

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 FIRST.

1789.

II.

We were four boys and two girls—Nicolas, Lisbeth, myself, Claude, Mathurine, and little Etienne, a poor little pale and delicate cripple, whom the Baraques people called the little duck, because he waddled on his poor deformed legs; all the others were strong and hearty.

Mother often said, when looking at Nicolas, Claude, and myself—

"Don't fret so much, Jean-Pierre; among these three one must draw a lucky number. Then let Robin look out; as soon as he gets his money, I'll split his head open with this axe."

Wretched, indeed, must she be to entertain such ideas for a moment. Father would make no reply, and it was for us quite in the order of things to be sold; we thought ourselves as much the property of our father and mother as so many head of cattle. Great want prevents one from seeing things as they are; before '89, with the exception of the nobles and the bourgeois, every father of a family looked on his children as property; that is what some think so right, and what makes them say that their fathers and mothers were held in greater respect, which is pure nonsense.

Fortunately, our father was too good-hearted to try and make a profit out of us; often the poor man cried when in a middle of a famine in winter he was obliged to send us out begging like every one else. He would never let little Etienne go out in the snow. I did not go out begging long either; I can just remember going out on the road to Mittelbronn or the Quatre-Vents two or three times, when very young, for when I was eight years old, my godfather, Jean Leroux, the blacksmith, who kept an inn at the other end of the village, had taken me to look after his cattle, and I only went home to sleep.

These things happened long, long ago, and yet the Three Pigeons Inn is always before my eyes, with its tall signpost by the roadside; Phalsbourg, grey in the distance against the sky; in front of the inn the little black forge, and behind it a sloping orchard, the great oak-tree, and the streamlet running through it. The water of the spring bubbled over some big stones placed there on purpose, and spread over the thick turf, and the oak covered it with its shade. All round this oak the soldiers belonging to the regiment de Boccart, in 1778, had made a bench and raised bowers of ivy and honeysuckle, by order of Major Bachman; since then officers of the different regiments came to this spot, which they called Tivoli, to amuse themselves. The wives and daughters of the *échevins* and the syndics all wanted to drink the Tivoli water on Sundays, and to dance under the oak-tree.

There it was that the tall Chevalier d'Orléans, belonging to the regiment de Brie, standing above the spring, lifted up his bottle full of water and spouted Latin with his eyes turned up. The ladies, seated on the grass with their beautiful dresses of thick brocade, their little satin shoes with steel buckles, and their round hats, with poppies and daisies twined round them, listened and laughed without understanding a word; and when Quartermaster de Venier, with his little violin, began to play minuets, the Chevaliers de Sigueville, de Saint Féral, de Contréglise, all these fools, with their little hats cocked over the ear, got up, extended one leg, and offered a hand to a lady, who hastened to smooth down her dress and take her place; they then danced with gravity and staidness. The servants, all old soldiers, went to the inn for baskets of wine, pies, and preserves, which an ass had conveyed from the town.

The poor of Baraques, standing in the dusty road, flattening their noses against the pallings of the orchard, watched all these fine people, more especially when the corks were drawn and the pies opened; every one wished to be there then, just for one quarter of an hour.

Then when night came the officers gave their arms to the ladies, and the noble company slowly returned to Phalsbourg.

Many regiments visited the Tivoli of Maitre Jean; up to 1791 those of Castelle, Rouergue, Schénau, La Fare, Royal Auvergne. The *échevins*, syndics, and counsellors came too, in their great well-powdered wigs and their wide black coats, white with flour down the backs; they led a pleasant life. Now of all who danced and of all who looked on, I am without doubt the only one remaining: if I did not talk about them one would no more bestow a thought upon them than on the autumn leaves of 1778.

Once in my godfather's service, I had nothing to complain of: I had a new pair of shoes every year and my food; how many others would have been glad to have had as much! I knew it, and I neglected nothing in my endeavour to please Maitre Jean, Madame Catherine his wife, and even the apprentice Valentine, and sometimes left a horn on the field of battle. In the evening we sat in the shade, leaning against a rock, watching the approach of night, listening to the buzzing in the air and the frogs beginning to croak in the stream farther off.

