

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.

Every one who came from Phalsbourg repeated the same thing; the La Fère regiment was confined to barracks, and every hour couriers stopped at the governor's house, and then hurried off into Alsace.

Fancy people's astonishment! they were not accustomed to revolutions as we are now. The idea of bringing one about never occurred to us. It created a panic.

That day nothing stirred; news was stopped; but the next day we learned the taking of the Bastille, we knew that the Parisians were everywhere masters, that they had muskets, powder, cannon—and it created such an effect that the mountaineers came down into Alsace and Lorraine with their axes, pitchforks, and scythes; they passed by in troops, crying out—

"To Marmontier!"

"To Saverne!"

"To Neuviller!"

"To Lixheim!"

They spread over the country like ants, pulled down the herdsman's huts, and the houses of the foresters in the service of the prince-bishop, without mentioning octroi offices, and the toll-gates on the high roads.

Letumier, Huré, Cochart, and several others came to induce Maitre Jean to join them, that we might not be behind Mittelbronn, Quatre-Vents, and Lutzelbourg. He cried—

"Let me alone! Do what you like. I won't have anything to do with it."

But as nearly all the villages in Alsace had already burned the title-deeds belonging to the convents and seigneurs, and as the Baraquins wanted to do the same with the papers of the commune, at the Tiercelin convent at Lixheim, he put on his coat to try and save ours. We set out together, Cochart, Letumier, Huré, Maitre Jean, I, and the whole village.

You should have heard the cries of the mountain people down in the plain. You should have seen the wood-cutters, lumberers, and others, all in rags, brandishing their axes, forks, scythes and pickaxes in the air. The noise rose and fell like the water rolling over the dam at Trois-Etang; women were mixed up with them, their hair dishevelled and hatchets in their hands.

Of Forbin's horse at Mittelbronn there was not one stone left on another. All the papers were burned. The roof had fallen in on the cellar. At Lixheim you were up to your middle in the feathers and straw of the bedding; everything in the unlucky Jews' houses was thrown out of window, and their furniture was chopped to pieces. When people are cowards they lose their heads; they confound religion, love of money, and vengeance all together.

I saw the poor Jews escaping towards the town: their wives and daughters, with little children in their arms, crying like mad people, the old people tottering and sobbing behind; and yet who had suffered worse than these poor people at the hands of our kings? Who had the greatest right to complain? No one thought of such things now.

The Tiercelin convent was at Old Lixheim; the five priests who lived there had charge of the papers belonging to Brouviller, Hérange, Fleisheim, Pickholtz, Baragues, and even to Phalsbourg.

All the communes joining the crowd of mountain people filled the old streets round the mayor's residence; they demanded their papers, but the Tiercelins thought—

"If we give up the title-deeds these people will massacre us afterwards."

They did not know what to do, for the crowd had spread round the convent, and all the passages were guarded.

When Maitre Jean arrived, the village mayors in their cocked hats and red waistcoats were deliberating near the fountain. Some wanted to set fire to everything, others to break the doors down; some, more reasonable, proposed first demanding the title-deeds, and seeing what they would do afterwards, they finished by having the upper hand. As Jean Leroux had been deputy to the balliwick, he was chosen with two of the mayors to go and ask for the papers. When the Tiercelins saw there were only three of them they admitted them, and then closed their gates again.

Maitre Jean has since told us what happened inside the convent. The poor old men trembled like hares; the superior, who was called Father Marcel, exclaimed that the title-deeds were his charge, and that he dared not part with them—they must kill him first!

But Maitre Jean having taken him to the window and shown him the scythes and forks as far as he could see, he said nothing, but pointed out a large wardrobe with an iron-wire lattice front, in which the registers were piled up to the ceiling.

They had to be sorted first, and as that had already lasted more than an hour, the communes, imagining that their mayors were kept prisoners, wanted to break in the doors; but when Maitre Jean showed himself on the balcony with a handful of papers, which he dis-

played to those below, cries of satisfaction and delight might be heard from one end of Lixheim to the other. They laughed and cried to one another—

"We've got them—we've got our papers!" Maitre Jean and the others soon came out with a truck full of registers. They penetrated the crowd, calling out that the reverend Tiercelin fathers were not to be maltreated, as they had restored every man his own, which was all they wanted.

