

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

IV.

It was a very good method of teaching; and only through hearing the others answer, at the end of three months I knew nearly all my catechism.

He also made us say our lessons by question and answer; about eleven he used to go down behind the benches and lean over to see that we were learning; while we were spelling in a low tone, he would pinch one's ear gently, and say—

"That's right—you will get on!" Every time he said that to me I lost breath, and my eyes dimmed with pleasure. Once he even said to me—

"You may tell Jean Leroux that I am very well satisfied with you. Give him this message."

That day I should not have cared to call the *échevins* or the governor himself cousin; still I said nothing about it to Maitre Jean—I was afraid of the sin of pride.

By the beginning of March I could read. Unfortunately, Jean could not keep me doing nothing all the year, and with the return of spring I was again down in the pastures. But I had my catechism in my bag, and while my goats were climbing about the rocks, quietly seated on a tuft of heather, in the shade of a beech or an oak, I learned over again what the curé had taught us.

Thus, instead of forgetting what I had learned, like the Huitenhäuser, Chèvrehof, and other boys, I knew it still better at the close of autumn and M. Christopher at the beginning of winter removed me into the class of the well-to-do boys of Lutzelbourg, who went to school all the year round. I learned all there was to learn in our villages—to read, write, and do a few sums—and on the 15th of March, 1781, I received the communion for the first time. Here my studies came to an end; I knew as much as Maitre Jean; the rest would come of itself if I worked with a will.

From this time my godfather took me entirely into the forge; he put his cattle in charge of old Yéri, the town herdsman; I still looked after them in the stable, but I was learning a trade at the same time, and some months after, having gained strength, I became third hammerman.

Madame Catherine and Nicole were kind to me, for in the evening, when the forge fire had tired Maitre Jean's eyes, it was I who read the gazettes and little books of all sorts brought us by Chauvel. I read them without understanding much about them. For instance, when the paper spoke of the crown rights, of state provinces, and provinces of election, I sweated blood and water, as they say, but I could not get the sense of that into my head. I saw clearly enough that money was to be given to the king, but I could not understand in what way it was to be raised from us.

In everything relating to our country it was another thing. When the paper spoke of the gabelles, as I used to go every week to buy salt in town for the house, at six sous a pound, which would be more than twelve sous now, I fancy I heard the salt-dealer at his wicket crying out at some poor devil—

"You were not here last Tuesday. You are buying smuggled salt. I've got my eye on you—take care what you are about."

For not only were we obliged to buy our salt at the office of the gabelle, at a price much above its value, but also to take so much a head, and weekly.

When it was a question of tithes I could see the tithe-collector, with his pole and his carts, calling out in the fields, "Mind the eleventh."

For then, even when the weather was likely to be bad or stormy, we were obliged to put the sheaves in a line, and the collector came so slowly, and stuck his pitchfork into the finest before your face, to add to the help he had already.

In the middle of all recollections, what causes the saddest recollection is the state of want of my parents, always at work, and always falling short of food in winter. Etienne had grown—the poor child worked with father, but was always weak and ailing—he could hardly earn enough to feed him; Claude was herdsman at the Tiercelin convent at Lixheim, Nicolas was at work in the forest as woodcutter; he was a workman, but he was fond of tipping and fighting in the wine-shops on Sundays, and hardly gave his mother anything. My sisters, Lisbeth and little Marceline, waited on the officers and town ladies at Tivoli, but that was but once a week; on Sundays and the rest of the week they begged on the high road, for there were then no manufactories; they did not knit those fine woollen hoods, jackets, and puffs in our villages, nor did they plait those thousands of straw hats which are now sent to Paris, Germany, Italy, and America; children often reached the age of eighteen or twenty without having earned a penny.

But, worst of all, our debt went on increasing; it already exceeded nine crowns of six livres,

and M. Robin knocked at our window regularly every three months to tell father he must do such and such a *corvée*—this was our nightmare, all our other ills were small by comparison. We did not know that owing to the system of farmers-general, of tolls and taxes, we were made to pay for life's necessities ten times as much as they were worth; for a piece of bread we paid the price of a loaf, for a pound of salt the price of ten, and so on, which was our ruin.

