

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

XIII.

I made these reflections as I went back to the inn. As I entered the large room Maitre Jean had just arrived; he was hanging up his great coat in the wardrobe, and called to Nicole to bring him his knitted jacket and cotton night-cap.

"What a good thing to find oneself in one's old coat and sabots! Ha! Michel, here we are again. The hammers will have to dance again. You must be all behindhand?"

"Not very Maitre Jean; we have got on well with our work. The wedges which came from the Dagsberg were all sent away yesterday evening."

"So much the better."

Dame Catherine now came in quite pleased, and asked—

"Is it all done, Jean, quite done? You will not have to go down there again?"

"No, Catherine, thank God! At the end of it I had had enough of these distinctions. Now our affair is granted; the memorial leaves the day after to-morrow. But it has not been without trouble, and had we not had Chauvel, I do not know where we should be now. What a man he is! he knows everything, he talks on every subject; it is an honour to the Baraques to have sent such a man. All the members of the other balliwicks have chosen him to carry our complaints and our grievances to Nancy, to support them against whoever should attack them. As long as the Baraques last, never again will they do themselves so much credit as now. Now Chauvel is known everywhere, and that we have sent him, that he resides at Bois-de-Chênes, and that the people in those parts had the good sense to acknowledge his ability in spite of his religion."

Maitre Jean told us all this while putting no his old frock and his sabots.

"Yes," said he, panting, "out of hundreds of deputies to the balliwick, the Third Estate has chosen fifteen to take charge of the memorial, and Chauvel is the fourth; therefore, now we have a *fete*, do you see, a gala for the friends of the Baraques, in honour of our deputy, Chauvel; it is all arranged—Letumier and Cochart have been told; I saw them at the Golden Apple in town, and I have invited them and told them to invite others. The old bottles under the fagots must come to light this time, the kitchen must blaze. Nicole must this evening fetch six pounds of good beef, three pounds of outlets, and two fine legs of mutton, from Kountz, under the market. She must say it is for Maitre Jean Leroux, of the Three Pigeons. The legs of mutton must be dressed with garlic. We must have sausages or cabbages, and we must hand down our largest ham, and a good salad, some cheese and nuts; every one must be pleased. I want the whole country round to know that the Baraques have the honour of sending the fourth deputy of the balliwick to Nancy—a man unknown to others but whom we know, whom we have chosen, and who of himself alone has done more to support the rights of the people than fifty others. But we will talk about that by-and-by. Chauvel shut the mouth of the oldest lawyers, of the sharpest advocates, and the most cunning rich ones of the province."

Maitre Jean had certainly had a glass or two on his road, for he talked by himself, stretching out his great hands, and blowing out his red cheeks, as he always used to do after a good dinner. We listened in astonishment and admiration.

Nicole laid the cloth for supper; that caused a silence; each was thinking over what he had just heard.

As I was leaving, Maitre Jean said—

"You must tell your father that he is invited by his old comrade, Jean Leroux—for we were old comrades; we drew for the militia together, in '57—do you hear Michel?"

He held me by the hand, and I replied—

"Yes, Maitre Jean, you pay us a great compliment."

"When one invites good and honest people like you, one does honour and gives pleasure to oneself—and now good night."

Then I went home. Maitre Jean, my god-father, had never before said such kind things about my father to me, and I loved him, if possible, better than I ever had done.

XIV.

When I went home I told my parents that my father and myself were invited to dine with Maitre Jean and the Baraques notables the following day. They understood what an honour it was for us, and my father was much affected by it. He talked for a length of time about his drawing for the militia in the year '57, when Jean Leroux and he walked about the town arm in arm with ribbons in their hats; and again at my christening, when his old comrade undertook to be godfather; he recalled the smallest details in these recollections, and exclaimed—

"Ah, the good times, the good times!"

