

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.

IX.

If I relate these things now, it is to describe to you these musterings of July, 1792; the same took place everywhere, and everywhere volunteers were waiting for others before starting.

Margaret, seated by me in the heather by the side of the road, opened a little basket of bread, meat, and wine which she had brought, for there was nothing to be had at Graufthal; old Becker's inn was not yet in existence, and all the women from town, knowing they would have to wait, had brought their provisions with them.

Chauvel, my father, Maître Jean, and three or four municipal officers placed themselves lower down under the shade of some oaks, and looked at us from a little distance. They knew we had much to say to each other, and were pleased to be alone. Margaret told me to write whenever I could; she looked lovingly at me; she did not cry, as many others did; she was firm, and knew well at such a time not to discourage those who were going away.

"While you are far away," said she softly, "I shall always think of you, and you need not be uneasy about your father; he is my father too. I love him. He shall want for nothing."

As I stood before her I admired her and felt more courageous. I never lost the hope of coming home again, not even amidst the greatest dangers; when many others left themselves unmannered by rain, snow, cold, hunger, and misery, I used still to cling to hope; I was determined to see Margaret again; her love kept me up. By our side, against a rock, the family of Father Goulin, the forage contractor, was seated. The old man, the mother, and sisters were in great grief; the father said his two sons ought to have asked his consent; that both need not go, and that he was too old to carry on his business alone. It was very sad, and the lads must have lost confidence. Happily in other places old men talked to their boys in a different fashion about their country and freedom.

But it was when the curé Christopher arrived that cries of "Vive la nation!" rolled in echoes from Fallberg and the Bande-Noir; one would have thought the old mountains were alive and repeated our shouts from one peak to another, while they waved their great oak and fir branches.

M. le curé Christopher brought us the Lutzelbourg volunteers; he also came to bless our colours. I saw him a long way off, and I recognised him under the Bichelberg rocks, as he came down the winding path, holding Etienne by the hand. I had not time to go and take leave of the poor child, so he came trotting and limping along the best way he could. While they were crying and shouting, I went down to the Zinsell Bridge. It might be eleven. The heat was great in the valley, and the air so heavy, that the river was glistening with little fish after the flies which fell in the water by thousands, while the trout shot about like lightning in the shadow of the osier beds. On the hog-backed bridge stood the curé Christopher, his face covered with perspiration; he put his hands out to me, and said—

"I am satisfied with you, Michel. I know of your good fortune, and I know, too, that you deserve it."

And then Etienne jumped into my arms, and we walked up the hill together by the forest's house, where the old mill-general of the commune was holding a meeting. Etienne ran to kiss Margaret and my father; Chauvel and Maître Jean, with the village mayors, came and shook hands with the curé.

There were between five and six hundred volunteers from the neighbourhood assembled. Those from the higher mountains were missing, and we had just begun to fall in, when their drum was heard in the distance, and we all cried out—

"Here they are!"

They were the last; they had come five leagues farther than we, and were all woodcutters, charcoal-burners, and lumberers; short but powerful fellows, who had already chosen for their chief Claude Hulin, the sabot-maker, the same that defended his native village so well against the allies of 1814. Among them was Marc Divès, the hawker, in linen pantaloons, barefooted; his blouse fastened round his waist by his cravat; and we could hear him half-a-league away talking, calling up the laggards, and imitating the calls of different birds. We could see him brandishing his club, and then, to shorten the distance, wade across the river with the water up to his lips. The rest followed him; it was the best possible way to cool themselves.

At last, after Hulin and his companions had come, Jean Kat and the two young Légiers, who had enlisted as drummers, began the rappel, and we soon saw the decisive moment was come.