We did not know that at a distance of twenty-five leagues, in Switzerland, with the same amount of labour, we could have lived better and put money by as well. No, poor peasants never understood indirect taxation; whatever is asked from them in coin at the close of the year, if only twenty sous, disgusts them; but if they knew what they paid for daily necessities, they would cry out in another fashion.

There is nothing of that now: the barriers are withdrawn, and the officials cut down to a quarter of their number; but in those days what robbery and what distress!

How I longed to be able to relieve my parents! how I comforted myself by thinking—

"Next year Maitre Jean will give me three livres a month, and so we shall be able to pay off our debt little by little!"

Yes, this idea gave me double strength. I dreamed of it day and night.

At last, after suffering so much, one piece of good fortune happened to us. Nicolas, in drawing for the militia, drew a white ticket. At that time, instead of being numbered, the tickets were white or black—black tickets only had to go.

What good luck! The idea of selling Nicolas immediately came into my mother's head; he was five feet six inches (French) high; he was fit for the grenadiers. That would be more than nine crowns.

All my life long I shall see the joy of our family. Mother held Nicolas by the arm, and said to him—

"Now we can sell you! Many married men are forced to serve in the militia. You can take the place of one of them."

It was only married men who were allowed substitutes, but you had to serve double the time—twelve years instead of six! Nicolas knew that as well as his mother, but he answered all the same—

"Just as you like. I am quite satisfied."

Father would have preferred keeping him; he said that by cutting wood in the forest, and doing *corvée* work in winter, he could earn money and pay his debts; but mother took him aside, and whispered to him—

"Listen, Jean-Pierre! If Nicolas stays here he will get married. I know he is looking after little Jeannette Loris. They will marry and have a family, and that will be worst of all for us."

Father then asked, with his eyes full of tears: "You want to be a substitute, Nicolas; you want to leave us?"

And Nicolas, with a bit of red ribbon in his old cocked hat, cried—

"Yes, I'll go! I ought to pay the debt."

He was a good fellow. Our mother threw both her arms round his neck, kissed him, and told him she knew he loved his parents, she knew it long ago; and that he would come back to his village in a white coat and a sky-blue collar and a feather in his hat.

"All right! all right!" replied Nicolas. He saw through our mother's plans, who was only thinking of her family, but he made believe to notice nothing; besides, he was ready for war.

Our father sat crying by the hearth with his head in his hands. He would have liked to have kept his whole family by him; but mother leaped over his shoulder, and while the rest of the family were crying at the door and disturbing the neighbours, she murmured in his ear—

"Listen! We shall have more than nine great crowns. Nicolas has six inches to spare, and they will be paid for extra; that will come to twelve louis! We can buy a cow; we shall have milk, butter, and cheese; we shall be able to fatten a pig."

He made no reply, but was sad all day.

However, next day they went to the town together, and in spite of his sorrow father said that Nicolas would be a substitute for the son of the baker Josse, that he would have to serve twelve years, and that we should get twelve louis—a louis for each year's service; that Robin should be paid first, and then we should see what to do.

He wanted to give Nicolas a louis or two; but mother said he wanted nothing, that he would be well fed once a day, that he would be well clothed; he would have stockings to his feet like all the militia, and if he had money in his pocket, he would spend it in the wine-shop and get punished.

Nicolas laughed and said—

"Well, well, so be it."

Father alone was grieved. But you must not suppose that mother was glad to see Nicolas go. No, she loved him a good deal; but great misery hardens the heart; she thought of the younger ones, of Marceline and Etienne: in those days twelve louis was a fortune.

