

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

XVII.

After Margaret left everything became quiet again for several days. Rain had set in, we worked hard, and in the evening I profited by some hours' leisure to make use of Chauvel's bookshelves. There were many books—Montesquieu, Voltaire, Buffon, Jean Jacques Rousseau; all these great writers, whose names I had heard ten years before, were there—the large volumes in a line on the floor, and the others above them on the shelves. How I opened my eyes when they fell on a page which coincided with my own ideas! and what pleasure I felt when I opened the *Dictionnaire Encyclopédique* of MM. d'Alembert and Diderot for the first time, and understood the alphabetical arrangement, where, according to his wants or his occupation, every man can find whatever he looks for!

This seemed admirable to me. I immediately turned to the article "Forge," where the history of smiths is told from Tubal Cain in the Bible down to our day, the method of getting iron from the mine, of smelting, tempering, hammering, and working it, down to the smallest details. I was very much struck by it, and when I said something about it next day to Maître Jean, he was astonished also. He said we young people had great opportunities for learning, but that in his time such books either did not exist or were too dear. Valentine also seemed to think a great deal more of me. About the 8th or 10th of May we had a letter from Chauvel to tell us of their arrival at Versailles, saying they were lodging at a master bootmaker's, Rue St. François, for fifteen livres a month. The States-General were just opened. He had not time to write fully, and only put at the end of his letter—

"I trust Michel will not hesitate to take my books home with him. Let him use them and take care of them, for one should always respect one's friends, and they are the best." I wish I could find this letter—the first of them all—but God knows what became of it! Maître Jean had the bad habit of lending and showing his letters to everybody, so that three-fourths of them were lost.

What Chauvel said showed me that Margaret had repeated our conversation to her father, and that he approved of it. I was filled with joy, tenderness, and courage united; and from that time I took home every evening a volume of the *Encyclopédie*, which I read, article by article, at one or two in the morning. My mother was very cross about the oil which was consumed. I let her complain; and when we were alone my father would say—

"Learn, my boy; try to be a man; he who knows nothing is too wretched. He works all day for others. Never mind what your mother says."

Nor did I mind her, as I knew very well she she would be the first to profit by what I might learn.

About this time the curé Christopher and a quantity of Lutzelbourg people were ill; draining the Steinbach marshes had disseminated fever over the whole valley. Everywhere you saw poor creatures dragging their limbs about with their teeth chattering.

Maître Jean and I went to see the curé every Sunday. This strong man was nothing but skin and bone. We thought he would never recover.

Fortunately they called in old Fredinger, of Dirnningen, who knew the true remedy for marsh fevers—parsley seed boiled in water. By this remedy he cured half the village, and the curé at last slowly recovered.

During the month of May I remember there was much talk of bands of brigands who were plundering Paris. All the Baraquins and the mountain people wanted to take their pitchforks and scythes and go and meet these scoundrels, who were reported to spread themselves over the fields and burn the crops.

Soon after we heard that these brigands had been massacred at the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, at a paper stainer's named Revellion, and the fright calmed down again for a time. Later this panic became stronger at these reports, for during two months we had no other news than that afforded by the gazettes.

At last, however, thanks to God! we had a second letter from Chauvel, which I have kept, having taken care to copy it myself, the original being sent all over the country, and not seen again. A bundle of newspapers, old and new, came at the same time.

That day the curé Christopher and his brother the tall Materné, who fought in 1814 against the allies with Hullin came to see us.

The curé had lost the fever; he was nearly well. He and his brother dined with us. I read the letter to them. Dame Catherine, Nicole, and two or three notables were present, and were very much surprised that Chauvel, so well known for his good sense and caution, should allow him to write so freely.

Here is his letter. Every one will see what was going on in Paris, and what he had to expect if the nobles and bishops had remained our masters:

"To Jean Leroux, master blacksmith at the Baraques-du-Bois-de-Chênes, near Phalsbourg
July 1, 1789.

