

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. VIII.

And then, speaking of the constitution, which had given the king the sole charge of defending the country, he cried—

"O king, who have only affected to love the laws but to preserve a power which would help you to defy them—the constitution, that it might not hurl you from a throne where it is necessary for you to remain in order to destroy it—the nation, only to insure the success of our treachery by inspiring it with confidence; do you believe you can deceive us with your hypocritical protestations? Was it to defend us that you opposed foreign soldiers with such inferior forces as to leave no doubt of their defeat? Was it in our defence that the projects of fortifying the interior of the country and of making preparations for resistance were laid aside till the time came when we might already have become a prey to tyrants? Was it in our defence that a general who violated the constitution was left unpunished, and the courage of those who served it fettered? No, no, you have not carried out the will of the constitution! It may be overthrown, but you shall not gather the fruit of your perjuries! You have not officially opposed the victories which were gained over freedom in your name; but you shall not reap the benefit of your unworthy triumph. You are as nothing now in this constitution which you have violated so dishonourably, or to the people you betrayed in a manner so cowardly!"

What a cry of indignation was heard in the club or on the place as far as Chauvel's voice could reach! It was but the truth, we all thought so already; with such a king, whose interests were contrary to those of the nation, it was destruction. Therefore, every one said, "He must be deposed; there must be an end to it; and the nation must look to its own defence."

But what shows the treason of Louis XVI. in the most odious light is the fact that the very day following, his own ministers declared to the Assembly that our treasury, our armies, and our marine were in such a ruinous condition that they resigned en masse. After which these brave fellows left the hall without even waiting for any reply, like bankrupts who, unable to render satisfactory accounts, make their escape to England or elsewhere, leaving honest people in distress. The meaning of which was—"You have trusted in us. Instead of putting France in a position to resist an invasion, we have done nothing. Now our friends the Prussians and the Austrians are ready; they are advancing. Let us see how you will extricate yourselves."

IX.

We did extricate ourselves all the same! The next day, July 11, 1792, the Assembly declared the country in danger, and all France was up. These words, "the country in danger," meant to say—

"Your fields and meadows, your houses, your father and mother, your villages, all the rights and all the liberties you have just won from the nobles and the court, are in danger. The emigrants are coming with Prussians and Austrians at their backs to rob and pillage you, massacre you, burn your homesteads and cottages, compel you to pay tithes, and gabelle, and field rent, &c., from father to son once more. Defend yourselves, hold together as one; or make up your minds to work like beasts of burden for the convent and your seigneur."

This was its meaning, and this is the reason why we marched as one man; it is the reason why our blows have been so destructive; we all were imbued with revolutionary ideas; we all were defending our property, our rights, and our freedom.

The decree was published in every commune in France. Cannon were fired every hour, the tocsin was rung in every village; and when men heard their fields were about to be invaded, you may believe the sickle was left in the furrow to grasp the musket; for the field can bear a crop next year, and for ten or for one hundred years; the harvest may be burned, or become forage for Prussian horses; but the field itself must be preserved to produce wheat, barley, oats, and potatoes, for our children and our grandchildren.

Among us, when Eloi Colin read the decree from a platform in the middle of the place, screaming out like a sparrowhawk on a rock, "Citizens, the country is in danger! citizens, to the help of the country!" the enthusiasm first showed itself among the buyers of church property who knew that if the sons of the émigrés returned, their fathers would surely be hanged. Therefore, all of them, five and six at a time, mounted the platform and were enrolled.

As for me I possessed nothing as yet, but I lived in hope; I had no intention of always working for others, and besides, I was of the same opinion as Chauvel about freedom; I would have died for it; and even now at my age my old blood boils when I think of some rascal or other making an attempt on my person or my property.

I did not wait long; I saw directly what ought to be done. As soon as the proclamation

was ended I went and enrolled myself in the volunteers. Xaintrailles headed the list, the second was Latour-Folssac, and the third Michel Bastien, of Baraques-des-Bois-des-Chênes.