So the affair was settled; the papers were to

be signed at the town-hall in the course of the week. Nicolas set off for the town, and of course, as he was to be the substitute of the son of the house, Father Josse, who kept the inn called the Great Stag, opposite the German gate, treated him to sausages and choucroute; nor did he refuse him a glass of good wine. Nicolas passed his time in laughing and singing with his comrades, who were substitutes for other townspeople. I worked on with more courage than ever, for at last Robin would have his money, and we should be freed from that rascal. I struck the anvil with pleasure, and Maitre Jean, Valentine, and all the household understood my satisfaction.

One morning as the sparks were flying right and left under the hammer, there suddenly appeared in the doorway a strapping fellow six feet high, a corporal in the Royal Allemand regiment, his large cocked hat stuck over his ear, the coat buttoned, a chamolins-coloured vest, yellow leather breeches, and long boots up to his knees, his sword belted round his waist; and he begins to call out—

"Good morning, cousin Jean; good morning."

He was as grand as a colonel. Maitre Jean first looked at him with surprise, and then he said—

"Oh, it's you, is it, you rascal? You are not hanged yet?"

And other began to laugh, and cried—

"Always the same, cousin Jean—always joking. Won't you pay for a bottle of Rikewir?"

"When I work it is not to wet the whistle of a fellow like you," said Maitre Jean, turning his back on him. "Go on, boys, work away."

And while we went on hammering the corporal laughed and walked off, trailing his sabre. He was really Maitre Jean's cousin—his cousin Jerome, from Quatre-Vents; but he had been in so many scrapes before he enlisted that his family no longer noticed him. This fellow had come home on leave; and why I mention him is because next day when I went to buy salt I heard some one call out at the corner of the market—

"Michel! Michel!"

I look round and I see Nicolas with this fellow before the Bear tavern at the entrance to Cœur-Rouge-lane. Nicolas takes me by the arm and says—

"You must have a drop."

"Let us go to Josse," said I.

"I have had enough choucroute," said he.

"Come."

And when I said something about money the other struck in with—

"Never mind that; I like a fellow-countryman—that's my business."

I was obliged to go in and drink.

Old Ursula brought whatever they called for—wine, brandy, cheese. But I had no time to lose, and this den full of soldiers and militia smoking, crying and singing together, did not please me either. Another Barquin, little Jean Kat, the clarionette player, was with us, and he too was drinking at the Royal Allemand's expense. Two or three old soldiers, veterans, their wigs pushed back, hats on one side, nose, eyes, and the whole face covered with red patches, were sitting at the table leaning on their elbows, and black pipes between the stumps of their teeth. They three and thou'd Nicolas, who returned it. Two or three times I saw them wink to the Royal Allemand, and when Nicolas said anything they laughed, and cried—

"Ha! ha! ha! that's it."

I could not understand it. I was surprised that the other paid for everything.

Outside, the rappel was being beaten at the infantry barracks. The Swiss soldiers of Schénau's regiment went running by; they had relieved the De Brie regiment some days since. All these Swiss wore red coats, and the French soldiers white. But the old soldiers who were paid-off veterans belonged to no regiment, so they did not leave the tavern.

The Royal Allemand asked me how old I was; he said nothing more to me.

Nicolas began to sing, but I, seeing more people continually coming in, took my bag from under the bench, and I made haste home to Baraques.

This happened the day before the papers were to be signed at the town-hall. This night Nicolas did not come home to sleep.

My father was uneasy when I told him what I had seen. My mother said—

"It's nothing; boys must have pleasure. Nicolas can no longer come back to us every day; he had better make the most of his time, and amuse himself, since others pay for it."

But my father was thoughtful; my mother and sisters had been long asleep; my mother went up the ladder, and left us alone by the hearth; my father said nothing—he was thinking; at last, very late, he said—

"Let us go to bed, Michel, and try to sleep. To-morrow morning early I will see after him. The sooner this business is over the better. I must sign, as I promised."

He went up the ladder, and I was undressing, when we heard some one come to our cottage from the garden lane. My father went down, and said—

"Here is Nicolas."

He opened the door, but instead of Nicolas it was little Jean Kat, very pale, who said—

"Listen; don't be frightened; but a misfortune has happened."

"What is it?" cried my father, trembling.