"You ought to have had a letter from me dated May 8th, in which I informed you of our arrival at Versailles. I told you in it that we had found a convenient lodging for fifteen livres a month at Antoine Pichot's, master bootmaker, Rue Saint-François, in the quarter of St. Louis in the old town. We are still in the same place, and if you have anything to write to us about, be particular to direct the letter fully.

"I should like to know what sort of harvest you expect this year. I hope Maître Jean and Michel will write to me about it. Here we have had storms and showers of rain, occasionally sunshine. A bad season is expected. What do you think? Margaret wants to have news of her orchard, and particularly of her flowers. Attend to this.

"We live in this town like strangers. Two of my fellow-deputies, the curé Jacques, of Maissoncelle, near Nemours, and Pierre Gerard, syndic of Vie, in the bailiwick of Toul, are in the same house as ourselves, they below and we above, with a balcony looking on the street. Margaret goes to market and cooks for us.

"All goes on well. In the evening, in the room of the curé Jacques, we arrange our plans. I take my pinch of snuff, Gerard smokes his pipe, and we always end by agreeing more or less.

"That is how we get on. Now let us turn to the affairs of the nation.

"It is my duty to keep you informed of what is doing; but since our arrival we have had so many things to cross us, so many vexations, so many accidents. The two first orders, and principally the nobility, have shown us such ill-will that I could not see where or how it would end. Ideas changed from day to another—one day confident, the next despairing. We needed both patience and calmness to bring these people to reason. Three times were they on the point of going away, and it was only when they saw that we could do without them, and draw up a constitution alone, that at last they made up their minds to take their place in the assembly and unite their deliberations to ours.

"I have been, therefore, unable hitherto to give you any certain news, but to-day the game is won, and I will take up the recital in detail from the beginning. You will read this letter to the notables, for I am no more for myself but for every one, and I should be indeed wrong if I did not render those who sent me an account of their affairs. As I have taken daily notes of everything, I shall omit nothing. When we reached Versailles, the 30th of April, with three other deputies from our bailiwick, we stopped at the Hotel des Souverains, which was crammed with people. I will not tell you what they made us pay for a bouillon or a cup of coffee. It would frighten you. All these people, the servants and the hotel-keepers, are valets from father to son; they live by the nobility, who live on the people, without troubling themselves about them or their wants. A cup of broth which costs with us two liards here costs the value of a day's work of a Baraque working-man, and it is so much a matter of course that any one who grumbled would be considered a poor creature, and be looked at with contempt. It is fashionable to allow oneself to be robbed and cheated by people like these.

"You can easily believe this did not suit me; when one has earned one's bread honestly and laboriously for thirty-five years, one knows the price of things, and I did not hesitate to send for the fat landlord and tell him what I thought of his bill. It was the first time he had ever been treated in such a manner. The rascal pretended to look down on me, but I returned it with interest. If I had not been a deputy of the Third Estate he would have turned me out; fortunately this position causes one to be respected. I was told by my fellow-deputy, Gerard, the next day, that I had scandalized the hotel servants, which made me laugh. The bow and the grimace of a lacquey cannot be worth the labour of an honest man.

"I wished to tell you this story that you might see the sort of people we have to deal with.

"However, the day after our arrival, after going all over the town, I took my lodgings and sent my effects there. It was a lucky discovery: the other two I have named to you followed me there directly. We are here together and we live as cheaply as we can.

"You should have seen Versailles on the 3rd of May—the day of presentation to the king; half Paris was in the streets; and the next, at the mass of the Saint-Esprit, it was still more wonderful: people were even on the tops of the houses.

"But before anything else, I must tell you about the presentation.

"The king and the court reside in the Château de Versailles, built on a sort of mount like that of Mittelbronn, between the town and the gardens; in front of the château is a court on a gentle slope; on both sides of the court, on the right and left, are large buildings where the ministers are lodged; at the back is the palace.