I should be wrong to say that it cost me nothing. I knew my poor father was destined to wait for three years, and that Maitre Jean would be in great difficulty about his forge, but I also knew we must be defended, and that we could send no nobles in our place, that we must do it ourselves, or wheel a barrow again for ever.

As I came off the platform with my enlistment-ticket in my hat, my father held out his arms to me. We embraced on the first step of the platform amid cries of "Vive la nation!" His chin trembled, and tears ran down his cheeks; he hugged me, and said with sobs—

"Well done, my boy! Now I am satisfied—the wound caused by Nicholas is healed. I feel it no more."

He said so because he was an honest man, and nothing could grieve him more than the treason of a son against his blood and his country; now he was consoled.

Maitre Jean embraced me too, for he thought I might contribute to defend his farm at Pickelholz, and if the others came back there it would be my fault. He was right; I would have been cut to pieces before a hair of his head was touched.

I need not describe the cries, embracings, hand-shakings, and promises to conquer or die; it is always the same, and since then, by deceiving the people with false news, men filled with pride and folly have succeeded in exciting the same enthusiasm for wars in which France had no interest, and which have done her very great harm. But this time it was in earnest; the nation was rightly enthusiastic; it was fighting in defence of lands and liberty, which is better than to allow itself to be massacred for a king or an emperor.

I always feel emotion when I recollect those old men and women, feeble and decrepit, their arms hanging over the shoulders of their sons, whom they had just enrolled, poor people as we may call them, needy creatures from Dagsberg, who had nothing to defend, who lived in woodcutters' and charcoal-burners' huts, without the slightest interest in this war; but even they loved their country, and liberty, and justice! And patriotic gifts for the relations of volunteers, for the wounded, for the equipment of troops, offerings from even the poor and infirm, who begged the municipal officers to accept their two lards; children who cried because they were too young to become drummer-boys or buglers! This was all natural; every one did his best.

What I remember better still, and which strikes me up again like a boy of twenty, is that while Maitre Jean, Letumier, my father, and myself were sitting at table in Chauvel's library the shutters closed to keep out the intense heat, and from time to time the bell rang and Margaret went out to serve some customers, and then came in again without daring to look at me; and while I, notwithstanding the good wine and good cheer, was not able to laugh like the rest, nor seem quite happy to go immediately to the camp at Wissembourg, Chauvel all at once took a bottle of wine in his hand, and said as he drew the cork—

"My friends, we are going to drink this bottle to Michel's health; empty your glasses!"

He then put the bottle on the table, looked at me very seriously, and said—

"Listen, Michel; you know I have liked you for a long time; your conduct this day increases my regard for you, and shows me you are a man. You have not hesitated to do your duty as a patriot, notwithstanding all that might detain you here. You have done well! Now you are going away to defend the rights of man; if we had not other duties, you should not go alone; we would have served in the same ranks. At this moment speak out openly. Do you not leave nothing here you regret? Do you go with a heart at ease? Have you nothing to ask of us? One of those patriotic gifts which are only accorded to men whom we esteem and love?"

He looked at me, and I felt I blushed; in spite of myself my eyes wandered in the direction of Margaret, who was pale, and kept hers down. I dared not speak. There was a dead silence. Then Chauvel looked at my father—

"Well, Father Bastien, what do you say? I believe these children love one another."

"Ah, I think so too," said my father, "and have done so for some time."

"If we betroth them, Father Bastien, what have you to say to it?"

"Ah, it would make me happy for life!"

As they were talking so gaily together, Margaret and I had risen, but did not dare go nearer. Then Chauvel cried—

"Come, my children, embrace one another!"

In a moment Margaret was in my arms. She hid her face on my shoulder—she was mine. What happiness to be able to embrace the girl you love before every one, parents and friends! How proud one is to hold her thus, and what power could force her from you?

Maitre Jean laughed in his good-natured way, and Chauvel, turning round in his chair to us, said—

"I affiance you one to the other, Michel, you must march away now; but in three years, when you return, she shall be your wife. Will you not wait for him Margaret?"

