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.

VII.

The National Assembly, wishing to prevent the disturbing of order by these men, ordered a camp of 20,000 men to be formed near the capital. But the king put his veto on this decree too. At the same time he sent Mallet-Dupan to the Prussians to press them to hasten their advance, and to proclaim on their march that they had no quarrel with the nation, but only with the seditious, and that they merely came in the cause of legitimate government, and to put down anarchy.

See this honest man, this good king, in concert with his people's enemies. Pity him, indeed! he wanted to put the halter once more round our neck. The poor man has failed; the patriots have vanquished the king of Europe and established and maintained justice at home What a misfortune! he is to be pitied! and the queen too, that kind-hearted Marie-Antoinette, who said every day that the Prussians, and her nephew, the King of Hungary, Emperor of Germany, would march and deliver her, over the bodies of two hundred thousand Frenchmen!

The Girondins, having at least seen how they were played with by the court, determined to force an explanation from the king, and the minister Roland addressed him a letter requesting him to be frank and declare himself either for or against the nation; if for, that he should sanction the two last decrees; if against that he should maintain his veto, and then the people would know that Louis XVI. sided with the enemies of France.

It was just; he said to him—

"Your majesty was in the enjoyment of great prerogatives, which you believed to belong to royalty. Brought up in the idea of their preservation, you could not see their loss without displeasure; the desire of recovering them was as natural as the regret felt at their deprivation. These feelings enter largely into the calculations of the enemies of the revolution; they reckon on secret favour until circumstances shall admit of avowed protection. The disposition cannot escape the notice of the nation, and it has maintained this state of distrust. Your majesty, therefore, has had the alternative of yielding to private affection, or of making sacrifices exacted by necessity, and consequently to embolden rebels by disquieting the nation, or to pacify the people by joining them; everything has its day, and the day of doubt is come.

"The declaration of rights is become a political gospel, and the French constitution a religion for which the people are ready to die. All sentiment has adopted the tones of passion; excitement is extreme; it will break out in some terrible manner, if a reasonable confidence in your majesty's intentions cannot calm it; but this confidence is not to be based on protestations, it can only have actions for a foundation. It is no longer time to draw back; there is no possibility of temporising; the revolution is made in men's minds; it will be completed at the price of blood, and cemented by it, if there be not wisdom sufficient to anticipate those evils which may be avoided; a short delay, and the people with grief will be bound to see in its king the friend and accomplice of conspirators."

The king, by way of reply, dismissed the Girondin ministers, but the National Assembly voted that the ministry carried with them the regret of the country, and that Roland's letter should be sent to the eighty-three departments. The king then appointed Dumouriez war minister. This general was a very shrewd man; when he saw that in spite of his advice Louis XVI. would not sanction the two decrees, he preferred resigning and accepting a small command in the army; so that the king, finding no man of sense willing to risk the danger of his two vetoes, was very much discouraged. The queen gave him confidence by saying to him—

"The Prussians will soon be here; have patience for a little while, and do not be discouraged.

This has been reported by one of Queen Marie-Antoinette's waiting-women, and I believe it to be true, because it is just as it used to be at home when my father lost courage, and my mother would say—

"Never mind, the time of drawing for the militia will soon be here; we shall be able to sell either Nicolas, Claude, or Michel. One of the three is sure to draw a white ticket. We shall be easy then; we can pay off the usurer, and with the rest we can buy a cow or a couple of goats."

It is always the same story: instead of selling one of us the queen would perhaps have given up Alsace. All France was afraid of it; this idea was a heavy weight on our hearts, for the poorest Baraquin loved his country better than those people did. I am sure of it, real patriotism is only to be found among the people; they love the land they cultivate; the others love places where they can gain pensions by doing nothing—at least, so it was then.