"You see this at a league's distance when you come by the Paris Avenue—four or five times as broad as our highways, and bordered by fine trees; the court is closed in front by a railing

extending about sixty fathoms. Behind the château are the gardens, filled with water-works, statues, and similar decorations; how many thousands of men must have been worked to death in our fields, and paid poll-taxes, gabelles, &c., &c., to construct this palace! After that, the nobles and the lacqueys live well; luxury, they say, is necessary to keep the people going; so to live luxuriously at Versailles it is necessary for three-fourths of France to be famishing for a hundred years!

"We knew of the presentation by notices stuck up everywhere, and little books which have a great sale here; the sellers stop you in the street to get you to buy them.

"Many of the Third Estate thought it was wrong that they should have notice of the presentation through public bills when the two first orders had direct notice of it. I did not think much about it, and I set off at twelve o'clock with my two fellow-deputies for the Salle des Menus where the sittings of the States-General are held; it is built outside the château, in the grand Avenue de Paris, on the site of some old workshops belonging to the magazine of the Menus-Plaisirs of his majesty the king; what the 'grands and menus plaisirs' of the king are I do not know, but the hall is very fine; two others join on to it, and are arranged, one for the deliberations of the clergy, the other for that of the nobility.

"We left the Salle des Menus in procession, surrounded by the people, who cried, 'Vive le Tiers Etat!' We saw that these good people knew that we were their representatives, especially the mass of Parisians, who had come over-night, and who were at the railing. The railing in front of the palace was guarded by the Swiss; they kept the crowd back, and allowed us to pass. We reached the court and then the palace, where we ascended a staircase—the steps covered with carpets and the ceilings studded with golden lilies: along the balustrades were placed stately lacqueys, covered with embroidery—there must have been ten on each side up to the top.

"Once on the first landing, we entered a hall, more beautiful, grander, and richer than one can describe; I thought it was the throne-room; it was the ante-room.

"At last, in about a quarter of an hour, a door, Maître Jean, led us into the real reception-hall, magnificently arched over, with rich mouldings, and painted as I cannot describe. We were in some sort lost here, but the king's guards stood all round, sword in hand, and suddenly on the left, amidst the silence, we heard the cry of—

"The king—the king!"

"It approached nearer and nearer, and the master of the ceremonies, entering first, repeated:—

"Gentlemen, the king!"

"You will say, Maître Jean, that this was only a scene; so it was. But it must be confessed it was very well imagined to raise the pride of those who are called great, and to impress respect on those who are looked upon as little. The grand master of the ceremonies, M. le Marquis de Brezé, in court dress, by the side of us poor deputies of the Third Estate, in coats and breeches of black cloth, seemed a superior being, and by his air it was easy to see he thought so himself; he approached our eldest member, bowing, and nearly at the same time the king advanced and crossed the hall alone. A chair had been placed for him in the centre, but he remained standing, his hat under his arm, and the marquis having signed to our senior member to advance, he presented him, then another, and so on, by bailiwicks; they told him the name of the bailiwick, he repeated it, and the king said nothing.

"At the close, however, he told us he was glad to see us, the deputies of the Third Estate; he spoke slowly and well; he is a very fat man, with a round face, large nose, lips, and chin, and a retreating forehead. At last he went out, and we retired by another door. This is what is called a presentation.

"When I got home I took off my black coat and breeches, my shoes and buckles, and my hat. Father Gerard came, and then the curé; our day was lost, but Margaret had prepared a leg of mutton and garlic for us, of which we ate half with a good appetite, and drank a jug of cider, while talking over our affairs. Gerard and many others complained of this presentation, saying it ought to have taken place all the orders together; they thought from that we might conclude beforehand that the court would try to separate the orders. Some threw the blame on the master of the ceremonies. I thought to myself, we shall see. If the court opposes voting man by man, we will take it as a warning.

"The next morning early all the bells began to ring, and in the street were heard cries of joy and reports without end. It was the day of the mass of Saint-Esprit, to invoke the blessing of the Lord on the States-General. The three orders were assembled in the church of Notre-Dame, where they sang the 'Veni Creator.' After this ceremony, which was very pleasing on account of the beauty of the voices and the goodness of the music, we went in procession to the church of Saint-Louis. We came first, then the noblesse, and then the clergy, preceding the

Holy Sacrament. The street was hung with tapestry belonging to the crown, and the crowd cried, 'Vive le Tiers Etat!'