Every village received its title-deeds at the communal house, many burned theirs on the place, and thus destroyed their own titles when they burned the convents! But Jean Leroux put ours in his pocket, and therefore did the Baraquins retain their right to pasture and to gather acorns in the oak woods, while many others had none whatever, having, so to say, burned their own forests and pasturage for ever.

I could tell you much more about these things, for many, instead of giving up the deeds they had preserved, took care of them, and sold them afterwards to the seigneurs, and some to the state. These men became rich at the expense of their communes. But it is of no use to talk of them now. The rascals are dead; they have settled their accounts long ago.

It might be said that in fifteen days France had been entirely changed. All the rights of convents and châteaux disappeared in smoke. The tocsin used to ring day and night; the sky was red the whole line of the Vosges; the abbey, the old kites' nests were burning like candles among the stars, and that lasted till the 4th of the following August, the day on which the bishops and Seigneurs of the National Assembly surrendered their privileges and feudal rights. It was suggested there was nothing to surrender, everything having been previously destroyed; but still it was better so, and their descendants had no claim to raise afterwards.

This was how the people got rid of the ancient rights of the "noblerace of conquerors." The yoke had been laid on them by force, and by force had they freed themselves from it.

From that day the National Assembly was able to begin our constitution. The king himself complimented it, and said—

"You are wrong to distrust me! All the regiments which I have brought here, the ten thousand men assembled on the Champ de Mars, and the cannon which surround you, are for your protection; but since you will not have them, I will send them back."

Our representatives afflicted to believe what he told them; but if the Bastille had not been taken, if the nation had not risen, if the foreign regiments had had the best of it, if the Gardes Françaises had taken part against the city, what would have happened? One need not be very clever to guess. Our good king Louis XVI., would have spoken quite different y, and the representatives of the Third Estate would have had a hard time of it. Happily events turned out well for us. The commune of Paris had just embodied its National Guard, and all the communes in France followed the example; they were arming themselves against those who wished to place us again under the yoke. Every time the Assembly passed a decree, the peasants took their muskets or their forks, and cried—

"Let us put that in force at once. It will be done a little sooner, and save our seigneurs the trouble."

So the law was put in force.

I always feel pleasure in recollecting the way our citizen militia, as the National Guard was first called, was embodied in August, 1789. The enthusiasm was nearly as great as when the deputies to the Third Estate were elected.

Maitre Jean Leroux was named lieutenant of the Baraque company, Letumier sous-lieutenant, Gauthier Courtols sergeant-major, and others sergeants and corporals. We had no captain, for the Baragues did not muster a whole company. There were plenty of cries of "Vive la nation!" the day they wetted their epaulettes, and you should have seen Maitre Jean's face, who at last was entitled to wear his moustache and his whiskers in earnest. That affair cost him a couple of barrels of his best Lorraine wine. Letumier, too, let his moustache grow, long and red, which made him look like an old fox. Jean Kat was our drummer; he could beat all the rigadoons and marches like an old drum-major. I don't know how Jean Kat learned all these accomplishments—perhaps when he played the clarionette. We had also received some muskets from the arsenal, old rattle-traps mounted with bayonets a yard long. We handled these very well all the same. At first we had some drill-sergeants from the La Fère regiment, who taught us the exercise on the Champ de Mars after twelve on Sundays. Before the week was over Maitre Jean had ordered his uniform of Kountz, the regimental tailor, and the second Sunday he came to drill in full uniform, in his blue coat with red facings, eyes bright, epaulettes hanging down, his cocked hat on the back of his head, and his basket-hilted sword dangling at his heels. He strode up and down the ranks, and cried to Valentine—

"Citizen Valentine, shoulders back! mille tonnerres!"