Every evening motions for exterminating everybody were proposed at the club, and Chauvel constantly repeated—

"Be calm! be calm! anger can do us no good; it disturbs everything. These two vetoes have been an advantage to us; the enemy is beginning to unmask; it is better to see his face. Up to the present moment we have been in doubt; now we have none; they have sought to create agitation, trouble, and dissensions among us. It is our enemies' plan. The greater the necessity for union and coolness. They will not have confederated patriots near Paris—a greater reason for sending the best. Let every man prepare to march; let those who remain subscribe their money to pay them. Let every man do his best. Attention. Let us remain united, and have no dissension."

Among provincial clubs, ours, in consequence of Chauvel's good sense and firmness, was perhaps the best. Our motions were sent to the Jacobins, and sometimes they were referred to during their sittings.

Suddenly Lafayette, who had hitherto been considered a good patriot, and been supported by the Girondins against the Montagnards, unmasked his batteries, and it was seen they were pointed at us—that he sided with the court and laughed at the people.

What he had done up to the present moment was mainly through vanity; now he put on his old nature; he was a marquis! and a dangerous marquis, since he was at the head of an army, and he might try to lead it against the National Assembly.

This was the first time danger from such a quarter threatened us; since then other generals have had the same idea. Fortunately Lafayette had won no great victory; after a trifling affair before Maubeuge, where the Austrians had been beaten, he said, "My army will follow me," but he was not sure of it, and contented himself by writing a very insolent letter to the Assembly, in which he declared the Jacobins were the cause of all disorder, called the Girondins intriguers, and gave a sort of order to the Assembly to dissolve all the clubs, and to withdraw its two decrees respecting refractory priests and the camp to the north of Paris. After that trust marquises, friends of Washington, a soldier without a victory who wants to give orders to the representatives of his country! Since then M. the Marquis de Lafayette, once the friend of Washington, now the court's defender, was a known man. The king liked him no more than the patriots; he was too much of a republican for him, too much of a marquis for us.

The National Guard, since his departure from Paris, had joined the people; the citizens and workpeople were united, as in '89. Petion's good sense had brought them together; and when they saw the insolence of this marquis they agreed to celebrate the aniversary of the tennis-court oath, which fell on the 20th of June. Chauvel had spoken about it a week before in his back shop.

"It is the greatest national fête," said he; "yes, the tennis-court oath is, in its way, worth the taking of the Bastille. These two great fêtes ought to be put in the calendar as the passage of the Red Sea and the arrival on Sinai among the Jews!"

The day before the 20th, even before hearing of Lafayette's letter, which we did not get till the 24th, Chauvel said—

"We shall not be able to celebrate this oath at Phalsbourg; in a fortified town we must have the minister's permission, and I would not ask it; all the same, I invite you to-morrow after dinner to take a good glass of wine in honour of this day; we shall not be alone in France."

We understood that something was about to take place—that he knew it, but was too prudent to tell us.

Every one knows now that the 20th of June the Parisians rose early, and, led by Santerre, the brewer, Legendre the butcher, Rossignol the jeweller, and some other patriots, an immense crowd of men, women, and children, with cannon and pikes, colours, and breeches hanging from poles, went to the National Assembly, shouting "A bas le véto! vivent les ministres Girondins!" and singing "Ca ira!"

The National Assembly threw open its doors to them; about twenty-five or thirty thousand marched through for three hours, and then they went and paid a visit to the king, queen, and their ministers at the Tuileries.

The National Guard, no longer under the command of Lafayette, instead of firing upon them, fraternised with them, and they all entered the palace together.

The poorer people were astonished at the works of art and luxury which they saw there for the first time; they also saw the king, surrounded by his domestics, in the recess of a window. The butcher Legendre told him he must sanction the decrees; that the people were tired of being taken for fools; that they could see things clearly, and were not to be deceived. This was the speech of a plain-spoken man.

The king promised to observe the constitution. He then got on a table, put the red cap on his head, and drank a glass of wine to the health of the nation.

There was a great tumult in the saloon; but Petion came at last and told the patriots, who were passing their time in looking about the palace, that if they remained there any longer the enemies of the public good would misinterpret their motives: he also told them they had shown the dignity of freemen, and the king would reflect with calmness on what his decision ought to be. They saw their mayor was in the right, and they began to file off through the palace while the Queen and the little dauphin, were sitting in one of the large saloons. This filing off lasted until evening.