Then came the time to go home. Nicolas blew the horn, the echoes from the rocks re-

peated it, the cattle collected together and followed in a line to Baraques in a cloud of dust. I put ours in the stable, filled the mangers, and had my supper with Maitre Jean, Madame Catherine, and Nicolas. In summer, when they worked at the forge, I blew the bellows till ten, and I went home to sleep in my father's hut at the other end of the village.

Once well off try to remain so; therefore every morning, in the summer at four, in the winter at five, while the people of the inn were fast asleep, and the cows chewed the cud in the stable, I was already at the door, at which I gave two gentle knocks. This awoke the girl, who got up and opened the door in the dark. I lighted my lantern from the ashes in the kitchen; then while Nicole milked the cows I went up to the granary for oats and hay, and I gave a feed to the horses of the waggoners and grain-dealers who slept at the inn the night before market-days. They got up, looked at everything, and found it all right; then I helped them to get their carts from the shed, bridle their horses, and buckle their harness; and when they started and began to cry, "Hue Fox! Hue, Rappel!" I wished them good-day with my little woollen cap in my hand.

These great waggoners and flour-dealers they never took the trouble to answer me, but they were satisfied, and had no fault to find, that was the great thing.

When Nicole came back to the kitchen she gave me a saucer of curds and whey, when I ate with an appetite. She then gave me a great piece of bread to take to pasture with me, two or three fine onions, sometimes a hard-boiled egg, or a bit of butter. I put everything in my bag, and then I went to the stable, cracking my whip. The animals came out one after the other; I patted them, and then we went in single file down the valley of the Rocks, I running last as happy as possible.

The Phalsbourg people, who go to bathe in the valley of the Zorne, knew these masses of rocks, heaped up as far as one can see, a scanty heath growing in the fissures, the little streamlet full of cresses from the springs below, which is dried up by the time June's white butterflies are come.

There I used to go, for we had a right of pasture on the waste lands of the town, and it was only towards the end of August, when there was nothing left for the cattle to graze on, that we went to the forest. All this time I was out in the air.

The herdsmen of Phalsbourg only brought out the swine, which, in the heat of the day, made a hole in the sandy soil and huddled themselves up together. There they slept, flapping their eyes with their pink ears; one might tread on them without making them move.

Boys used to come there from other villages, one with an old blind horse, another with a mangy cow, many with nothing to do but crack a whip, whistle, or dig up the turnips, carrots, and radishes in the fields. If the Garde Champêtre caught them, he walked them into town, with a collar of stinging-nettles round their necks, which was all the same to them; the only thing they cared for much was, the second or third time it happened, according to their age, to be publicly whipped on market-days. The executioner scratched their backs with his bull's-hide whip; if they repeated it they were sent to prison. Many a time have I recollected seeing the grandmothers and grandfathers of such people, who exclaimed against the Revolution, whipped in the good old days. I could not help laughing; one meets with curious things in this world!

However, I too am bound to confess that I regret the past, not on account of the floggings or the prévôt, no, but because I was young then; and if our superiors were worth but little, the heaven above us was beautiful still. My big brother Nicolas and the rest of them, Claude, Lisbeth, Mathurine, would come and take possession of my bag, and we cried and wrangled over it. If they took all, Maitre Jean would have paid them a visit in the evening at our hut; they were afraid of that, so they left me my share, and they called me—their canon!

At other times our big Nicolas protected me. Then all the villages, Hultshausen, Lutzelbourg, the Quatre-Vents, Mittelbronn, the Baraques above and below, fought with sticks and stones; Nicolas, with the remains of an old cocked hat on the back of his head, an old soldier's coat, all in rags, buttoned down his thighs, with a great cudgel in his hand, and naked feet, marched at the head of the Baraques like a savage chief; he screamed "Forward!" so loud that he could be heard at Dann.

I could not help loving him, for every moment he called out, "The first that hits Michel had better look out!" but all the same he took my onions away from me, which was very disagreeable.

They used to make the animals fight, and when they were struggling with their horns locked together, Nicolas laughed and encouraged them. They often injured themselves, and sometimes left a horn on the field of battle. In the evening we sat in the shade, leaning against a rock, watching the approach of night, listening to the buzzing in the air and the frogs beginning to croak in the stream farther off.