Those who are in the habit of going from Phalsbourg to Petite-Pierre are well acquainted with that great mass of rock which lies to the left of the road in the middle of a field. No one knows to this day how it came there. It must

have rolled down, but whence or when? Perhaps before men inhabited this earth. On this rock, surrounded by volunteers, M. le curé Christopher, after addressing us on our duties as Christian soldiers, blessed our colours; every village had its own; they were piled together, and with outstretched arms he consecrated them all in Latin, after the manner of the Church. Immediately afterwards Chauvel ascended the rock, as municipal officer and president of the club; he ordered the battalion flag to be brought to the front—a large tricolour flag, with the red woollen peasant's cap on the top—and with outstretched hands he blessed it, and after the fashion prescribed by the constitution, in the following words:—

"Old cap of the French peasant, bent over the soil so long; cap which our unhappy fathers have moistened with their sweat; cap of the serf, on which the lord and the noble have rested the weight of their foot for a thousand years; lift thyself up amidst the din of battles! May the children and grandchildren of those who have worn thee in slavery bear thee now through the bayonets of our enemies! May they hold thee erect, nor ever let thee droop, and mayst thou become the dread of those who seek to shackle the people to the soil! May the sight of thee make them tremble, and may future ages learn that from the lowest depths of degradation thou art arrived at the highest pinnacle of glory by the firmness, the courage, the virtues of thy defenders!"

After which, Chauvel, very pale, turned to his anxious listeners, and continued—

"Volunteers! children of the people! you swear to defend this flag or die—this flag which represents to you your country and liberty—this flag which recalls the sufferings of your forefathers; you swear it? Answer me!"

Then all together with a sound like thunder, we answered—

"We swear it!"

"It is well," said he. "In the name of your country I accept your oath; she trusts to you, and blesses you all."

He spoke very simply, but very forcibly; his voice reached a great distance, and every one could hear him.

Chauvel then came down from the rock, and soon after many who were not relations of the volunteers set off for their villages, for a dark cloud came over from the direction of the Petite-Pierre, and from the very great heat it seemed to threaten a storm of rain. Chauvel ordered the rappel to be beaten, and when we had formed in a circle round him, Maître Jean, and the mayors, he told us that by the decree of the National Assembly we should elect our own officers and non-commissioned officers as soon as we arrived in camp; but that in the meantime we had better choose a leader to keep order on the march, to distribute billets, settle the hour for starting, and the rest. He recommended us to elect one, which was done immediately. The mountaineers had chosen Hulin, the sabot-maker. They called out—

"Hulin!"

We all repeated the same name, and Hulin was our leader to the camp at Rixheim. He had only to get us along, and when we halted anywhere, to go to the mayor and ask for billets for quarters and rations.

But now I must tell you about our leave-taking. Towards midday, as the sky became more overcast, and we saw the leaves in the wood quivering without a breath of wind—sure sign of an approaching storm—Hulin, who had been standing with the mayors, came down into the road and ordered the rappel to be beaten. Then everybody knew the moment of departure had come. The mayors, Chauvel, the curé Christopher, my father, and all the others came down into the road at the foot of the hill. I looked at Margaret for a moment that I might cherish the remembrance of her in my heart for the three years I was not to see her. She, too, looked at me; her eyes were dim. I held her hand, and I felt she did not care to let me go.

"Come," said I, "a last embrace."

And I embraced her; she was very pale, and did not say a word. I took my knapsack up from the heather and buckled it on. Chauvel, my father, Etienne, and Maître Jean now came up. I had given my eighty livres bounty money to my father, to pay for Etienne's board at Lutzelbourg, and as I embraced Maître Jean I felt him slip something into the pocket of my jacket; it was two louis, which were very useful to me later. It was time to be off; my courage would else have failed me. I took up my musket, saying—

"Good-bye, all—good-bye!"

But at that moment Margaret called out, "Michel!" in such a tone that it went through my heart. I ran back to her, and as she was crying, I said to her—

"Come, Margaret, be courageous; it is for our country!"

I had not a drop of blood left in me; all round us people were crying.

Margaret roused herself at last, and said, as she clasped me in her arms—

"Defend yourself well."

I hurried off without saying a word to the rest, nor did I even look in their direction.