This has been represented by many as a crime of the people against the king. The more I think of it the simpler and more natural it appears to me. Of course no man is especially pleased at seeing a great crowd of people in his house; but a king ought to be the father of his people. Louis XVI. had said so a thousand times.

Well, if it was true, and if he thought so, he ought not to have been surprised; there is nothing more natural than to ask a father for what one wants. But I believe he said so as he had said other things, and this visit from his children frightened him, as they came too unceremoniously; and as there was no want of Valentines then, there was no end to their regrets.

On the other hand, the patriots had hoped that Louis XVI. would have reflected on seeing this mass of people, and would have sanctioned the two decrees—so thought Chauvel. But the king maintained his veto, so that altogether the affair was a failure, and our enemies profited by it.

They might have been sure of it. The party of the Feuillants, and the soi-disant constitutionals, Barnave, Monnier, Lally-Tolendal, Duport, the brothers Lameth, who always talked to the people about respecting the constitution, and advised the court to destroy it—these people, half the National Guard, and seventy-six departmental directories, cried that all was lost; that there was no respect for the king; that Santerre, Rossignal, and Legendre, and all the chiefs of the manifestation of the 20th of June, should be brought to trial, as well as Petion, for not having fired on the people, as Bailly did on the Champ de Mars; and Lafayette himself, instead of remaining at his post, watching the eighty thousand Austrians and Prussians assembled at Coblentz to invade us—Lafayette left his duty and came to Paris to require, in the name of the army, the chastisement of the insurgents of the 20th of June.

He was honourably received by the Assembly, which did not prevent the Girondin Guadet saying—

"When I heard M. Lafayette was in Paris I immediately thought we had no longer any enemies abroad—the Austrians are vanquished. This illusion has not lasted long; our enemies are still there, and yet M. Lafayette is in Paris. What powerful motives can have brought him here? Our domestic troubles? Does he, then, fear the National Assembly has not sufficient power to repress them? He constitutes himself the mouthpiece of the army and of all respectable people. These respectable people where are they? This army, how did it come to this decision? I believe M. Lafayette takes the wishes of his staff for those of the whole army, and I say that if he has left his post without the minister's permission, he violates the constitution."

That was clear.

Lafayette is the first example of those generals who afterwards deserted their armies to come and seize upon power under the pretence of serving their country.

He ought to have been arrested and tried by court-martial. If he had been condemned to have a cannon-ball chained to his leg for ten years, as a private soldier, he would not have been in such a hurry to go to Paris without orders.

At last, after having denounced the Jacobins at the National Assembly, he hurried to offer to escort their majesties to Compiègne, whence the king could order the revision of the constitution, establish the monarchy in its prerogatives, and the nobility in their civil privileges. He, Lafayette, would undertake to carry out the king's wishes, and if Paris resisted to treat it as a city in rebellion. This we found out afterwards by letters from Coblentz. But the king and queen gave him a cold reception.

The queen wanted to be rescued by the Prussians and not by Lafayette, who had dragged her from Versailles to Paris, surrounded by a crowd in rags, crying out, "Here is the baker, his wife, and the little apprentice!" She could not forget it, nor accustom herself to the idea of any constitution, and still less to see in M. Lafayette the saviour of the monarchy. The absolute rule of the Prussians and that of her nephew Francis, King of Hungary and Bohemia, Emperor of Germany, was much more preferable. Lafayette, seeing that the days of the white horse were gone, tried all the same to raise the National Guard to exterminate the Jacobin Club; but Petion forbade the rappel to be beaten. No one came, and the marquis in despair quietly returned to his army near Sedan.

The patriots saw through his treason, and the Assembly received petitions from all quarters to demand the punishment of traitors, and especially of Lafayette.

