

# 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.

#### III

"You know, Michel, that my lands at Pickholtz are the best in the ban of Lixheim; I saw it the last time I was walking about there. It is strong land, with chalk and sand in it. Everything ought to grow there abundantly; but those idle Tiercelins have let the land get so low, the river overflows there, the meadows are become marshes, ranunculuses and all descriptions of rank vegetation grow there plentifully; the cattle will not feed there. Nothing would have been easier than to have let the water run off by removing the willows which have fallen for ages past; but they never cared about it; they had food enough in their racks when they returned to their homes every morning and evening; hams were rotting in their store-rooms. What a set! On the high lands everything remained waste, all dried up; the old walnut and pear trees spread their branches at random, and covered everything with their shade. The plough will have some work to turn that over, and the axe too. There will be no want of faggots; I shall have sufficient for three or four years. It is not small task to put a hundred and fifty arpents of land in good order again, to manure, cultivate, and sow what has not had two hard-frost for hundreds of years. These hundred and fifty arpents ought to have brought me in ten thousand four hundred livres this year, and I have not had even six hundred. See the result of the idleness and cowardice of those beggars; they ruin a country! Well, we shall change all that. I have already put a new roof to the little farmhouse, which was in ruins; and have taken out the rotten beams of the barn, and paved the stable. Now it is nearly all to rights. But I must have cattle. Catherine's property at Fleisheln has always paid well; our inn does very well also; we shall do in the end. Only I cannot always be here; to see if every one does his work properly—if the cattle are looked after, the land ploughed &c. I must be there; I shall only come to Baraques once or twice a week. Catherine does not want any help to carry on the inn; but I must have a man at the head of the forge, and I have made choice of you. You shall be journeyman instead of me. You must find a master smith, for you will have all the responsibility, and the journeyman must suit the master. From to-day I give you fifty livres a month instead of thirty. This is not all; with work and good conduct all will improve. I love you—you are a good lad; I have, I may say, brought you up; I am your godfather; I have no children; you understand!"

He was affected as he concluded. I was so happy that I said to him—

"Oh, Maitre Jean, you make a man of me, and I feel I deserve it."

"And by your good conduct also," said he, as he pressed my hand; "by your work and your attachment to my family; had I a son, I should have wished him like you. Well, it is understood, till next spring we continue to work together; I will show you what you have yet to learn; in the meantime you must look out for a journeyman, and then things will be as I have just explained to you."

He gave me his hand. Ah, we may say, if there is great unhappiness in life, we sometimes fall on happy days. When Maitre Jean put me in the position of master, I felt proud of being something myself, and of not always having an order to obey. The idea of Margaret learning this great news filled me with satisfaction. But what pleased me the most was that out of my fifty livres a month I could send my brother Etienne to Lutzelbourg for him to be taught by the curé Christopher, and bring him up as a schoolmaster; this was the greatest happiness of all, for I dreaded letting my infant brother become a burden on the village, should any accident happen to me; and immediately thinking of the joy my father would feel, I asked leave of Maitre Jean to run home.

"Go," said he, "and make yourselves all happy."

I did not take a moment in reaching home. My father, Etienne, and Marceline were making baskets; they were surprised to see me at that hour, when I was always at work at the forge. My mother was cooking at the fire; she looked round, and went on with her work.

"What is the matter, Michel?" said my father.

"In my happiness I cried out—

"Maitre Jean gives me fifty livres a month, and Valentine's gone, and I take his place, and I get fifty livres. Maitre Jean has told me at the end of the winter he is going to Pickholtz to look after his land, and then I shall take his place as master, that I shall do everything, and I am to find a journeyman at once."

"Then my father lifted up his hands, and cried—

"Oh, my God, is it possible? Now, my child, we may say you are rewarded for your good conduct to us!"

He got up. I threw myself into his arms, and said—

"Yes, how fortunate for Etienne! For a long time I have hoped to send him to be taught by M. Christopher, to become a schoolmaster; but there was no money—"

My mother would not let me conclude. She cried out—

"He shall not go! He shall not be made a heathen!"

