

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.

VI

The old town-hall, with its bell-tower, its large open windows under the clock, its arched entrance, through which the villages poured one after the other, sounded from top to bottom like a drum. At a distance it resembled an ant's hill. The Baraquins passed before the people from Lutzelbourg; they were between the old cistern and the grand staircase. Maitre Jean, Valentine, my father, and myself walked in front; but the others, those from Vilschberg, not having given all their votes, we had to wait on the steps some time; how every man's heart beat then when he reflected on what he was about to do! Behind us, under the old elms, after the cries of "Vive notre bon roi!" I heard a clear voice, a voice we all recognised, that of little Margaret Chauvel, who was crying, like the almanack-sellers—

"What is the Third Estate? by M. l'Abbé Siéyes; buy What is the Third Estate? Assemblies of the Bailiwicks, of Monseigneur the Duke of Orleans; who will buy The Assemblies of the Bailiwicks?"

I turned to Maitre Jean and said, "Do you hear little Margaret?"

"Yes, I have heard her a long time," said he. "What good people these Chauvels are! They may well boast of having done good to their country. You should go and tell Margaret to send her father here. He cannot be far off; he will be pleased to hear himself named."

Elbowing my way, I pushed through the crowd to the top of the steps of the town-hall, and I perceived Margaret selling her books, with her basket on a bench in the place under the elms. One can hardly fancy anything like the little rogue, catching the peasants by the sleeve, and talking to them in German and French. Her sale was at its height; and for the first time the brightness of her black eyes astonished me, in spite of the thousand other ideas which occupied my mind. I stepped down towards the bench, and as I went up Margaret caught me by the jacket, crying—

"Sir! sir! What is the Third Estate? Just look at What is the Third Estate? of M. Abbé Siéyes, for six liards."

Then I spoke to her.

"Don't you recognise me, Margaret?"

"Why it is Michel!" said she, letting me go and laughing.

She wiped the perspiration which ran down her brown cheeks, and threw her long black hair all loose on the back of her neck. We were both surprised to find ourselves there.

"How you do work, Margaret! what pains you are taking!" said I.

"Yes," said she, "this is the great day—we must go on selling," and pointing to the bottom of her petticoat, and to her little feet, covered with mud, "Look what a state I am in; we have walked since six yesterday evening; we came from Luneville with fifty dozen of the Third Estate, and we have been selling them all the morning till now! Look here, we have only ten or twelve dozen left."

She looked quite proud of it, and I still held her hand in surprise.

"And where is your father?" said I.

"I don't know; somewhere in the town—about the inns. We shall sell every one of these Third Estates. I am sure he has already sold all his copies."

Then suddenly drawing her little hand back—"Go," said she, "the Baraquins are going into the Hôtel de Ville."

"But I am not twenty-five, Margaret, and I have no vote."

"It is all the same; we are losing time chattering here."

And then she began selling again,

"Here, gentlemen, the Third Estate, the Third Estate."

I went away astonished. I had always seen Margaret by her father's side, and now she appeared quite another person. I wondered at her courage. I thought to myself, "She would get out of a scrape better than you, Michel."

And even in the crowd, on the balcony, after having rejoined Maitre Jean, I kept thinking of it.

"Well?" said he, as soon as I reached him. "Margaret is by herself in the square; her father is somewhere in the town with his books."

At that moment we were going down from the balcony into the great corridor, which led to the prévôt's audience-hall. The Baraquins' turn had come; and as it was necessary to vote out loud, before entering the hall, we could easily hear the voting.

"Maitre Jean Leroux! Mathurin Chauvel! Maitre Jean Leroux! Mathurin Chauvel! Maitre Jean Leroux! Chauvel!"

Maitre Jean, with a very red face, said to me—

"What a pity Chauvel is not here! how pleased he would be!"

I turned round and saw Chauvel behind me, quite astonished at what he heard.

"You have done this?" said he to Maitre Jean.

"Yes," said the godfather, very well pleased.

"From you I am not surprised at this," said Chauvel, shaking hands with him; "I have known so long what you are. What surprises and delights me is to hear Catholics name a Calvinist. The people are laying aside their old superstitions; they will gain the day!"

We moved gently forward, and we turned two by two to enter the great hall. Directly afterwards, above the crowd, with their hats off, we perceived M. the Prévôt Schneider, in a black coat, edged with white, a cap in his hand, and a sword by his side. The echevins and syndics in black coats, a black scarf round the neck, were sitting one step lower. Behind, against the wall, was the large crucifix.

That is all I can remember.

The names of Jean Leroux and Mathurin Chauvel followed like the beat of a clock. The first who said "Nicolas Letumier and Chauvel," was Maitre Jean himself. He was recognised in consequence, and the prévôt smiled. The second who voted for Jean Leroux and Letumier was Chauvel; he was consequently recognised also; but M. le Prévôt had known him for a long while, and he did not smile at his name. The lieutenant, Desjardins, indeed, whispered to him as he leaned over to him.