It was about the beginning of July, during the greatest heat in the year, that thousands of confederated patriots, without troubling themselves about the veto, set off to organise a camp of twenty thousand men; they started in small bands of five or six, in their blouses, with red caps on their heads, and with a change of clothes and shoes in a handkerchief at the end of a stick, crying—

"To Paris! to Paris!"

The elder ones, when stopped on their road to take a glass of wine or beer, would say—

"We are going there to defend liberty, resist oppression, and punish traitors."

They were covered with dust. My heart beat when I saw them pass, turn round to wave their hats and caps in the air, and shout to us—

"Adieu! You shall soon hear of us!"

I would have followed them, but the idea of father and mother, Mathurine and Etienne, who could not do without me, kept me back. It was hard to stay behind.

The king's minister Terrier then wrote to the directories of all the departments to stop and disperse these assemblages by all reasonable means; to remind the districts and municipalities that the magistrates ought on their own responsibility to order police-officers, the national gendarmes, and all public forces not to allow these people to leave their native place under pretence of going to the capital. But his letter had no effect; on the contrary, all the clubs were against it, and Chauvel declared it was treachery; that every facility had been given to the Prussians and Austrians to unite their forces; that the road into our native country had been, as it were, cleared for them, and that now they had recourse to the veto and the threat of martial law, and other abominable devices, to prevent the citizens from doing their duty. He discovered also that the king's servants, disguised as National Guards, went everywhere, turning the federals, whom they called sans-culottes, into ridicule, as if poverty was a crime. Very often a poor man had more heart and more self-respect than rascals like them, for it is not difficult to be a valet, and one earns more money that way than by working at a trade from morning to night. It was universally considered to be time to put these people in their proper place, and the National Assembly passed a decree that those citizen National Guards who had been induced to come to Paris through attachment to the constitution, either to join the army of reserve at Soissons or to go to the frontiers, should enrol themselves at the municipality; that they should be present at the federal fêtes of July 14th; that they should receive billets for military quarters during three days, that then the municipality would give them the route for their destination, where their battalions would be organised and paid on a war footing.

This decree did good; it was sent by a special messenger to the eighty-three departments, and the king, the queen, the courtiers, and the ministers at last understood the veto was not final; and notwithstanding that Luckner fell back before the Austrians according to orders from government, in spite of the junction of ninety-five thousand Austrians and Prussians at Coblentz, with twenty thousand émigrés ready to invade us; notwithstanding Bouillé's fine plan, who kept his promise to show the foreigner the road to France, and whom Frederick William, Francis II., and the Duke of Brunswick had summoned to their councils; in spite of his fine plan of attacking Longwy, Sedan, and Verdun, which would hardly offer any defence, and then to march on to Paris by Rethel and Rheims, across the fine plains of Champagne, where they would find in the granaries and barns of our peasants the means of supporting their invasion; notwithstanding the preaching of refractory nobles, which severed Britany and La Vendée more than ever from our revolution and the raising of the Lower Languedoc peasantry by the Count de Saillant, the king's lieutenant-general; in fact, in spite of all the treasons of the nobility, the court, and the émigrés united against us to establish the king's good pleasure, the game was not in their favour Yes, if these people had but possessed a shadow of common sense, they ought to have seen that armies of cobblers and lawyers, as they called us, dreaded neither the grenadiers of Frederick nor the lancers of the King of Bohemia and Hungary, nor "the illustrious descendants of a haughty race of conquerors."

In the first place, it is a different thing to fight for oneself to getting one's head broken for a prince, who would afterwards lay you aside like a useless crutch. This idea must have occurred to them, and I think to Louis XVI, also; for, some time after, letters were found in the iron chest, despairing letters, in which he spoke of the trouble and uneasiness which the creation of the army of cobblers and lawyers caused him and whom he would have preferred to see fighting one another.

I shall never forget the passage of the federals nor the terrible cry from France, when, at the beginning of July, the famous speech of the Girondin Vergniaud was published in the country and when each of us recognised our own opinion of the treachery of Louis XVI. in that of the National Assembly. Chauvel himself read this