My mother was satisfied too, but as she was angry with me, instead of showing her contentment, she went on spinning and said nothing. Nevertheless, next morning our white shirts and gala clothes were ready on the table; she had washed and dried everything and got everything ready in good time, and as at mid-day my father and I walked down the street arm-in-arm, she watched us from the door, and cried out to her neighbours—

"They are going to the great dinner of the notables, at Jean Leroux's."

My poor father, leaning on my arm, said with a smile—

"We are as fine as the day of the Elections. Since then no harm has happened to us; let us hope it may continue so, Michel. We should pay attention to what we say; one always says too much at a great dinner; we had better take care; don't you think so?"

"Yes, father; be easy; I shall say nothing."

He trembled still, just like a poor hare hunted for years from bush to bush; and how many others were at that time like him? Nearly all the old peasants who had been brought up at the feet of the seigneurs and nobles, and who knew but too well there was no justice for them.

In undertaking a thing, young men should begin in company with resolute men like Chauvel, who neither change nor give way. If the peasants had to make the revolution of '89 by themselves, and if the citizens had not begun it, we should still be in '88. How can they help it? Suffering at last destroys courage, confidence comes from success, and then again they had no instruction whatever. But this day we had to see what good wine could do. We were more than a hundred paces from the inn when we heard the shouts of laughter and the jokes of the notables who had got there before us. The tall Letumier, Cochart, Claude Hure, the wheelwright, Gauthier Courtois, the old gunner, and Maitre Jean were standing talking at the corner of the great table, covered with its white cloth, and when we went in were quite dazzled by the decanters, bottles, old painted earthenware plates, the forks and spoons newly tinned, and which glittered from one end of the room to the other.

"Ha! here is my old comrade, Jean-Pierre," cried Maitre Jean as he came to meet us.

He had on his blacksmith's jacket with hussar buttons, his wig curled and tied in a great bow at the back of his head, his shirt open, the stomach well rounded in his wide breeches, woollen stockings, and shoes with silver buckles. His great cheeks shook with satisfaction, and as he laid his hands on my father's shoulders, he said—

"Ah, my poor Jean-Pierre, how glad I am to see you!" cried he; "how everything comes back to me when I see you!"

"Yes," said my father, with tears in his eyes; "the good time of the militia, eh, Jean? I sometimes think of it; we shall see it no more."

But Letumier, his hat over his ear, and his large cinnamon-coloured coat hanging over his lean thighs, his red waistcoat and steel buttons, which tinkled like cymbals, began to shout—

"It is come back already, Jean-Pierre! We all of us won at the militia-drawing the day before yesterday. The country has won! hurrah!"

He raised his hat towards the ceiling, and the others laughed to see the row of bottles. Their hearts felt light. Each one in the circle turned aside from time to time as if to blow his nose, and counted the bottles out of a corner of his eye.

At the end of the room the kitchen door was open; we could see the great fire on the hearth and two legs of mutton turning gently on the spit, the fat falling sputtering into the dripping-pan; Dame Catherine, in a great white cap, her sleeves tucked up, coming and going, a dish or perhaps a tart in her apron; and Nicole, with a large fork, turning the meat in the saucepans, or shaking the salad-basket in the corner. The good smell came in strong; one would never have thought that Maitre Jean would have treated simple notables in such style, but this careful and laborious man disregarded expense on great occasions, and what greater occasion could he find to gain the goodwill of the country round than to entertain well those who had named him and his friend Chauvel to the balliwick? All good citizens of my time have done the same; it is the best way to preserve their class; they had the good sense to put themselves at the head of the people; and when their sons, through avarice and folly, sought to separate from them, to become, as it were, sham nobles, they worked for others who were sharper than they. This is our history in few words.

The old people assembled near the window had again begun to discuss the business of the balliwick, and every time a notable came in there was a cry of—

"Ha, Pletobé! ha, Rigaud! this way, this way; how goes it?"

Valentine, in the background, looked at me and laughed. But his enthusiasm for the king, the queen, and the authorities on high was no

bar to his love for good wine, sausages and ham—in fact the idea of such a *fete* seemed especially pleasing to him, and he occasionally turned his long nose very complacently in the direction of the kitchen.