As she spoke, my father turned suddenly round; he looked at her, grew very pale, and answered in a tone of anger and indignation such as we had never heard before—

"And I say he shall go! Who is master here? You will not have it? Well, I will. Do you understand me? I will! Ah, when your son—the best of all—comes to rescue his poor brother from want, is that all the thanks you can give him? It is the others, Nicolas and Lisbeth, whom you love—creatures who have given us up, and would let us die of hunger—you, I, and the children, all of us—those are what you love!"

He was so terribly angry, we were quite frightened. My mother at the hearth looked at him with astonishment without daring to reply to him. He went quietly up to her, and when he was two steps from her he said as he looked sternly at her—

"Bad heart! You have had not a word for your child who gives you your daily bread!"

Then at last she threw herself into my arms and cried—

"Yes he is a good boy—a good son!"

And I felt she loved me at all the same, which softened me much. The children cried, but for a moment my father could not recover himself; he still stood there, looking at us pale and angry; at last he took me by the hand and said—

"Let me embrace you again. It is a good thing to have such a son; yes, it is a good thing!"

He sobbed out loud, and mother cried; so that what ought to have made us all happy made us miserable.

At last we all became calm. My father wiped his eyes, put on his jacket and his Sunday cap, and said as he took my arm—

"I shall work no more to-day. Let us go, Michel, and thank my friend Jean, our benefactor. What a good idea it was to choose him for your godfather! that idea must have come from heaven!"

Two seconds after we were walking up the street full of snow; my father leaned on my arm; joy shone in his eyes; he explained that I was baptised Jean-Michel, which seemed a great source of gladness to him. As he walked into the Three Pigeons, he cried—

"Jean, I come to thank you!"

Maitre Jean was very glad to see him.

We sat around the stove till night, talking happily about me, Maitre Jean's projects, and family affairs. When supper-time came, my father sat down with us; and late, about half-past nine, we returned home, where they were all in bed.

#### IV.

Such was the beginning of the year 1794. I had sent my brother to board at Lutzelbourg with an old mattress-maker named Gertrude Arnold, at an expense of twelve francs a month. Thus he was able to attend M. Christopher's school, and from that time the child has always continued to give us the greatest satisfaction.

During the month of January Maitre Jean made me comprehend what he wanted done. I was to look after the forge, and keep an account of all that was bought and sold at the inn, because his wife could not write. I had to keep his books, so that when he came home from the farm he need only look at the bottom of the page to know exactly how he stood.

My mother, who was quite astonished that anything in the cottage dared to oppose her, seemed very pensive; sometimes my father used to say—

"Now I am happy—all goes well; and if Mathurine can only find a place with respectable people, I should have nothing to wish for."

I thought of that, too; but in this troubled times rich people did not like to undertake new servants, and I was become prouder than I had been, and I should not have liked to have seen my sister a servant to people in the town. This is very natural, and easily understood.

So we were happy.

Unfortunately the storm grew greater every day; in January and February emigration was at its height. At that time the Red Book circulated all over France; we saw there the pensions and disgraceful presents which noble families had enjoyed, and which amounted to fifty millions a year; while poor wretches weighed down by taxation were dying of hunger. National contempt compelled these nobles to leave the country in crowds; the roads were covered with their carriages; there were not sufficient relays of horses to be procured; every day we heard the crack of their postillions' whips. When the gates of the town were closed they would drive round the ramparts rather than wait for the gate-keeper, Father Lebrun, to come and open them. It rose to such a pitch that the patriots began to grow uneasy about it. The National Assembly was discussing the law on

passports. Mirabeau said it was wrong to prevent people going and coming; but the citizen guards did their duty nevertheless; they questioned the emigrants as to what they were going to do at Coblenz, Constance, or Turin. If they refused to answer they threatened to put the ladies in the town guard-room till they received instructions from the department; then they could see the haughty attitude of these gentry change; then they could be mild enough, shake hands with the patriots, call them "friends," and drink to the health of the nation at the nearest wine-shop.

