

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE SECOND.

THE COUNTRY IN DANGER.

1792.

IV.

Instead of things becoming quieter, the Royalist citizens increased their excesses. At Brié-Comte-Robert the Hainault Hussars dragged the patriots, even the women, from bed to put them in irons and insulted them shamefully. Our fury increased; the idea of being forced to fight was the more exasperating as the year promised well. In May everything was in flower at Baraques—trees, hedges, and woods. Margaret's great pear tree rose from behind their house like a great snowball. We used to say—

"What a happy thing if there could only be quiet now! Is it not enough for the poor to suffer cold and hunger in bad seasons? Are we to be threatened with seeing Prussians and Austrians come and destroy our crops, and traitors leagued with them, when we happen to have a year which promises well?"

Nevertheless, work continued, when one fine morning we heard that the king had decamped and all the National Guards in Champagne and the Messin country were scouring the roads to catch him; that couriers were hurrying everywhere, and he who could lay his hand on him would make his fortune. We had this information from three Alsatians and their wives who were driving back from Sarrebourg. Their wives cried—"Jesus! Marie! Joseph! we are all lost!"

The men who were sitting in front in cocked hats and red waistcoats, beat their horses to get along. I cried out to them—

"What has happened?"

The one who was driving turned his head and said—

"The devil is unchained!"

He laughed; he had had too much to drink; but one of the women said—

"The king has escaped!"

A few moments later the same story was repeated by fifty people who were hurrying home with the news. Three or four who stopped at the inn said the queen and the dauphin were with the king.

Then for the first time I was enraged with that man, for till then I had believed in his oath. Simon Benerotte was astonished, for in my rage I flung my hammer against the wall, and cried—

"The coward! he has deceived us!"

But I soon grew calm, and as both men and women were disputing about it before the Three Pigeons, I called out to them that if the king went it was to rejoin our enemies at Coblenz, and that the Germans only waited for his presence to invade us; that William and Leopold did not dare to attack us before his arrival for fear of an accident at the Tuilleries, but that now there was nothing to hinder them.

If Maitre Jean had been at Baraques, he would certainly have had the rappel beaten; but he, Letumier, and the others were out in the fields. I was very unhappy then about it; but now I laugh at it, for thousands of other patriots watched the roads from Paris to Sarrebourg, which was not the road Louis XVI. was likely to take; it was a shorter road, either into Belgium or to Metz.

Under all circumstances every one agreed the king was on his road to join our enemies, and that we should be very shortly invaded. The nation was so convinced of it that the Assembly had no doubt whatever on that point, and the next day, June 25th, this decree was posted everywhere—on the church doors, town-halls, and even inside the inns, against the walls, so that all patriots might answer the rappel. Maitre Jean came himself from Picheholtz to post it up in the great room of the Three Pigeons abusing the king terribly, and calling him a hypocrite.

"21st June, 1790.

"The National Assembly decrees as follows:—

"Art. 1. The National Guard of the whole kingdom is called out.

"Art. 2. The department of the North, of the Pas de Calais, of the Jura, Upper and Lower Rhine, and all departments on the frontiers of Germany shall furnish as considerable a number of men as their position will allow.

"Art. 3. Other departments shall furnish from two to three thousand men each.

"Art. 4. Consequently, every citizen desirous of carrying arms will put his name down at his municipality.

"Art. 5. Enrolled National Guards will be formed into battalions of ten companies, each company to consist of fifty men.

"Art. 6. The companies to be commanded by a sub-lieutenant, a lieutenant, and a captain.

"Art. 7. The battalions will be commanded by two lieutenant-colonels and a colonel.

"Art. 8. The companies will appoint their own officers, and battalions their own staff.

"Art. 9. Every National Guard shall receive fifteen sous a day, the drummer shall have one day's pay and a half, the quartermaster two, the sub-lieutenant three, the lieutenant four, the captain five, the lieutenant-colonel six, the colonel seven.

"Art. 10. The instant their services are no longer required the National Guards shall receive no pay, and shall return without distinction to their former companies.