"Forever!" said she.

And I felt her arms close round me. I could not help crying, and said—

"I never loved any but you. I shall never love another. I am willing to go and fight for you all, for I love you all!"

And then I sat down again. Margaret immediately left the room. Chauvel filled our glasses and cried—

"Here is my son Michel's health!"

My father replied—

"Here is the health of my daughter Margaret!"

And we all called out—

"To the health of our country and liberty!"

One hundred and sixty-three volunteers were enrolled at Phalsbourg on that day. The whole province was in a state of enthusiasm, and eager for the defence of what we possessed; there was no one at work in the fields; on the place and in the streets one could hear nothing but cries of "Vive la nation!" "Ca ira, ça ira!" Then the ringing of bells, and every hour the firing of cannon at the arsenal, which shook the windows. In the back shop we continued to fraternise; from time to time some patriot called out at the door the number of volunteers enrolled. He was called in, and had a glass of wine in honour of the country. Chauvel took great pinches of snuff, and cried out—"It is going on well; it will do!"

He also talked about great blows which were to be struck in Paris, but without saying what they were.

My brother Claude, who was a really good man with no idea of mischief, a very good labourer and who did all he was told, but without any notions of his own, was head lad at Maitre Jean's farm at Pickelholz; Maitre Jean preferred a man like him, because it was a pleasure to him to give orders to any one. He also said he should send Mathurine to the farm, for he could not hope to find anywhere a better housekeeper, or one more careful or more economical; she was, in fact, rather closefisted. Maitre Jean intended remaining to take charge of the forge till I came back, and had made all his arrangements accordingly; and my father, who could still earn eight or ten sous a day, was out of debt and had two goats, looked upon himself as fortunate, the more so when Chauvel told him he would find some employment in town for Etienne.

About five, Freyilg, the mayor's secretary, came and told us that the volunteers belonging to the town would march the next morning at eight for the camp at Wissembourg, and that they would wait for those from the villages at Graufthal, where the general rendezvous was appointed. This made us rather more serious, but our good-humour continued; we had a few more glasses, and then it began to grow dark, and it was time to return to Baraques. Chauvel closed his shop; Margaret took my arm as far as the Porte de France. It was the first time we had been seen out of doors together; people looked at us, and cried, "Vive la nation!"

Chauvel, Maitre Jean, and my father followed us; on the bridge, in front of the Corps de Garde, we embraced tenderly; Chauvel and Margaret returned home, and we went back singing and laughing, and, if truth must be told, rather too much excited by wine and the day's events. All we met were in the same state; we were often embracing, and crying, "Vive la nation!"

About nine we left Maitre Jean and Letumier before the Three Pigeons, and wished them good night; but if they could go to sleep, a very different reception awaited my poor father and myself. I tell you this that you may understand the rest of my story; besides, in this world good and evil go together; and this will show you, if the patriots won at last, it was with difficulty, for nearly all underwent a sort of domestic La Vendée. My father and I then walked down the old street full of ruts and manure-heaps. It was a fine moonlight night. We sang lustily, but more to give ourselves confidence than from pleasure; we were thinking about my mother, who would not be very pleased to hear I was going away as a volunteer, and that I was betrothed to a heretic.

But about a hundred yards from our cottage we lost all desire to sing any more, and stood still, for there was my mother in her grey linen petticoat, her large cap on her hair, which was hanging loose, and her skinny arms bare. She was sitting on the steps of our old cottage, resting her hands on her knees, and her chin upon them; she looked at us some distance off; her eyes sparkled, and we felt she knew something about what had taken place.

I never felt more uncomfortable; I wanted to go back; but my father said, "Come on, Michel."

So we walked on; when we were not farther than twenty yards distant, she ran at me and uttered a yell—God forgive me for saying so—the yell of a real savage; she buried her hands in my neck, and would have got me down if I had not seized her arms to prevent her throttling me. Then she kicked my shins, and cried out—

"Go, and kill Nicholas! Kill your own brother! Go, you Calvinist!"