We used to laugh at this comedy, and the National Guard would let go the horses' reins, and cry out—

"A pleasant journey, gentlemen!"

Well, Frenchmen have always enjoyed a joke; it is natural to them.

However, troubles respecting the civic oath increased. Twelve or fifteen hundred rebels in Alsace had formed an association to oppose the execution of the decree. They used to meet to the rallying cry of—

"Vive le Comte d'Artois!"

The National Assembly sent commissioners to ascertain what they wanted; they became more insolent than ever, and raised the cry of—

"Les commissaires à la lanterne!"

Some chevaliers of Saint-Louis and some ancient councillors of the parliament were their leaders. When that was found out, the patriots of Colmar and Strasbourg took their clubs and dispersed the citizens. All the royalist gazettes spoke of the coming invasion. At Phalsbourg, the Saxe Hussars having to pass through the town on their way to Sarre guemines, as it was suspected they intended going over to the enemy, some soldiers of the La Fère regiment seized their bridles and wanted to make them cry, "Vive la nation!" when they all drew their sabres and rode over them, leaving the town by Porte de France. The hospital was full of wounded soldiers. It was disgraceful, for the La Fère soldiers were unarmed. That did not prevent Louis XVI. praising the Saxe Hussars, who were chosen later to cover his retreat to the Austrians. The La Fère regiment was blamed severely, and the Royal Liegeois was sent to replace it which had distinguished itself six months before, under the orders of M. de Bouillé.

Imagine the patriots' indignation! As long as the Royal Liegeois remained, no one in the town or the environs would return the salute of any officer. We lost the services of Sergeant Quéru and all the drill-instructors. We accompanied them in a body to Sarrebourg, where we fraternised before parting.

During the agitation we heard of the escape of the king's aunts with twelve millions in gold in their carriages, leaving debts to the amount of three millions behind them as a charge upon us; then that they had been arrested at Arnales-Duc in Burgundy, and that in their fright they had written as follows to the National Assembly:—

"We wish to be only citizens, as, indeed, according to law we are. We are respectfully your very humble and very obedient servants."

This letter, which made one laugh, nevertheless showed very good sense on their part, being only the plain truth.

The Assembly gave them permission to go wherever they wished, though Maitre Jean said they ought to have been brought back to Paris in triumph. I always thought the Assembly in the right, and if they had opened every gate in France to induce the nobles to leave, with the understanding they were not to return, they would have done well. We all hold to our own opinions. I am sure Louis XVI. would not have done more or less than the Count d'Artois if he had succeeded in gaining England or Germany. I am sure that our rulers who quitted us in later times would have been satisfied to have stayed at home, for they found it more difficult to return than to quit.

As to the king's aunts, they went to Rome, and we never heard anything more of them. We saw from the gazettes which Chauvel sent us that there were great troubles in Paris. People were distrustful, expecting some blow to be struck by the nobles and the seigneurs. Camille Desmoulins, Brissot, and Féron, bold and clever men, continually said—

"Be on your guard! Do not let them take you by surprise. Many of your deputies of the Third Estate have sold themselves. Leopold and William have made peace together to invade us. Be ready!—sleep not!"

On one occasion the faubourg of Saint-Antoine wanted to pull down the Château de Vincennes as they had the Bastille; Lafayette had great trouble to dissuade them. That same day five hundred nobles, armed with poniards, introduced themselves into the king's palace by a door which opened into the guard room of the Swiss soldiers. When discovered they declared that they were the king's best guards; they were beaten out again with the butts of the soldiers' muskets, and Louis XVI. said he wished for no other protectors than the citizen guard, but that did not make the people watch him less carefully. It was said he was ill, and his medical attendant suggested he should go to Saint-

Cloud. But the market-women begged him to remain; which shows how simple the ignorant are; these poor creatures believed the departure of the king would be a great loss to France, as if kings were not much more easily found than countries; however, we cannot be wise in a moment.