Then came the time to go home. Nicolas blew the horn, the echoes from the rocks re-

peated it, the cattle collected together and followed in a line to Baraques in a cloud of dust. I put ours in the stable, filled the mangers, and had my supper with Maitre Jean, Madame Catherine, and Nicolas. In summer, when they worked at the forge, I blew the bellows till ten, and I went home to sleep in my father's hut at the other end of the village.

III.

Five years passed on, my brothers and sisters continued begging, and I took all possible pains to be useful to my godfather. When I was ten years old the idea of learning a trade and of earning my bread myself had already occurred to me; Maitre Jean noticed it, and kept me at the forge as much as he could.

Every time I think of it I fancy I can hear my godfather's voice cry, "Courage Michel, courage!"

He was a tall, stout man, with large red whiskers, a long pigtail hanging down his back, and his moustaches so long and thick, that he could turn them back behind his ears. In those days the farriers of the hussars wore such whiskers, and the tail fastened behind. I fancy my godfather wanted to look like them. He had great grey eyes, a thick nose, round cheeks—when he did laugh he laughed loud. His leathern apron came up under his chin, and his great arms were naked at the forge in the middle of winter. Every moment he wrangled with his apprentice, Valentine, a tall, stooping lanky fellow, who thought every thing right in this world—nobles, monks, freedoms of companies, everything!

"But, you fool!" cried my godfather to him, "if these things did not exist you would have been a master blacksmith, like myself, long ago; you might have got something together and have lived comfortably."

"It's all the same," said Valentine. "You may think as you will; as for me, I am all for our holy religion, the nobility, and the king; that is the state of things which God has ordained!"

Then would Maitre Jean shrug his shoulders and say—

"Well, if you think everything is right, I have no objection—go on!"

And then they went on hammering. I never met with a better fellow than Valentine, but he had no head, and he argued like a goose. It was not his fault, and he ought not to be blamed for it.

Mistress Catherine was of the same opinion as her husband, and Nicole thought like her mistress.

The inn prospered, Maitre Jean put by money every year, and when the officials were appointed to settle about the *corvées*, the head-money, and other exactions at Baraques, he was always on the list, with the master woodcutter, Coehart and the great wheelwright, Lésumier, who was also making three or four hundred livres.

You must know at that time the usual road for the waggoners, carters, and marsh cultivators of Alsace going to the town was to pass by Baraques; but the road from Saverne to Phalsbourg was straight up hill, stony, full of ruts and even hollows, which threatened to overturn you into the Schlittenbach; and it required five or six extra horses to climb this hill, people used to go round by the valley of the Zorne, and both going and coming they almost always stopped at the Three Pigeons.

The forge and the inn worked well together; while the horse was being shod or the cart mended, the driver stepped into the Three Pigeons; he could look out of the window and see what was going on while he ate his crust of bread and drank his half-pint of white wine.

On fair-days the large room swarmed with customers; they came in crowds with their packages, baskets, and carts. On their road home they had nearly always a drop too much, and were free enough in speaking their mind. They grumbled without ceasing; the women especially never left off; they called the prévôts and seigneurs by their true names; they repeated instances of their abominable conduct, and when their husbands tried to stop them they called them a set of fools.

The farmers of Alsace were particularly bitter against the turnpike tolls which cut down their profits, for they had to pay on coming from Alsace into Lorraine. The unlucky Jews who had to pay at every gate—so much for the Jew, and so much for the donkey—did not dare complain, but the others spared no one.

"Yes, it is a fact; they squeeze us to death; the duties are raised every day; but what can we do? The peasants are peasants, and the seigneurs are masters; as long as the world goes on the seigneurs will be at the top, and we must remain at the bottom. Well, let us trust in God. Here, Mistress Catherine, take your money and let's be off."

And off they all went. An old woman would begin to pray aloud to help them along the road, other women took it up, and the men with bowed heads followed meditating after.

I have often thought that this sort of burthen of question and answer saved them from thinking, and was a sort of relief to them. The idea never occurred to them of helping themselves—

of getting rid of the saltmaker, collector, toll-taker, seigneurs, convents, and of all that bore upon them; and of putting the tithes, aids, twentieths,—all exactions, in fact—into their own pockets, as they did later. They still trusted to the goodness of God.

