

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

XVII.

"Then drawing himself up, and eyeing the master of the ceremonies from head to foot—
"Nevertheless," said he, "that there may be no ambiguity, no delay, I declare, if you have been charged to compel us to leave this place, you must ask for orders to use force, for we will not leave our places but at the point of the bayonet."

"The whole Assembly cried out—'Yes! Yes!'

"There was a great tumult. At the end of two or three minutes, quiet being somewhat restored, our president said to the master of the ceremonies—

"The Assembly decided yesterday that they would hold a sitting after the royal sitting. I cannot dissolve the Assembly before they have discussed it without restriction."

"Am I to convey this answer to the king?" asked the marquis.

"Yes, sir," replied the president.

"Then the master of the ceremonies went out and the sitting continued.

"To tell the truth, Maitre Jean, we expected some great blow; but about two, instead of bayonets, we saw a number of carpenters arrive, who had been sent to pull down the stage erected for the royal sitting, and who began their work immediately. Another device of the queen and the Count d'Artois—unable to employ force, they fell back on noise!

"A sorrier trick was never seen.

"You may believe this fresh outrage did not prevent our doing our duty: the discussion was carried on, accompanied by the noise of hammers. The workmen at last, astonished at our calmness, ended by leaving their tools, and by descending the steps of the estrade, to listen to what was said. If M. the Comte d'Artois could have seen them, until the close of the sitting, more attentive than at church, and applauding those speakers who said what was forcible and just, he would have been understood the people are not so stupid as they think proper to believe.

"Cannes, Barnave, and Siéyès spoke. Siéyès said, as he came down from the tribune—

"You are to-day what you were yesterday."

"We voted by rising or remaining seated, and the National Assembly unanimously declared its intention to abide by their former resolutions; and at the close, Mirabeau, whose anger had time to cool, and who clearly saw his life at stake, said—

"I bless Freedom this day, because she has borne such ripe fruit in the National Assembly. Let us confirm our labours by declaring the inviolability of the persons of the deputies of the States-General. It is not to betray fear, but to act with prudence; it is a check on the violent counsels which surround the throne."

"The next morning at nine, Gerard, M. the curé Jacques and myself arrived at the hall of the States-General. They had removed the hangings of the canopy and the carpet of the throne. The hall was nearly empty, but as the deputies of the Third Estate arrived, the benches began to fill; we talked to one another and made acquaintance with our neighbours, as people ought to do who have undertaken such serious matters. Twenty minutes after, nearly all the deputies of the Third Estate were assembled. We waited for those of the nobility and the clergy; not one showed himself.

"Suddenly one of our deputies came and told us that the two other orders had met each in its own hall, and were then in deliberation. Naturally, this produced as much surprise as indignation. We then decided to name as president of the Third Estate our senior in age, an old bald-headed man, whose name was Leroux, like yours, Maitre Jean. He accepted the nomination, and chose six other members of the Assembly to assist him.

"Some time was necessary to re-establish silence, for thousands of ideas occurred to you at that moment: each had to say what he feared, and what means he thought it best to employ in so serious a situation. At last we became calm, and M. Malouet, a former employé in the administration of the marine, as I am told, proposed to send a deputation to the two privileged orders to invite them to join us in the place of the general assemblies. A young deputy, M. Monnier, answered him that such step would compromise the dignity of the commons; that there was no hurry, and we should soon be informed what the privileged orders had decided, and that we could then act accordingly. I was of his opinion. Our president added that we could not as yet consider ourselves as members of the States-General, since these estates were as yet not constituted, nor our powers verified; and for this reason he declined to open the letters addressed to the Assembly; which was taking a sensible view of the matter. Much was also said on the same day on the subject, which all came to the same thing.

"Towards half-past two a deputy from Dauphiné brought us the news that the two other orders had decided on verifying their powers separately. The sitting was then raised

in confusion and adjourned to the next day at nine.

"It was quite palpable. We saw that the king, the queen, the nobles, and the bishops found us sufficiently qualified to pay their debts, but they did not care to give us a constitution where the people would have a voice in the chapter. They preferred incurring debts alone, without protest or control, than to assemble us once in two hundred years, to induce us to accept these debts in the people's name, and to consent to be taxed to all eternity.

"Imagine what our reflections were and our anger after this discovery.

"We sat till midnight, crying out and irritating ourselves at the abominable selfishness and injustice of the court. After that, I said to my comrades, it were better for us to remain calm in public, to keep right on our side if it were possible, and to leave the people to reflect. We decided on so doing; and the next day, when we reached the hall, we saw that the other deputies had doubtless taken the same resolution; for instead of the confusion of the previous evening, all was serious, the president in his place, and his assistants writing at the estrade, receiving letters and laying them on the table.