At the end of March, Maitre Jean set off to look after his farm, and I remained at the forge with my new journeyman, Simon Benerotte, a strong fellow with a rough beard. It rained nearly every day, as it usually does in the spring. Few vehicles passed, but we had a good order for Phalsbourg Church. It was the rallying, which is still to be seen in the chancel. Maitre Jean left me the care of putting it up, and I went to work every day in town, leaving Benerotte at the forge.

The Royal Liegeois regiment about this time was recalled to Metz. It was said that General Bullié wished to have all regiments devoted to the king within reach. We discovered why soon after. This regiment left us in March, and the Auvergne, a true patriotic regiment, replaced it. It had distinguished itself in the American war, and refused to march against Nancy. Eloi Collin at the club passed a eulogium on it; he recapitulated its battles, and on the first day we fraternized with the non-commissioned officers and soldiers, as we had done with those of La Fère.

But the Auvergne regiment had also its accounts to balance; its officers continued to beat their men, and soon after a most extraordinary occurrence took place, well calculated to make the aristocrats reflect.

On that day, in the beginning of April, I was putting up the railing with the help of two workmen, when I heard the drum beaten, about one, at the Hôtel de Ville. Rather surprised, I go out to see what it is; and as I come to the church door I see the Auvergne regiment under the command of its non-commissioned officers, march by and form a square under the old elm-trees. The nobles, officers, were at the Café de la Régence, where Hoffman's distillery now is, at the corner of the Rue de l'Ancienne Clérou. They were quietly taking coffee and playing cards. On hearing the drum they rush out pell-mell, without even putting on their hats. The colonel, the Marquis de Courbon, approaches, and calls out to know what it all means, but the continual roll of the drums gives him no answer. Then three old sergeant-majors step forward from the ranks, each with his musket on his shoulder, and meet in the centre of the square.

They were tall fellows with grey moustaches, bearing their cocked hats across their shoulders, their pig-tails hanging down their backs, and looked fierce enough. The townspeople looked on from the windows, not knowing what it all meant. Suddenly the drums cease to beat, and one of the old fellows takes a paper from his pocket, and cries—

"Sergeant Ravette, come forward."

The sergeant steps forward, his musket on his arm.

"Sergeant Ravette, the Auvergne regiment acknowledges you as its colonel."

The new colonel immediately places his musket against a tree, and draws his sword, while the drums are beaten and the colours lowered, and the whole regiment presents arms.

I never saw anything more terrible. If the officers had attempted to use their canes the regiment would have fallen on them with the butts of their muskets and their bayonets. Fortunately, they soon saw their danger, and returned to the café while the affair continued.

After the colonel, they appointed the lieutenant-colonel, major, captains, lieutenants; all the officers, in fact, and many non-commissioned officers. It was all over by three. The square deployed; when the officers came out of the café to remonstrate, the new colonel, a little dark man, said to them drily—

"Gentleman you have six hours allowed you to leave the place."

Then he gave the command—

"By files to the left—forward—quick march!"

And the soldiers returned to their barracks.

The next day not one officer was in the town. This is what I saw myself. Three weeks after, the 24th of April the National Assembly was informed by the minister of war of the revolt of Auvergne regiment, "which had expelled its officers, had become a private society, and disavowed all authority but its own." I read it in the gazettes of the day, with many other falsehoods. The truth is the Auvergne regiment sided with the nation; they were tired of their officers' insolence; nor would they be under the command of men likely to betray them on the battle-field. Notwithstanding the minister's letter, many other of our regiments followed Auvergne's example, and if our whole army had done the same we should not have seen in later days generals-in-chief endeavour to lead their men against the people's representatives, and whole regimental staffs desert to the enemy.

One Sunday soon after, Maitre Jean came home; he saw everything was in order and was satisfied; he brought us a parcel of newspapers from the hotel of the Grand Cerf at Lixheim, by