"It is the first time the populace did not side with fine clothes, for we were like crows by the side of these peacocks, with their little turned-up hats and feathers, coats embroidered in gold all down the seams, their elbows in the air, and swords by their sides. The king and queen, surrounded by their court, closed the procession. A few cries of 'Vive le roi! Vive le duc d'Orléans!' were heard. The bells rang incessantly; these people had some sense; not one among so many thousands was silly enough to cry 'Vive la Reine! Vive le Comte d'Artois! Vive les Evêques!' Yet they were very fine notwithstanding.

"At the church of Saint-Louis the mass began. Then the Bishop of Nancy, M. de la Fare, preached a long sermon against the luxury of the court, such as all bishops have preached for ages.

"This ceremony lasted till four in the afternoon; every one thought it enough, and that we should have the satisfaction of discussing our affairs together, but we were not near it yet, for the next day, May 5th, the opening of the States-General was another ceremony. These people can exist only on ceremony, or, to speak plainly, on comedy.

"The next day, then, all the States-General met in our hall, which is called the Hall of the Three Orders. It is lighted from above, by a round opening hung with white satin, and these in columns on both sides. At the end there was a throne under a canopy, splendidly besprinkled with golden lilies.

"The Marquis de Brezé and his masters of the ceremonies conducted the deputies to their places. Their work began at nine and finished at half-past twelve; you were called by name, led to your place, and begged to be seated. At the same time the state counsellors, the ministers and state secretaries, the governors and lieutenants-general of provinces, took their places. A long table covered with green cloth below the estrade was destined to the secretaries of state; at one end of it Necker was seated, at the other M. de Saint-Priest. If I had to give you all the details I should never have done.

"The clergy were seated on the right of the throne, the nobility on the left, and we in the front. The representatives of the clergy were 291, of the nobility 270, and we 578; some of ours were still absent, as the Paris elections did not terminate till the 19th, but that was not perceptible. At last, about one o'clock, they gave notice to the king and queen, who appeared almost immediately, preceded and followed by the princes and princesses of the royal family and their court attendants. The king took his seat on the throne, the queen by his side in a large arm-chair, without the canopy; the royal family round the throne; the princes, ministers, and peers of the kingdom rather lower down, and the rest of the court on the steps of the estrade. The ladies of the court, in full dress, filled the galleries of the hall on the side of the estrade, and mere spectators were distributed in the other galleries between the pillars.

"The king wore a round hat, the loop of which was set with pearls and mounted by a large diamond, known by the name of Pitt. Each one was seated in an arm-chair, a chair, a bench, or a stool, according to his rank and dignity; for these things are of the greatest importance; on that does the greatness of a nation depend! I could never have believed it if I had not seen it; everything is settled beforehand for these ceremonies. Would to God our affairs were as well ordered! But questions of etiquette take precedence, and it is only after the lapse of ages that one has time to trouble oneself about the distresses of the people.

"I wish that Valentine had been three or four hours in my place; he could explain to you the difference between one cap and another, and between one robe and another. What interested me most was when the grand master of the ceremonies made us a sign to be attentive, and the king began to read his speech. All I can recollect of it is that he was glad to see us; that he hoped we should come to a good understanding, to prevent innovations and find money for the deficit; that in this hope he had called us together, that the debt would be laid before us, and that he felt confident beforehand that we should find means to reduce it, and so to strengthen public credit; that this was his most ardent desire, and that he loved his subjects.

"Then he sat down, saying his chancellor would still further explain his intentions. The whole hall cried, 'Vive le Roi!'

"The chancellor, M. de Barentin, having risen, told us that his majesty's first desire was to spread benefits around him, and that the virtues of sovereigns are the first resource of nations in difficult times; that our sovereign, then, was determined to crown public happiness, that he had summoned us to help him, and that the third race of our kings had a right above all to the confidence of every good Frenchman, that it strengthened the order of succession to the crown, and that it had abolished all