"Art. 11. Standing orders will be immediately drawn up for these troops."

I give you a copy of this decree, because it is the first model on which the levies en masse were based; it is the decree which gave birth to those great republican generals who for so many years vanquished the Generals of Frederick, Francis, Paul, William, and Alexander, not ten times or twenty times, but an extraordinary number of times, and they were most of them peasant's sons. The others were of noble blood, "the descendants of our proud conquerors," and "our republicans were the humble posterity of the conquered." How everything in this world changes!

This decree also shows what confidence the National Assembly had in the king, since it was not against our enemies that the country was called out, but against Louis XVI., who was on the road to join them. He thought he was sure to have us in his net again soon; but, God be thanked, events were contrary to his expectation. Here we may see the Supreme Being was with the people and the constitutional men, and not with the court and the nobles; here we must wonder at Providence, for in spite of all their deceit and precautions, and the treason of Bouillé, and so many other wretches who went over to the enemy when the plan miscarried, the son of a postmaster, the patriot Drouet, sufficed to upset these projects and compel the king's return to Paris. He was arrested by the municipal council at Varennes, a small village nine leagues from the frontier; and the hussars sent by Bouillé to escort his carriage were stopped by a cart full of furniture which was upset on a small bridge by Drouet and his friends.

Yes, the will of God discovers itself in these things, which I read in the gazettes of those days. Maitre Jean made me get on a table in the great room, which was so full of people one could hardly breathe; the windows were opened and the street was thronged; and I read out this news in the midst of exclamations of astonishment and "Vive la nation!" which spread all over the village.

What excited general indignation was Bouillé's insolent letter to the Assembly the moment the king was led back to Paris uninjured, in which he tried to frighten us by threatening us with invasion. Listen. I will not copy it all, but only where his treason is to be plainly seen:—

"Luxembourg, 26th June, 1791.

"The king has made an effort to burst his bonds; a blind destiny, to which empires are subjected, has decided otherwise."

So he begins. What does he mean? "A blind destiny to which empires are subjected," that must mean there is no God; that shows these nobles are no better than heathens, and treat us as slaves, because they did not believe in our Saviour's words, "You are brothers! You are equal! Love one another!" But I will not stop at that, I go on to his threats. After saying it was by his advice the king had set out for Montmédy to join his faithful Germans, declare the National Assembly dissolved and convolve another more to his liking, to re-establish the privileges of the nobility, he continues thus:—

"Believe me, all the princes in the world regard themselves as menaced by the monster you have brought into existence, and they will soon pour their forces into our unhappy country. I know our strength, hope is chimerical, and your chastisement will soon serve as a warning to posterity; those are the terms in which a man whom you once inspired with piteous feelings compelled to address you. You are answerable for the lives of the king and queen to all the kings in the universe; if one hair of their heads be injured, not one stone in Paris shall be left on another. I know the way, and I will lead the armies of the foreigners."

"This letter is but the forerunner of a manifesto from the sovereigns of Europe; they will give you notice more fully of the war you have to dread."

"Adieu, messieurs."

It was clear enough we were answerable for the lives of the king and queen to the kings of the universe, and he, Bouillé, knew our strength, he was to lead the enemy against us, into his own country, and destroy Paris from its foundations upwards!

V.

Now the preliminary meetings began for naming deputies to the Legislative Assembly; the list of "active" citizens had been posted up at the town-hall; and we passive citizens, who did not pay the value of three days' labour in direct taxes, had no right to vote, and in '89! Nevertheless, we were paying twenty times as much in indirect taxes on wine, spirits, beer, tobacco, &c.; we were the more active citizens, as far as work and expenditure were concerned, than the misers who invested all their savings in landed property. Why should there be this distinction? Maitre Jean himself said—

"That works badly! our deputies make

blunders; and many of the best patriots will end by insisting on equality in voting."

The elections took place all the same; rich people were chosen, who paid at least one hundred and fifty livres in direct taxes. Now money did everything; education, good sense, courage, and honesty had but the second place, and they could even be dispensed with altogether.