Nearly all the volunteers were down in the

road; those who had lagged behind came up, and set off by threes and fours, just as it happened. Great drops were already falling; we could smell the sweet scent of rain on the dust; and as we turned the angle of the road which leads to the Petite Pierre, the deluge began by a flash of lightning; but the greater part of the storm had passed over the mountain, about Saverne in Alsace, and this rain did us good. The same day, about three, we passed by the Petite-Pierre without halting. It was three or four leagues farther on where we stopped near some large glass-works, in the midst of the woods.

I had been in a dream the whole time. I had not even looked at my companions, so many other things had been passing through my mind. But then, in a sort of open hall where a fire had lighted, while some people brought us bread and beer, Marc Divès, who was sitting next to me, laid his hand on my shoulder, and said—

"Michel, it is hard to leave home!"

I looked at him; I was glad to see him again, but I could not speak. No one was inclined to talk; and directly after eating a crust of bread and drinking a mug of beer, we lay down right and left, our heads on our knapsacks, between the pillars of this great shed.

It is a blessing for the young to be able to sleep and forget one's misery for the moment, which is denied to the old.

Next morning, very early, Hulin began calling out—

"Come, comrades, fall in."

We all got up and buckled on our knapsacks. A heavy dew had fallen, the large drops dripped from the tiles; we looked at the weather, and some old soldiers among us, before shouldering their muskets, tied their handkerchiefs round the locks.

We were just setting off, when on our right a long line of mounted Volunteers from the Lower Rhine came up with us. They were national dragoons, as they were called, sons of well-to-do peasants, brewers, post-masters, butchers, farmers—in fact, people in easy circumstances, who rode their own horses; and with the exception of one or two old soldiers who wore their uniforms, these Alsations were dressed, some in large cocked hats, some in foxskin caps, some in long boots and some in gaiters. The only thing which gave them any resemblance to dragoons was a long sword in a leathern sheath, large hilt, and a blade three fingers wide, which hung from their belts and rang against the stirrup iron.

No finer men nor better riders could be seen. They all looked pleased and resolute. When they saw us under the shed their commandant drew his sword, and then they all began together to sing a song which none of us had then heard, but which we were often destined to hear on the field of battle:—

"Allons, enfants de la patrie,
Le jour de gloire est arrivé!"

What a song at such a moment! It made us nearly mad! The cries of "Vive la nation!" never would cease; and as the Alsations filed past the glass houses, the master came out with his wife and daughters, and begged them to stop. They thronged round them, and held them by their brides and hands, and cried—

"We must fraternise, brave Alsations! dismount! Vive la nation!"

But their captain, a tall fellow six feet high, said they were under orders to Sarrebruck the same evening, so they set off, singing as they rode.

Our enthusiasm was immense after hearing this song; it was like the cry of the country in danger. When we left that place I may say we all felt fresh courage. I said to myself—

"Now it will be all right. We have the song which Chauvel wanted to take the place of the 'Carmagnole,' something great and powerful, like the people."

I remember, too, the great excitement there was in the hamlets and villages in the bosom of these mountains: the tocsin was ringing everywhere; at every cross-road files of volunteers with their little bundles on their sticks passed, crying out—"Conquer or die."

We called out to them in answer, and further off other bands in the cross-roads took it up: this sometimes extended for half-a-league. All the country round was afoot; when it is a question of defending the people's true interests, I believe men would rise from the dust.

When we got to the little town of Bitche, we found its streets, squares, and thus so full of people that we were obliged to encamp outside among the gardens and meadows in company with other villagers. Hulin went by himself to announce us at the municipality, and make his requisitions for rations.

I had a good look at this old half French and half German town, which is very like Saverne, and its fort on the heights, to which paths lead up six hundred feet high, from whence cannon commanded the low country for two or three leagues.

I recognised on the ramparts the red uniforms of the poor Château-Vieux regiment. They had sworn to die to the last man rather than surrender the citadel, and these brave fellows kept their word, while their executioner, the Marquis

de Bouillé, was showing the Prussians the road to France. We set off from thence to the camp at Rixheim, between Wissembourg and Landau.