"The discussions of the nobility and clergy, in the form of pamphlets, were sent to us, and I add them here, to show what these people thought and desired. The clergy had carried the verification of their powers in their order by a majority of 133 votes against 114, and the nobility also by 88 votes against 47; in opposition to the good feeling and good sense of their party—the Viscount Castellane, the Duke de Liancourt, the Marquis de Lafayette, the deputies from Dauphiné, and those of the seneschalship of Aix and Provence, who combated their injustice—they had already appointed twelve commissions to verify their own powers.

"On that day Malouet renewed his proposal to send a deputation to the two privileged orders to induce them to join the commons' deputies; and thereupon the Count de Mirabeau rose. Although noble, he is a deputy of the Third Estate; the nobility of his own province having refused to admit him among them, as not being a proprietor by tenure. He immediately made himself a trader, and the town of Aix elected him; he is a Provençal, tall and stout, with a high forehead, large eyes, yellow complexion, plain, and marked by the small-pox; he has a harsh voice, and stammers when he begins; but when he is once excited, there is a great change, and everything becomes clear; you seem to see what he says, you fancy you have always thought as he does; and from time to time his harsh voice lowers its tone, when he is about to say something great or forcible; it mutters at first, and then goes off like a clap of thunder. I can give you no idea how the face of such a man changes; voice, eyes, gesture, ideas, all are in accordance. You forget self while listening to him; he holds you, and you cannot release yourself. If you look at those around you, you find them all pale. So long as he is on our side all will be well; but we must be on our guard. For myself I distrust him. First, he is noble; and then he is a man without money, of violent passions, and in debt. Only to look at his great fleshy nose, enormous jaws, and his stomach covered with ragged but still magnificent lace, you think he could devour Alsace and Lorraine, together with Franche-Comté and the country round besides! All the same, I devoutly thank the nobles for having refused to enter his name on their register; we had at first too great want of him, as you will see further on.

"On that day Mirabeau did not say much; he only observed that we must be constituted an order ourselves before we could send a deputation, that we were not yet so constituted, and that we would not constitute ourselves without the others. It would be better, then, to wait.

"The advocate Monnier then said that we ought to allow those deputies of the Third Estate who were willing to undertake it to go as individuals, and without any mission, to try and induce the nobles and the clergy to co-operate with us according to the king's desire. As it could compromise nothing, this opinion was adopted. Twelve members went out to gain information; they announced that in the hall of the nobles they only found the commissions occupied in verifying those gentlemen's powers; and in that of the clergy, the order being sitting, their president replied that they would discuss their proposal. An hour after, MM. the bishops of Montpellier and Orange, with four other ecclesiastics, entered our hall and told us that their order had decided to name commissioners who should join ours and those of the nobility, to see if the powers could be verified in common.

"This reply caused us to adjourn our sitting of the 7th of May to the 12th, and I took advantage of these four days' holiday to visit my two comrades and Margaret. We had no time to stop there in passing on the 10th of April, two days after the sack of Revellon's house in the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. The excitement was then great, the prévôt's guards were on the alert, the arrival of a crowd of bandits was spoken of. I was curious to see what was going on there, if they were quiet again, and what they thought of our first sittings. Parisians who were coming

backwards and forwards had given me some idea, but I preferred seeing for myself. We set off early in the morning, and our vehicle in three hours reached this immense city, of which one can form no adequate idea, not only on account of the height of the houses, and of the quantity of streets and lanes crossing one another, the antiquity of the buildings, the number of squares, blind alleys, cafés, shops, and stalls of all descriptions, which join on to and follow one another as far as one's eye can reach, and the signs hanging from the roof, up to the roof; but more so still because of the numberless cries of sellers of fried fish, fruiterers, old clothesmen, and thousands of other people, drawing carts, carrying water, vegetables, and other goods. One might think oneself in a menagerie, where the hitherto unknown birds of the American forests utter their different cries. And then the rolling of the carts and carriages, the horrid smells from heaps of refuse, the people's pitiful looks, all dressed in old clothes of the latest fashion, darning, singing, and laughing, full of politeness to strangers, and of good sense and gallantry in their distress, who see everything favorably, provided they can walk about, give utterance to their opinions in the cafés, and read the paper! All that, Maitre Jean, makes this city resemble nothing else in the world, certainly nothing at home. Nancy is a palace compared to Paris, but a palace empty and dead—here everything is alive.

"The unhappy Parisians still feel the effects of last winter's dearth; many of them are really nothing but skin and bone; nevertheless, they are merry; one sees jokes stuck up in the windows. When I saw that I was delighted; I found myself at home. Instead of dragging my bale from village to village for hours together, I should have found buyers here, so to say, at every step. Then, again, this is the true country for patriots; these people, poor and wretched as they are, cling to their rights above all: the rest will follow.