A finer man was never seen. When Dame Catherine saw him she could hardly believe it was her husband. Valentine was all in confusion when he looked at him; he took him for a noble, and his long face became still longer with admiration. But Maitre Jean was not so well up to his drill as many others. There Letumier gave him a clincher. We used to laugh and amuse ourselves then. All the neighbouring villages, Vilchberg, Mittelbronn, Quatre-Vents, Dann, Lutzelbourg, Saint-Jean-des-Choux, marched and countermarched like old soldiers, the town children bawling, "Vive la nation!" after them. Annette Minot, a fruit-woman in the market, was our cantinière; she had a little deal table, a chair, and a stone bottle of brandy in the middle of the Champ de Mars, with goblets and a large tricolour umbrella to protect her from the sun, which did not save her from being nearly roasted about 3 p.m.; nor were we much better off; we suffered so much from the dust. Good heavens! how I remember all these things! And our sergeant, Quéru, a short fat man, with grey moustaches, his ears buried in his wig, his black eyes full of mischief, and his great cocked hat on the top of all! He used to march backwards before us, his musket held across his thighs, crying—

"One, two! One, two! Halt! In line to the right! Steady! Stand at ease!"

And seeing us sweat from exhaustion, he would laugh heartily, and say—

"Dismiss!"

Then we ran to Annette Minot's table; every one wanted to offer a glass of brandy to the sergeant, who never said "No!" and used to say in his southern accent—

"You will get on, citizens, all right."

He was very fond of a glass of brandy, but what was that to us? He was an able instructor, a good fellow, and a patriot. He, little Trinquet, of the third company; Bariaux, the finest voice in the regiment; Duchêne, a tall Lorrainer, six feet high; in fact, all these old sergeants fraternized with the citizens; and often in the evening, before the retreat was beaten, we used to see them slip into the club, keep in the shadow of the columns in the hall, and listen to the subject under discussion, before answering to their names at the rappel. These men had passed fifteen or twenty years growing mouldy in the inferior ranks, doing the duty of noble officers! Later we saw them captains, colonels, and generals. They felt it was coming and sided with the revolution.

In the evening, Maitre Jean, having hung up his uniform, and put away his epaulettes and his hat, and put on his woolen jacket, used to study the theory of drill; sometimes, when at work in the forge, he would begin to call out the words of command when we least expected it, just to exercise his voice and see if he had a good bass tone. Almost always after supper Letumier would come in and sit down, with his pointed knee between his hands, and ask him questions, while he balanced himself on his chair with a waggish air. Maitre Jean could only understand in theory squares and attacking in column, because Sergeant Quéru had told us that was the chief thing in war; he used to get very red, and call out—

"Michel, the slate!"

And then we all looked at the slate and saw squares three and four deep, and the attacking columns with their guns, which he would explain in detail. But Letumier would wink his eyes and shake his head, and say—

"You are wrong, you are young, Maitre Jean!" Then my godfather would get angry and rap the pencil on the slate, and say—

"That is right—I tell you it is."

Every one took an interest in it, down to Dame Catherine. We used to talk so loud that Letumier should not be able to answer; at last nothing was intelligible, and ten came before it was cleared up. Letumier went away repeating as he went into the passage—

"You are wrong, you are wrong!"

And we used to run after him and say—

"It is you who are wrong, it is you!"

And if we had dared we should have given him a good shaking.

Maitre Jean said—

"Oh, the fool, can any one be so stupid? He cannot understand anything."

But at drill Letumier had his revenge; he gave the word of command well, and made his men march, directing them with his sword, now in this direction, now in that, without blundering. I must do him that justice. He deserved to be lieutenant quite as well as Maitre Jean; all the Baraquins thought so; but Maitre Jean's position as landlord and smith gave him the best position, and besides, he was the finest man in the village.

What shows the folly of the nobles and bishops at that time was the fact, immediately after the taking of the Bastille, instead of remaining in the Assembly to advocate their right, if they had any, that they should pack up everything, and go and beg the help of our enemies against us; they fled off, seigneurs and bishops, servants and abbés, capucins and gr. at ladies, by every road—those from Lorraine by Treves, from Alsace by Coblenz or by Bâle, and threatening us with, "Wait, wait, we shall be back again; we shall be back."