Some time after, during harvest, Chauvel wrote us word that the constitution was completed, that the king had just accepted it, and that they should return to Phalsbourg by the coach of the Rue Coq-Héron. A week after Maitre Jean and I went to meet them in the yard of the Bœuf-Rouge early in the morning; about eight the coach arrived, white with dust; I need not tell you how joyfully we embraced Chauvel and Margaret. Margaret had grown so tall! she was quite a woman, a pretty brunette with bright eyes and a lively air. She was indeed Chauvel's daughter; and when she sprang from the carriage, crying out, "Michel!" I hardly dared to take her in my great smith's hands and kiss her on both cheeks, I was so lost in admiration. Chauvel did not seem changed at all; one might have said he had been on his rounds in Alsace or Lorraine to sell his little books; he laughed, and said—

"Well, Maitre Jean, here we are again. Michel, I am pleased with you—your letters gave me great satisfaction."

How glad I was to see them again, and how happy to carry Margaret's basket, and walk by her side home to Baraques; and then in the great room of the Three Pigeons to help her to unpack the presents she had brought us from Paris—a great cap with a cockade in it for Dame Catherine; some steel needles in a pretty case for Nicole, instead of her old worn wooden needles; and some pretty red trinkets for Michel's watch. Of the latest fashion, which I take care of still in my secretaire. There they are in a box—they are old, turned yellow now, and never could have cost much; Margaret had too much judgment to bring me anything of value; she knew the smallest object from her would be of value in my eyes. Well, faded and worn as are those poor old trinkets now; it would require a strong man to deprive me of them; they are Margaret's first presents to me! She was then eighteen and I was twenty-one; we were in love—what can I say more?

VI.

It was in October, 1791, at the opening of the Legislative Assembly, that Chauvel showed what a man of business he was; in less than three weeks he had sold his house at Baraques to Letumier, who has about to marry his daughter Christine to a lad from Mittelbronn. He had hired the ground floor of old Baruch Aron, opposite the market of Phalsbourg; he had put up some shelves inside for his gazettes, books, and pamphlets; he used to receive great bales of books, which Margaret unpacked and set in order in their shop; his two travellers, Toubac and Marc Divès, went all over Alsace and Lorraine with their packs on their shoulders; everything went on flourishing; never had such a business been seen in the country.

Chauvel introduced those little tricoloured handkerchiefs on which the rights of man and the citizen were printed; all female patriots wore them. Then our opponents invented others with verses from the Apocalypse, and this inscription on the border: "If the buyers are not satisfied, their money would be returned when the nation paid off its assignats."

Chauvel sold everything; as many little books written by capucins as political catechisms; as many emigrés' newspapers as numbers of the *Ami du Peuple*, or others; and one day Maitre Jean took the liberty of telling him he was wrong; he answered him with cleverly—

"Let me alone, Maitre Jean; our princes and seigneurs, our bishops and abbés, do us a great service by printing their ideas; they enlighten the people; they do our work for us better than we do ourselves."

At the same time, in order to give the patriots the means of learning cheaply the latest news, he established a sort of reading-room next to his shop. In this Rue du Cour-Rouge, with a large table and benches in it; the table was covered with Gazettes which had come the same day, and one could go in and read as long as he liked for one sou daily.

What a good plan! It had been in existence in Paris for a long time, but it needed a clever man like Chauvel to start it in our little town.

All that did not hinder his getting our club along famously, for he had been named president instead of Raphael Manque; and three times a week, after seven, the market was full of people.

Chauvel arrived. He got up on the platform, sat down in the arm-chair, put his snuff-box and his handkerchief on his right hand; after taking a good pinch, he would cry out—

"Gentlemen the sitting has begun."

He then would open the *Moniteur* and begin to read the discussions in the Legislative Assembly, and sometimes those of the Jacobin Club, in the *Journal des Débats*. He would explain what many could not understand; and when the news had been read, he would cry—

"Well, gentlemen, that is our position at present; does any one wish to speak?"