At last, just on the stroke of twelve, Nicole came to tell me to call Chauvel, and I was going out to do so, when he quietly walked in with Margaret. All the others cried out—

"Here he is, here he is!"

He shook hands, smiling, with them all; but he was no more the same man, and the prévôt's lieutenant had no longer the power to take him by the collar; he was among the chosen fifteen for Nancy, and one could easily see it in his looks; his small eyes were brighter than ever; and his shirt-collar, white as snow, stuck up under his ears.

When Letumier, who was fond of ceremony, was preparing to make him a speech, he laughed and said—

"Maitre Letumier, the soup smells good."

And so it did. Dame Catherine entered with the great soup-tureen, which she placed with dignity on the table.

Maitre Jean called out—

"Sit down, my friends, sit down; Letumier, you shall make your speech at dessert; a hungry stomach has no ears; here, Cochart! Chauvel, there at the head of the table; Valentine! Hure! Jean-Pierre!"

At last he got us all into our places, and we began to think about enjoying ourselves. My father, Valentine, and I were opposite Maitre Jean, who helped. He took the cover off the big tureen, the savory smell of mutton-soup rose to the ceiling like a cloud, and the plates were passed round.

I had never seen such a grand dinner; I was lost in admiration, and so was my father.

Each man has a bottle by him; let him help himself to a glass.

Of course after their soup they drew the corks and filled their glasses; some wanted to drink the health of the deputies, but this was the small Alsatian wine, and Maitre Jean said—

"Wait! you must drink our healths in good wine, and not in the ordinary sort."

They thought he was right, and the bouilli with parsley sauce having been put on table, each one had his slice.

Letumier said that every man who worked in the fields ought to have half a pound of such meat and a quart of wine at every meal; the woodcutter Cochart thought he was quite right; and they began talking politics till the arrival of the fried sausages and choucroute, which changed the current of ideas of many.

Margaret and Nicole hurried round the table, replacing the empty bottles by full ones; Dame Catherine brought in the dishes, and about one, when the legs of mutton were put on table, accompanied by old Ribeauville wine, our satisfaction was at its height; Cochart said, as we looked at one another with a self-satisfied air—

"We are men! we have the rights of men! If any one chooses to assert the contrary let him meet me in the wood and I will give him his answer."

And the old gunner, Gauthier Courtois, cried—

"If we are not men, it is because the others always have good wine and good food for themselves; before a battle they could condescend to flatter us and promise us whatever we wished for. But after, they talked of discipline and beat us with the flat side of their swords as much as before. I say it is disgraceful to beat soldiers, and not to allow those who show courage to become officers, because they are not noble."

Letumier saw everything favourably.

"Distress is at an end," said he; "our memorials are drawn up! they will see what we want; and our good king will be compelled to say, 'These people are right, quite right; they want equal taxation and equality before the law, and it is only just.' Are we not all Frenchmen? ought we not to have the same rights when we support the same weight of taxation? That is only common sense."

He spoke very well, opening his large mouth as far as his ears, half-closing his eyes, throwing his head back, and throwing his arms about, like those who have facility in speaking; every one listened to him; and my father, after nodding two or three times, whispered to me—

"He speaks well; it is quite true, but don't say anything, Michel; it is too dangerous."

He looked every minute in the direction of the door, as if he expected to see the sergeants of police walk in.

Then Maitre Jean, having filled all the glasses with old wine, called out—

"My friends, here is the health of Chauvel, he who supported us better than any one at the balliwick; may he live long to defend the rights of the Third Estate, and may he always speak as well as he has spoken; that is my wish—to his health!"

Every one leaned over the table and drank with pleasure, laughed, and cried—

"To the health of our deputies, Maitre Jean and Chauvel!"

The windows of the large room shook again; people in the street stopped, and pressed their noses against the panes of glass, thinking—

"Those fellows trying out in there are well off."