They were like lunatics; we laughed at them. It was what was called the emigration. It began by the Count d'Artois, the Prince de Condé, the Prince de Bourbon, Polignac, and Marshal de Broglie, the man who commanded the army round Paris, and was to have carried off the National Assembly. They had driven the king to folly, and now, when they saw danger, these good royalists left him alone in trouble.

When Maitre Jean saw this downfall, he cried—

"Let them go! let them go! What a riddance for us and our good king! Now he is alone, and there will be no Count d'Artois to put his own ideas into his head."

Every one was delighted. If they had only all gone there would have been no further mention of them; we could have made a present of them to the English, Germans, and Russians; but many remained behind in command of our regiments, who only tried to rouse the soldiers against the nation. You will see later what the people attempted against their own country; all that will have its turn by-and-by; we need not hurry ourselves.

The Parisians at that time still were so attached to their king, that they wanted to have him among them, and they sent their wives to Versailles to beg him to come with the Queen Marie-Antoinette, the young dauphin, and all the royal family. Louis XVI. could but accept their invitation, and these poor people in the midst of famine cried—

"We cannot die of hunger now; here is the baker and his wife and the little journeyman."

Lafayette, who rode at their head on his white horse, was named commandant of the National Guard, and Bailly mayor of Paris; so you see how good-hearted these poor creatures were, who never try to engage the ill others have done them. Chauvel kept us informed of all these events. He also told us how the National Assembly had followed the king, and held its sittings in a large riding-school behind the Tuilleries. Every five or six weeks we had a letter from him, with a bundle of gazettes, the *Journal des Révolutions de Paris*, the *Révolutions de France et du Brabant*, the *Annales Patriotiques*, and many others whose names have escaped me.

They were full of fire and spirit, especially the articles of Loustalot and Camille Desmoulins; all that was said and done in France was reported in these journals, and so fully that every peasant could form an idea of our situation; we read them in the market of Phalsbourg, where Eloi Collin had formed our first club on the model of the Jacobins and Cordeliers of Paris; they met there in the evening, between the fire-engine magazine and the old meat-market, and Letumier used to read the news in such a loud and distinct voice, that they could understand what he said on the Place d'Armes; people came from all round to hear him, and the apothecary Tribolin and the commissariat officer Raphael Manz, Didier Hertzou, the hatter, a very sensible man, Henri Dominique, the innkeeper, Fixari, Baruch Aron, Pernett, in fact all the town notables used to address us on the rights of man, the veto, the division of France in departments, the law on citizenship, the admission of Protestant and Jews to public employments, the institution of juries, abolition of convents and religious orders, the resumption of the Church lands by the nation, the issue of assignats—in fact, on everything that offered, as these questions came to be debated in the Constituent Assembly. What a life and what a change!

Formerly the seigneurs and nobles would have said and done everything in their own interest, at Versailles, without troubling themselves about us; they would have shorn us regularly; their collectors, stewards, and lieutenants of police would come and quietly enforce their will, which was law, on us; our good king, the best of men, would have had his mouth full of love for the poor, and balls, fêtes, and hunting parties, bows and obsequies, would have filled the court journals; while cold, hunger, and all sorts of distress would have continued their rounds among the poor. Yes, it is a happiness to hear one's own affairs discussed, and to have a voice in them—how we support those who are in our interest, and how we rave against those who displace us! This may be called living. Even now the old market, with its lantern hanging from the principal beam, the market benches filled with people, children sitting in the hut of the old shoemaker Damier, Collin standing on a table with the newspaper, the wind whistling under the roof, the light on this mass of people, and in the distance the sentry on duty, with his old hat and patched white coat, stopping to listen—all this is still before my eyes.

And the elders, fast a sleep behind the swing-gate, I see them too; our fat mayor Bolleau, with his tricoloured scarf; the échevins; Jean Beaucaire, usher, royal sergeant at the prévôt's sittings, since replaced by Joseph Basaille, sergeant in the national gendarmery; and the prévôt himself, in his long wig, yellow face, and pinched-up nose; all these people walking about under the columns and saying nothing, instead of having us surrounded and kicked out,