We were obliged to march all day in the sun, for we had left the woods, and only occasionally found a little shade along the sides of the orchards. Many other detachments, both horse and foot, from the right and the left, before and behind us, followed in the same direction.

Files of vehicles conveying wine and ammunition were on the road also; we saw nothing else; but what dust! How glad we should have been to have had a good shower like the evening before!

We reached Rixheim about nine in the evening, and we found the cantonments there in great delight; for the first cavalry engagement had taken place that morning; our national dragoons had repulsed the Eben hussars and the Lobkowitz dragoons, led by émigré officers, who tried to cut off a convoy of provisions on the Landau road. It had been a smart affair. Custine commanded our men.

But in the village of Rixheim people were talking about a poor little drummer-boy belonging to a battalion of volunteer light infantry from Strasbourg, who was the first to discover the Eben hussars on the road, and began to beat the alarm. An Eben hussar had cut off his right hand as he passed, but the poor child continued to beat his drum with his left. He was crushed to death under the horse's feet.

This is how war made its appearance among us. Now I must take breath. I must also go and call on two old comrades who are living on the mountain, and who can refresh my memory. So, my friends, we shall stop awhile here. This first war of the republic is worth thinking over before relating it; and besides, so many great events have happened during the same time, that it requires everything to be set in order, old papers looked up, and nothing to be written down but what is acknowledged to be honest and true by honest people.

But if God preserves my health, that too shall come soon.

THE END.

"KNOW THY OPPORTUNITY."

The grim monster, Death, was stealthily approaching. I could almost feel his hot, fiery breath upon my forehead. My faithful goddess, Hygieia, had utterly deserted me. Only now and then would Morpheus befriend me, but on this auspicious day, he had deigned to moisten my eyelids with heavenly ambrosia, and I slept. As I slept, behold, I had a dream! I thought that I was roaming upon foreign soil whither my physician had sent me to recover my health. I was in a great metropolis—one of the grand marts of the world. In one of my strolls I chanced to meet a man who had in his hand a handsomely-bound volume, entitled "The People's Common Sense Medical Adviser," and who said that he was an agent for the sale of the book. The title was such a novel one that I was impelled to give the work a casual notice. As I hastily glanced over its pages, I observed that it contained treatises not commonly found in medical works. But I had too many times been hoaxed by appearances, and I determined that I would have nothing to do with it. A voice within me, like a faithful mentor, whispered, "Know thy opportunity; in that book is thy salvation!" I began reasoning with myself. Although doubtful and distrustful, yet I put forth my hand to take the book, and, lo! the agent was gone! I was miserable. In my agony I awoke. Great drops of perspiration were upon my brow. By my bedside was a friend who had called during my slumber to see me. Said my friend, "I have brought with me a book, just published, which I thought might interest you." One glance at the work, and I was assured that it was "The People's Common Sense Medical Adviser," by Dr. R. V. Pierce, of Buffalo, N. Y. Surely, this was the veritable book which I had seen in my dreams. My friend loaned me the work, and every day, as my strength permitted, I perused its pages. Although it contained very interesting treatises on Biology, Cerebral Physiology, Human Temperaments, Nursing of the Sick, etc., yet, being an invalid, I was most interested in the subjects of Diseases and Remedies. I believed that I had a liver affection, and yet more than one medical attendant had pronounced my disease Consumption, and that I would fall with the autumn leaves. In that book I found my symptoms perfectly portrayed. I was then confident that I had not deceived myself. I reasoned thus: "Any man who can so truthfully depict my feelings, and apparently understand my constitutional tendencies, must know just what my physical system demands. I will trust my case with Dr. Pierce. I will take his Golden Medical Discovery as recommended for my disease." The result is that, after having perseveringly followed his prescribed treatment, I once again enjoy the blessings of health. Therefore, I would say to the afflicted, "Know thy opportunity," and take Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery.

QUIS.