forty thousand men into the Low Countries, and twenty thousand on the Rhine, died in consequence of his excesses. He had taken stimulants to such a degree that they killed him. Then some good people thought his son Francis, King of Bohemia and Hungary, in the interim of being crowned Emperor of Germany, would be more reasonable, and he would withdraw his troops from our frontiers, since our disputes could not affect him. But, on the contrary, this young prince was hardly seated on the throne, than he summoned the National Assembly not only to restore their lordships in Alsace to the German princes, but to re-establish the three orders in France, and give their property back to the clergy.

This was too much. He thought he was talking to servants, and needed only to talk loudly to be obeyed. No patriot remained calm, our blood boiled, and on the 23rd of April, notwithstanding Chauvel's opposition, who declared that war was to the advantage of kings but not of the people, every one wanted to fight. Maître Jean was to move at the club a declaration of war against Austria by the National Assembly; he wanted to oppose Chauvel himself, and reproach him for not being sufficiently alive to the national honour, the first of all possessions.

Sometimes anger inclined me to Maître Jean's views, sometimes good sense to those of Chauvel.

All Monday it rained; sadness and indignation rendered us dull; every moment we ceased working to curse the wretches who were exposing us to these insults. At last, when supper was over, about half-past seven, we set off, Maître Jean and his great red umbrella, Letumier in his overcoat, and the rest of the patriots behind in a string.

When we arrived at Phalsbourg we saw that that the excitement was at its height; people were running from one house to another; they were to be seen talking in groups at the dark corners of streets; we thought it was in consequence of the motions which were to be made at the club; but once on the place we saw something else. Chauvel's shop was wide open, and so full of people that there was quite a swarm in the street, and in the shop in the midst of all these people leaning over one another was Margaret, standing on a chair with a gazette in her hand.

As long as I live I shall never forget Margaret as I saw her that evening, her small brown head

under the lamp near the ceiling, her bright eyes and animated face, reading the paper with enthusiasm.

She had just finished a sentence as the Baraquins rushed in out of the mud, and as they tried to elbow their way through the crowd, it naturally caused a disturbance; she turned round, and cried out clearly and distinctly—

"Listen! This is the decree of the National Assembly; it is France who speaks!"

Then she recommenced reading—

"Decree of the National Legislative Assembly—The National Assembly, in deliberation on the formal proposition of the king; considering that the court of Vienna, in contempt of treaties, has never ceased to grant its avowed protection to Frenchmen in rebellion; that it has formed a league with several princes of Europe against the independence and security of the French nation; that Francis I., King of Hungary and Bohemia, after its notes of the 18th of March and 7th of April last, has refused to give up this league; that, notwithstanding the proposal which was made to it by the note of March 11, 1792, for both parties to put their troops on a peace footing, on the frontiers, it has continued and increased its hostile preparations; that it has made a formal attack on the sovereignty of the French nation by declaring its intention of supporting the pretensions of German princes holding possessions in France, to whom the French nation has repeatedly offered an indemnity; that it has endeavoured to divide French citizens, and to arm them against their brethren, by offering the malcontents the support of the powers leagued against us; that the refusal to reply to the last despatches of the French king leaves him no hope of obtaining redress for these several complaints by peaceable negotiations, and is equivalent to a declaration of war:

"Declares it a case of urgency."

At that moment I was suddenly seized with enthusiasm, and waving my hat in the air I cried—

"Vive la nation!"

All the others behind me repeated it.

Margaret looked at me quite pleased, and then said, as she raised her hand—

"Listen! it is not all."

Silence was established, and she went on—

"The National Assembly declares that the French nation, faithful to the principles sanctified by the constitution, to undertake no war of conquest, nor ever to employ its strength against any nation's liberties, only takes up arms in defence of its own liberty and independence; that the war it is called upon to wage is not a war of nation against nation, but the just defence of a free people against the attack of a king; that the French will never confound their friends with their real enemies; that they will neglect nothing to soften the calamities of war, to protect and spare property, and cause all the unavoidable evils of war to fall only on those who have banded themselves together against liberty; that it adopts at once all foreigners who, forsaking the cause of its enemies, should come to serve under its colours, and devote their energies to the defence of liberty; that it will second with all its power their settlement in France:

"Deliberating on the formal proposition of the king, and having decreed it a case of urgency, it declares war against the King of Hungary and Bohemia."

Hundreds of cries of "Vive la nation!" were raised on all sides; they reached the barracks, and the soldiers of the Poitou regiment, which had replaced the Auvergne, showed themselves at the windows waving their hats. The sentinels hoisted theirs on the points of their bayonets; people stopped one another in the street and shook hands, saying—

"It is done—war is declared."

We were all feverish with excitement, notwithstanding a fine rain which covered everything like a mist.

Margaret had left her chair; I went up to her through the crowd; she put out her hand, and said to me—

"Well, Michel, we are going to fight!"

"Yes, Margaret! I was of your father's opinion; but since we are attacked we will fight for our rights or die."

I still pressed her hand, and looked at her with admiration; she seemed handsomer than ever; her cheeks were red, and her great black eyes full of courage, when Chauvel, bareheaded and his hair flattened down on his head by the rain, came in from the street with five or six of our best patriots, whom he had gone to inform of the news.

"Ah, there you are," said he, when he saw us in the shop; "the rain has not kept you at home—right—I am glad of it; we shall be all together."

"Ha!" cried Maître Jean, "so we are to have war, in spite of you, this time."

"Yes," said he, sharply; "I did not want it, but we will do our best since the others have so willed it. Come!"

And we went to the club opposite. A great din filled the old building; every corner was full of people. Chauvel got on the platform, and without sitting down began speaking in a distinct and impressive tone; he told us he