I had already turned to the right, having no vote to give. Chauvel, Maitre Jean, and myself left together; he had much trouble in getting through the crowd again; and even down below, instead of passing out by the place where the voters from Mittelbronn were just arriving, we went out by the back, under the old market. There Chauvel left us directly saying—

"This evening we will talk it over at the Baraques."

He had still some little books to sell. Maitre Jean and I went thoughtfully home alone. The crowd dispersed; they seemed very tired, but pleased nevertheless. Some had had a glass too much, and sang and danced along the road. My father and Valentine came home later. We might have hunted a long time for them without finding them.

That same evening after supper, Chauvel and his daughter came as usual. Chauvel had a great bundle of paper in his pocket; it consisted of the speeches made by the prévôt and his lieutenant the morning before the elections in the town-hall; and the procès-verbaux of the clergy, the nobility, and the third estate. The speeches were very good, and as Maitre Jean wondered how men could speak to us so well, and treat us always so ill, Chauvel, said, smiling—

"In future words and deeds must correspond. These gentlemen see the people are the stronger, and they take off their hats to them; but the people must be cognisant of their strength, and make use of it; then everything will be as justice wills it."

XII.

I must now mention a circumstance which affects me still when I think of it. It is the happiness of my life.

I must inform you that in this month of April, those of our province who had been named to draw up the memorial of our complaints and grievances met at the bailiwick of Lixheim. They were lodged in the inn; Maitre Jean and Chauvel left every Monday morning, and only returned the following Saturday evening; this lasted three weeks.

You may guess how the mountain was in motion all this time. The cries and disputes over the abolition of the poll and salt tax, of the militia; on the vote by individual or according to rank, and thousands of other things which had never been thought of; crowds of Alsations and Lorrainers filled the inn; they drank, struck the tables with their fists, and quarrelled like wolves; you would think they were going to throttle one another, and yet they were all of the same mind, like all the laboring class; they wanted what we wanted; without that what fights we should have seen! Valentine and I worked at the forge opposite the house; we mended the carts and shod the horses of all the passers-by; sometimes I tried an argument with Valentine, who thought all was lost if the seigneurs and bishops had the worst of it; I tried to convince him but he was such a good fellow that I did not like to annoy him; his only resource was to talk about a hut he had in the wood behind the Roche-Plate, where he caught tomcats; he had also traps in the heather, and snares in the runs, with leave from the inspector, M. Claude Coudray, to whom, from time to time, in return, he carried a string of fieldfares or other birds. This is what touched him most in the midst of this approaching confusion; he only thought about his decoy-birds, and used to cry to me—

"The building time is coming, Michel, and after the nests, the catching them with a call; then the flight of fieldfares, which settle in Alsace when the grasses are ripe; the year promises well, and if the fine weather lasts we shall catch plenty."

His long face grew longer still; he smiled, showing his toothless gums, his eyes became rounder; he seemed to see the fieldfares hanging by the neck in his snares; and he pulled the

hair out of all the horses' tails as they went by to make his springer. I was always thinking about the great affairs of the bailiwick, but mostly about the abolition of the militia, for I had to draw in September, and that concerned me more than anything else.

But something else occurred.

For some time, when I went home in the evening, I found mother Letumier and her daughter spinning with my mother, by the side of my father, Marceline, and little Etienne, who were plating baskets; they were quite at home there, and would stay till ten. These Letumiers were people well off for that period; they had some freehold property, and their daughter Annette, a tall fair girl, with hair rather inclining to red, but fresh and white, was a good creature. I often saw her going and coming past the forge with a small bucket under her arm, as if she was going to fetch water from the fountain; she would look round with a tender air; she had on a short petticoat and red linen corset, with shoulder-straps, and her arms bare up to the elbows.

I saw this without noticing or suspecting anything. In the evening, while watching her spinning, I may have said something gay or trifling, such as boys say to girls in all respect, as is very natural, without thinking more about it.

But one day my mother said—

"Look here, Michel, you had better go and dance to-morrow at the Rondinet de la Clogne, and put on your velvet jacket, your red waistcoat, and your silver heart."

I wondered and asked her why, but she only smiled, and said, looking at my father—

"You will see."

My father was plating very thoughtfully; he said to me—

"The Letumiers are rich; you might as well dance with their daughter; she would be a good match."

It put me out to hear this. I did not dislike the girl, but I never once yet thought of marrying. At last, through curiosity or folly, or because I wanted to please my father, I answered—

"As you will, but I am too young to marry, and I have not drawn for the militia."

"Well," said my mother, "it will cost you nothing to go there, and that may please people. It is only a civility after all."

So I answered—

"Very well."

And the following Sunday, after vespers, I set off. I go down the hill thinking these things over and wondering what I was about.

At that time old Paquette, widow of Dieudonné Bernel, kept the inn of the Clogne at Lutzelbourg, a little to the left of the wooden bridge; and behind, where the garden now is, at the foot of the slope, they used to dance under the yoke elm hedges. There were plenty of people, for the curé Christopher was not like so many other curés; he did not choose to see or hear anything, not even Jean Kat's clarionette. The drunk a small Alsatian wine and ate fried fish.

So I go down the street and go up the stair at the bottom of the court, looking at the boys and girls dancing about on the terrace; just as I reached the first arbours Mother Letumier cried—

"This way, Michel, this way."