But all this movement, these grumbings, this collection of Jews, waggoners, and peasants in the great room on fair-days, their quarrels over the price of oxen, corn, oats, and crops of all sorts; the expression of their faces when they shook hands over a bargain, and called for a pint of wine to wet it, according to custom—all this taught me to know both men and things. There could have been no better school for a boy; and if I have since acquired property, it is, that long before, I was already master of the value of land, stock, and crops. The old Jew Schmoulé and big Mathias Fischer, of Harberg, taught me all this, for they quarrelled often enough over the price of their wares.

You may believe me, when I was still quite little, I kept both eyes and ears open when running about with glasses and tankards. But what I liked best of all was to listen to Maitre Jean when he read the newspaper after supper.

In these days the smallest country inn takes in a newspaper; the old *Messager Botteux* of Silberman, hanging by the window, is no longer in existence. Every one wants to know how the country gets on, and reads the *Courrier du Bas-Rhin* or the *Impartial de la Meurthe* at least two or three times a week; every one is ashamed now of living like an ass, and of taking no notice of what is of interest to all. But before '89 those who had no right to trouble themselves about politics, and who were there to pay what exactions it was the king's pleasure to lay upon them, those people, I say, did not care to read; in fact, most of them did not know their letters; and besides, newspapers were very expensive, and Maitre Jean, though very well off, did not like incurring such an expense for his amusement only.

The little book-hawker Chauvel fortunately used to bring us a bundle of papers on his return from his journeys in Alsace, Lorraine, or the Palatinate. This was one of the characters which have disappeared since the Revolution—the hawker of almanacs, prayer-books, hymns to the Virgin, catechisms, alphabets, &c., who went his rounds from Strasbourg to Metz, from Trèves to Nancy, from Pont-à-Mousson, Toul, Verdun; who was to be met on all the byroads, in the depth of the woods, at the gates of the farms, convents, and abbeys, the approaches to the villages, in his jacket of coarse cloth, his gaiters with bone buttons reaching to his knees, hobnailed shoes, his back bent, with a leather strap over his shoulder supporting an enormous wicker basket on his back. True he sold mass-books, but how many forbidden publications were smuggled besides—the works of Jean Jacques, Voltaire, Raynal, Helvetius!

Father Chauvel was the boldest as well as the cleverest of all these Alsatian and Lorraine smugglers. He was a little, dry, nervous, dark man, with pinched-up lips and a hooked nose. His basket seemed to break him down, but he really carried it easily enough. As you passed him his little black eyes seemed to look through you; he could read you at a glance, whether you wanted anything, or whether you belonged to the police; whether to be on his guard against you, or to ask you to buy. He was obliged to be so, for if taken in this sort of contraband trade he would have been sent to the galleys.

Every time he came home from his journeys, Chauvel came first to us, about night-fall, when the inn was empty and the village silent. Then he appeared with his little Margaret, who never left him, not even in his rounds; and we only heard their steps in the alley to say, "Here's Chauvel! now we shall hear the news." Nicole ran to open the door and Chauvel came in, with a nod of the head, holding his child in his hand. This remembrance takes seventy-five years off my age. I see him now with Margaret brown as a whortleberry, in her linen gown with a blue fringe, and her black hair falling over her shoulders.

Chauvel handed the bundle of newspapers to Nicole, and sat down behind the stove with his little girl between his knees. Maitre Jean would turn round to him and cry out—

"Well, Chauvel, all goes on well, eh?"

"Yes, well, Maitre Jean; the people buy plenty of books, they begin to learn," would the little man answer.

While he was speaking, Margaret would pay great attention to him. It was clear she understood all what was said.

Maitre Jean was very fond of this little man; they understood one another perfectly.

After opening the bundle of newspapers on the table, and looking at them a moment or two, Maitre Jean would say—

"This comes from Utrecht, this from Cleves, this from Amsterdam—now we shall see what is going on. Nicole, fetch my spectacles; they are there by the window."

Maitre Jean, after having luxuriated in this manner for some minutes, would begin to read, while I sat breathless in my corner. I forgot everything, even the danger of going home late in winter when the village was covered with