The notables having taken their seats, glasses were filled again, while Catherine and Nicole brought great tarts and cream, and Margaret removed the remains of the legs of mutton, hams, and salad. All eyes were directed to Chauvel to see if he was going to return thanks; he sat quietly at the top of the table, his cotton cap on the back of his chair, his cheeks pale, and his lips closed, looking as if hesitating, and held his glass in his hands, deep in thought; without doubt the Ribeauville wine had roused him somewhat, for instead of returning thanks and drinking the healths of the others, he said, in a distinct tone of voice—

"Yes! the first step has been taken; but we must not yet sing the song of victory; there is still much to be done before we can have our rights again. The abolition of privileges, poll-tax, subsidies, salt-tax, tolls, and *corvées* is a great deal to demand; the others will not yield easily what they hold. No! they will fight, they will defend themselves against justice, and we must make them submit. They will call to their assistance all those in office, and who live by their situations, who seek to enoble themselves; and, my friends, that is only the first move; it is but a very small thing; I take it for granted that the Third Estate shall win this first battle; the people wills it; the people which has to support these unjust burdens will sustain its deputies."

"Yes! yes! till death!" cried Letumier, Cochart, Hure, and Maitre Jean, clenching their fists; "we shall win—we are determined to win!"

Chauvel did not stir; when they had done crying out, he went on as if no one had spoken—

"We may carry the day, through all the acts of injustice which the people resent, and which are too glaring, too conspicuous; but how shall we be the better for that, if, by-and-by, the States-General dissolved, and the money voted for the debt, the nobles should again acquire their rights and privileges? It would not be the first time, for we have had States-General before, and all that they had settled in the people's favour has long ceased to exist; what we must do, after having abolished privileges, is to put it out of all power to re-establish them; this power is in the people—in our armies; this must be our bill, not for a day, a month, a year, but always; you must hinder rogues and cheats from quietly, gently, and indirectly re-establishing what the Third Estate, backed up by the people, has overthrown! The army must be ours; and for the army to be ours, the lowest soldier must have it in his power, if endowed with courage and conduct, to rise from step till he arrives at the rank of constable or marshal, as well as the nobles. Do you understand me?"

"Chauvel's health," cried Gauthier Courtois.

But he waved his hand to stop the others from replying, and continued—"Then the soldiers will no longer be stupid enough to support the nobility against the people; they will be with us and will remain with us; and then, listen to this it is the principal thing: that the army and the people may be deceived no longer that they may be no longer blinded to such a point as to destroy their advancement and protect those who fill the employments which they ought to have, there must be freedom of speech and freedom of writing for every one. If any one acts unjustly by you, to whom do you appeal? To your superior; your superior always decides against you; it is very plain; the employed does as he is directed; but if you could appeal to the people, if the people appointed the superior officers then they would no longer dare to be unjust; nor could do so, since you could bring your employés to reason by withdrawing your support. But instruction is necessary to the people for the understanding of these things and for this reason did instruction seem to the nobles to be so dangerous; for this reason did they preach 'happy the poor in spirit!' in the churches; for this reason have we so many laws against books and newspapers; for this reason those who seek to enlighten us are compelled to take refuge in Switzerland, Holland or England. Many have died in want; but no such men never die; they are always in the midst of the people to sustain them, but they must be read they must be understood; it is to their health I now drink!"

Then Chauvel extended his glass to us, and we all cried together—

"To the health of brave men."

Many were ignorant to whom Chauvel alluded but they called out all the same, and made such a noise, that at last Dame Catherine came to warm us that half the village was under the windows, and that one would think we were rebelling against the king. Valentine left directly, and my father looked at me to know if it was time for to escape.

"All right Catherine," said Maitre Jean; "we have said what we had to say! now there has been enough of it."

Every one was silent; they passed round baskets of nuts and apples; outside in the street we heard the plaintive tones of a hurdy-gurdy.

"Ah," said Letumier, "there's Mithusalem;" and Maitre Jean called out—

"That is right; bring him in; he comes in time."

(To be continued.)