And then she tried to bite me. It was heard all over the village; people began to come out of their houses; it caused a great scandal in the place.

My father took her round the waist and pulled at her with both hands to make her let me go, but then she turned upon him like a fury and called him a Jacobin; had it not been for the charcoal-burner Hanovre and four or five neighbours, she would have torn his eyes out.

At last they got her into our cottage; she struggled in their hands as if she was made of wool, and called after me contemptuously—

"What a good son, who forsakes his father and mother for a Calvinist! But you shall not have her, you renegade! No! Nicholas will cut you all to pieces. I will have masses said that he may kill you! I will! Go—go! Curse you!"

They pushed her into the house, but her screams filled the village.

My father and I stood there in the middle of the street, looking very pale. When the door was shut, he said—

"She is mad. Let us go, Michel; something might happen if we went in now. Good heavens! how unfortunate I am! What can I have done to deserve it?"

So we went back to the Three Pigeons. A lamp was still burning. Maitre Jean was seated quietly in his armchair, telling his wife and Nicole the day's events; when he saw us come in—I with my neck bleeding, and my father with his coat torn—when he heard what had occurred, he said—

"My poor Jean-Pierre, if she was not your wife we would send her to prison directly."

He said for the future my father should leave my mother alone, work in his shed, and sleep at the auberge; but things could not be arranged so; my father would live in his own cottage; habit and respectability forbade his living separated from his wife, for, let things be ever so bad, it is better to live together; if they separate they are not well thought of by respectable people, and the children suffer for it.

That night we slept at the inn, and the next morning early my father went back to our cottage to fetch my knapsack; he put everything into it; he also brought my musket and haversack, cartouch-pouch, and everything; but my mother would not see me, in spite of all the good man could urge.

So I left without seeing my mother, with her curse and wish for my death upon me. I had not deserved it, but still it gave me great pain.

Maitre Jean has since told me that my mother hated me because I was so like her mother-in-law, Ursule Bastien, whom she had detested as long as she lived, and that mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law are always at feud; it is possible. But it is very unfortunate to be detested by those you love, and for whom you have always done every thing in your power; yes, it is very unfortunate.

X.

And now, my friends, we must leave the country, old Baraques-du-Bois-des-Chênes, and all the good people with whom we are acquainted.

The next day about ten we were already in the valley of Graufthal, on the other side of the mountain, under the rocks. There it was that all the volunteers of the canton were to assemble before marching to Bitche, and then to Wissembourg, and then farther still. The first village detachments which arrived were to wait for the others.

We had set off early on account of the heat, which we already felt in the early morning. Margaret, Chauvel, Maitre Jean, my father, and the whole town, men, women, and children, had followed us to the first halting-place. We were resting by the side of a sandy road in the shade of some beeches, our muskets piled, and the wide valley before us far as we could see, its river fringed with willows, and its woods studded with rocks in the far distance.

How many times have I stopped at that point within the last fifty years, and looked and dreamed of olden times! I could see it all again, and I used to say to myself—

"Here it is we took a last embrace; here it is that poor Jacques, or that unfortunate Jean-Claude, with his musket on his shoulder, turned to shake his father's hand, and cried out, 'Till next year!'"

The men from Saint-Jean-des-Choux arrived by this path, and those from Mittelbronn by that; we could hear the rattle of their drums for some time in the wood, then they emerged from a cluster of fir-trees with their hats on the point of their bayonets, then shouts of "Vive la nation!" filled the valley.

How long that is ago! The trees, brushwood, and rocks are there still, the ivy still creeps about the rocks, but where are they who shouted, embraced, and promised to come back? Where are they? When one thinks of all one's comrades lying along the banks of the Moselle, the Meuse, the Rhine, and among the brushwood of the Argonne, we must acknowledge the Lord has watched over us.

(To be continued.)