"Your Nicolas is in the town prison. He has nearly killed big Jerome, of the Royal Allemand, with a jug. I told him to take care, and do as I do; for the last three years I drink at the expense of the kidnappers; they all want to catch me, but I won't sign—I leave them to pay, but I never sign."

"Oh, my God!" said my father, "how many ills fall on us!"

I could not keep quiet; I was sitting by the hearth. My mother got up—they were all awake.

"What has he signed?" asked my father; "tell us what. He could not sign, since Josse had our promise. He could not do it."

"Well," said Jean Kat, "it was neither his fault nor mine. We had had too much. The recruiting-sergeants told him to sign; I made signs to him not to do it, but he could not see distinctly, he was too far gone. I was obliged to go out for a moment, and when I returned he had signed. The Royal Allemand had already pocketed the paper with a laugh. I took Nicolas into the kitchen, and I asked him if he had signed. 'Yes.' Then instead of twelve louis you will only get one hundred livres; you have let them cheat you!" Then he goes back in a rage, and tells the others that the paper must be torn up. The Royal Allemand laughs at him. Well, I can only tell you that your Nicolas upset everything; he had the Royal Allemand and one veteran by the cravat. Everything shook in the house. The old woman called for the guard. I was shut in between the table and the wall. I could do nothing; I could not get away. Jerome drew his sword, but Nicolas took a jug and gave him such a blow on the head with it that it was broken in pieces, and that rascal Royal Allemand was stretched at full length by the side of the stove, which was upset, bottles, jugs, and glasses rolling under one's feet. The guard came to the door, and I was just able to get away by the stable at the back into the Rue de la Synagogue. As I turned the corner I saw Nicolas in the middle of the guard near the archway. Market-street was full of people. It was not possible to get near. They said the Royal Allemand was nearly dead! But he had no right to draw his sword; Nicolas was not going to let him kill him. Jerome was to blame in it all; I will swear it if called upon—he was to blame!"

While Jean Kat told us this sad tale, we stood there crushed down, saying nothing, for we had nothing to say; but when mother lifted her hands every one burst into tears. It was my saddest remembrance; not only were we ruined, but Nicolas was in prison.

Had not the city gates been shut my father would have set off at once, but he was obliged to wait till morning in all this trouble.

Our neighbours, who were already in bed, got up one after the other when they heard our lamentations. As they came Jean Kat repeated the same story, while we sat on the edge of our old box full of leaves, resting our hands on our knees and crying. The rich do not know what misery is. No; it always falls on the poor—everything is against them. At first my mother had blamed Nicolas, but afterwards she was sorry for him and cried about him.

Early in the morning my father took his stick, and was going to start alone; but I made him wait. Maitre Jean was getting up, and he might give us good advice, and perhaps he could go with us and try to arrange the matter.

We waited till five, when the forge fire was lighted, and sat out for the inn. Maitre Jean was already up in his shirt-sleeves in the great room. He was much surprised to see us, and when I told him our trouble and begged him to help us, at first he was very angry.

"What can I do in all this?" said he. "Your Nicolas is a tippler, and the other, my big rogue of a cousin, is worse! What is there to be settled? Things must follow their own course; the prévôt must take it in hand. Any way the best thing that could happen would be to see your scamp of a son off to his regiment, since he has been such a fool as to let them kidnap him."

He was right; but as my father's tears fell fast, he all on a sudden put on his Sunday coat, took his stick, and said—

"Come, you are a good man, who deserves to be helped, if it be possible, but I have very little hope."

He told his wife we should be home by nine, and gave his orders to Valentine before the forge. We then set off, very much cast down. From time to time Maitre Jean cried—

"What can be done? He made his mark before witnesses, he is five feet six, strong as a box-tree. Do you think they will let off such fools when they allow themselves to be caught? Why, they make the best soldiers; the less brains they have the bolder they are. And the other fellow, that great gallows-bird, would have had six months' leave of absence if it was not to entrap our country boys? Don't you think he would catch it if he did not carry back