Sometimes one, sometimes another, had something to say. They listened and answered. Not only were citizens, workmen, and municipal officers there, but even Colonel Bazelaire, sent by the National Assembly to replace Sergeant Ravette, who was not sufficiently acquainted with manoeuvres on a large scale. Every one said his say, and when ten struck, while the curfew was ringing at the town-hall, Chauvel would rise and say good-humouredly—

"Public affairs have been discussed; next Monday, Wednesday, or Saturday we meet again."

If I relate all this it is for your information; you may believe I had other ideas in my head. At that time I made my court to Margaret every Sunday, with my cocked hat, my boots cleaned with the white of eggs, and my great red trinkets hanging majestically from my fob. I was no longer that good Mische Bastien who thought he was clean if he shaved once a month. Since the arrival of Margaret I had seen it was not sufficient; many others thought her pretty, and liked to look at her large black eyes and beautiful hair, and I was not the only one who saw she was both witty and sensible. No, many others were of my opinion; not only workmen and peasants, but dandies, young officers of the Auvergne regiment, ci-devants in powdered wigs, who filled the shop with their scents, bought gazettes, laughed, and warbled to attract a smile. I saw that very soon. How I used to wash and shave! You should have seen me on Sunday morning, before my little looking-glass hanging in the garret window, shaving myself repeatedly; my cheeks shone like a new hatchet, and if I did not find myself smooth enough, I used to rub my chin with my hand; and as soon as nine had struck, and my mother was gone to hear mass, my father used to come gently upstairs and look at me from the top of the staircase, and cry—

"Michel, she is gone; shall I come and tie your tail for you?"

For it was he who arranged my tail for me; it was long and black, as thick as my arm, and during the week I was obliged to wear it inside my shirt, because it impeded my work at the forge. The excellent man used to plait it carefully for me; I see myself now sitting across a chair, and my good father combing my hair quite contented; he was proud of my back and shoulder; and used to say—

"I don't say it because I am your father, but all round the country there is not such a strong fellow as you are."

I felt it, and I should have liked to have talked to him about my love, but I dared not; I had too much respect for my father, and he knew very well I was in love with Margaret; I was sure of it. My mother, too, suspected it; she was preparing for action; and my father and I, without saying anything, were doing the same. It was likely to be a hard battle, but all the same we expected to win it. At least, in the little garret under the thatch, we dreamed about happy days. When I had finished shaving and dressing, and my good father had given me a brush down, he used to say—

"That will do; now you can go. Amuse yourself, my boy."

I used to embrace him and set off with a light heart, while he looked at me from the door with a smile on his face, and all the old women leaned out of their garret-windows covered with rime to see me go by. I would go to the Three Pigeons and dine as fast as I could, and make my escape across the little garden for fear of being detained, for when the frost first set in the carriers often wanted their horses shod, and then I must have taken off my best coat and tucked up my shirtsleeves.

In about a quarter of an hour I was in town, at the corner, by the house of the apothecary, Triboulin, who has been dead these sixty years; he would give me a nod as I passed, but I hardly looked at him; I could see Chauvel's shop at a distance, and the packets of pamphlets in the front windows. People go in and out with their newspapers—patriots, soldiers, ci-devants; and then I reach the door; Margaret, in a little white cap, active and lively, is behind the counter. She talks, and gives every one what he asks for.

"Here, sir, are the *Révolutions de Paris*—six liards. This gentleman wants the *Journal de la Cour et de la Ville*. I have just sold the last copies."

She is very busy selling; but as soon as she sees me, her faces changes, and she calls out joyfully—

"Go into the library, Michel; my father is there; I shall come soon."

I shake hands with her as I go by; she laughs, and says—

"Go on; I have no time to talk."

I go in and find Father Chauvel writing at his desk; he turns round—

"Ah, it is you, Michel; very good; sit down; I must finish these four lines."

As he writes, he asks after Maitre Jean, Dame Catherine, the forge, and all particulars. He goes on writing his four lines. At last I rise and say—

"I must go and read the news."