Pretty Annette was there; when she saw me she became very red. I took her by the arm and asked her to waltz with me. She cried—

"Oh, M. Michel!" looked up and followed me.

Girls have been the same in all times, before as after the Revolution; they always like one man better than another.

"Well, I waltzed with her four or five times, I cannot exactly say how often, and they laughed. Mother Letumier seemed pleased, Annette was very red, and kept looking down. Of course we did not talk politics; we joked, we drank, and ate a cake together. I thought to myself—

"Mother will be satisfied; they will compliment her on her boy."

Towards evening, about six, I had enough of it; and without thinking of anything, I went into the street, and turned towards the pine-wood to cut across by the rocks.

It was very warm for the time of year, everything was green and in flower—violets, whortleberries, and strawberry-plants spread over and covered the path with verdure. One would have thought it the month of June. I remember these things as if it were yesterday, yet I am a few years older than I was then—yes, indeed!

At last, once over the rocks on the level, I reach the high road, whence you can see the roofs of the Baraques, and two or three hundred paces before me I see a little girl, white with dust, carrying a heavy square basket over her shoulder, who walked and walked. I said to myself—

"That must be Margaret! Yes, it is!"

And I walk faster—I run.

"Stop! Is that you, Margaret?"

She turned round, showing me her brown face shining with perspiration, her hair falling over her cheeks, her bright eyes; she began to laugh, and said—

"Oh, Michel! what a lucky meeting!"

I looked at the thick strap which seemed cutting into her shoulder; I was quite astonished, and ill at ease.

"Why, you look tired, said she. "Have you been far?"

"No, I come from Lutzelbourg, where I have been dancing."

"Ah, yes," said she walking on, "I come from Dabo. I have been all over the district. I have sold plenty of Third Estates down there. I got there just as the parish deputies met. The day before yesterday I was in Lixheim in Lorraine."

"Are you made of iron?" asked I as I walked along with her.

"Not quite of iron; all the same, I am rather tired; but the great blow has been struck, do you see; it keeps moving!"

She laughed, but was tired, for as she got near the little wall which inclosed Furst's old orchard she rested her basket on it, and said—

"Let us talk a little, Michel, and take breath."

I took her basket and put it on the top of the wall, saying, as I did so—

"Yes, let us breathe a while, Margaret; yours is a harder occupation than ours."

"Yes, but we are getting on," said she, with the same voice and look as her father's; "we may say we have made some progress. We have already recovered our ancient rights, and now we are going to ask for others. Everything must be granted—everything. All must be equalised; the taxes must be the same for all; every one must be free to succeed if he has the courage to work, and then we must be free—there!"

She looked at me. I was lost in admiration. I thought to myself—

"What are we in comparison with people like these? What have we either done or suffered for our country?"

Then glancing at me, she continued—

"Yes; that is how it is. Now the memorials are nearly finished, we shall sell thousands of them. In the meantime, I travel about alone. We have only this trade to live by, and I must work for us both now, while father is working for us all. I, yesterday, took him twelve livres; that will make up his weeks' account. I gained fifteen; since then I have earned four; now I have seven livres left. I shall go and see him the day after to-morrow; that will do, and while the States-General are in session we shall sell all that goes on—to the third estate I mean. We shall not give ground now—no! Intellect must advance; everything must be known. Let the people teach themselves. Do you understand?"

"Yes, yes, Margaret," said I; "you talk like your father. I could almost cry."

She was at that moment seated on the wall by the side of her basket. The sun had just set; the sky in the distance, in the direction of Mittelbronn, was like gold, veined with red, and the pale and bluish moon, free from clouds, was rising on the left above the old ruins of the Castle of Lutzelbourg. I looked at Margaret, who had ceased speaking, and who was looking at these things with her eyes raised. I continued watching her; she had her elbow on her basket, and I did not take my eyes off her. She noticed it, and said—

"Ah, I am covered with dust, am I not?"

Without answering her question, I asked her—

"How old are you?"

"On Easter Sunday, in a fortnight, I shall be sixteen. How old are you?"

"I am more than eighteen."

"Yes, you are strong enough," said she, springing from the wall and throwing the strap over the shoulder. "Help me. That's it!"

When I only lifted the basket I felt how terribly heavy it was, and said—

"It is too heavy for you, Margaret. You had better let me carry it for you."

She walked on stooping, glanced at me, smiled, and said—

"When one works to recover one's rights, nothing is too heavy, and have them we will."

I had no answer to make. I felt uncomfortable. I was filled with admiration for Chauvel and his daughter.

Margaret seemed tired no longer.

We had just reached Baraques. I accompanied Margaret to her door. It was dark. She took the great key from her pocket, and said as she went in—

"Another day gone. Good night, Michel."

And I wished her good night.

When I got home, father and mother were there, waiting for me. They looked at me.

"Well?" said my mother.

"Well, we danced together."

"And then?"

"Then I came home."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"You did not wait for them?"

"No."

"And you have said nothing?"

"What would you have me say?"

Then she lost her temper and began to cry.

(To be continued.)