"Our comrade Jacques has one of his sisters, a fruiterer, Rue du Bouloi, near the Palais Royal; we got down there. All along the street, after entering the faubourg, we heard nothing but this song:—

"Every one saw his ingenuity, and the motion was carried by a majority of 493 votes to 84.

"The Assembly adjourned at six, after passing the following resolution:—

"The National Assembly declares the person of every deputy inviolable; that all private individuals, corporate bodies, tribunals, courts, or commissions which should dare, either pending or after the present session, to proceed against, call to account, arrest, or cause to be arrested, imprison, or cause to be imprisoned, any deputy, on account of any sentiment, motion, opinion, or speech uttered at the States-General, as also any persons who should assist in any of the above-named attempts, ordered by whom they may, are infamous and traitors to the nation, and guilty of a capital crime. The National Assembly resolves that in such cases they will take every step to discover, proceed against, and punish, those who shall either originate, instigate, or put them in execution."

"Mirabeau had nothing more to fear, nor had we. If kings are sacred, it is because they have taken care to inscribe it in the laws, and so have we—that is always the advantage of being sacred! If any one touched a hair of our heads now, all France would be indignant. We ought to have begun there, but all our good ideas do not occur to us at the same time.

"I think, too, that the court did well not to push things to extremes, for during all this sitting of the 23rd the people filled the avenues of Versailles, and those who went in and out gave them every information, so that they knew every quarter of an hour what was passing in the Assembly. Had we been attacked we should have had the whole nation with us.

"At the same time a report was current of the dismissal of Necker and the appointment of the Count d'Artois; in consequence, as soon as our sitting was closed, the people flocked to the palace. The Gardes-Françaises had received orders to fire, but no one stirred. The crowd reached Necker's apartments, and it was by hearing from the minister's own lips that he would stay, that the crowd could be induced to retire.

"The exasperation was still greater in Paris. I have been told, when the news was spread that the king had rescinded everything, the fire was already smouldering, and it required but a signal to light up a civil war.

"This must of necessity be true, for, notwithstanding the advice of the princes, the regiments of German and Swiss mercenaries, which had been brought up from every corner of France; the cannon which had been placed in the queen's stables, or facing the hall of the Estates, the muzzles of which we could see from our windows; notwithstanding what he had himself signified to us, the king wrote to the deputies of the nobility to join the deputies of the Third Estate in the commons' hall; and the 30th of June, which was yesterday, we have seen these 'proud descendants of conquerors' come and seat themselves by the side of 'the

humble posterity of the conquered.' They no longer laughed as they did on the morning of the 23rd, when they saw us enter the hall all soaked in rain.

"All the appeals all the wishes of the people ought to make part of this constitution:—abolition of feudal rights, *corvées*, *gabelle*, and home customs, equality of taxation and before the law, personal security, admission to civil and military employments to be open to all citizens, letters to be inviolable, legislative power to be in the hands of the national representatives, responsibility of ministers, unity of legislation, of administration, of weights and measures; gratuitous education and administration of justice, equal division of property among children, freedom of trade, industry, and labour—in fact, all must be there, distinct and drawn up in order, and in chapter and verse, so that every one may understand it, and the poorest peasant may become cognisant of his rights and his duties.

"Be easy, my friends: men will talk of 1789 for a long time to come.

"This is all I have to tell you now. Let me hear from you as soon as possible. We wish to know what is going on in the provinces; my comrades are better informed than I. Tell Michel to give me an hour every day, after work is over, to let me know what is going on at Baraques and the neighbourhood, and to send me the despatch at the end of every month. In this way we shall always be in another's society, as before; and we shall seem to be talking together again by the fire-side. I end by embracing you all. Margaret desires me to tell you not to forget her, nor will she forget you. Once more we embrace you.

"Your friend,

"CHAUVEL."

While I was reading this letter, Maitre Jean, the tall Materné, and M. the curé Christopher looked on in silence. Some months before, whoever allowed himself to speak in this manner of the king, the queen, the court, and the bishops would not have escaped the galleys to the end of his days. But in this world things change quickly when the time comes, and what was once thought abominable becomes natural.

When I had finished, those present remained silent. At the end of two or three minutes Maitre Jean cried—

"Well, Christopher, what do you think of that? He puts no check on himself!"

"No," said the curé, "he does not, and if so prudent a man writes after this fashion, the Third Estate must have the power on their side. What he says of the inferior clergy, as we are called by our seigneurs the bishops, is true; we belong to the people, and we side with the people. Jesus Christ, our Divine Master, would be born in a stable; he lived for the poor, among the poor, and died for the poor.

"There is our example. Our memorial, like those of the Third Estate, demands a monarchical constitution, in which the legislative power belongs to the Estates; where equality of all before the law and freedom are established; where abuses of power, even in the Church, shall be repressed with severity; where primary instruction shall be universal and gratuitous, and unity of legislation established all over the kingdom. The nobility—they ask that women of rank may have the right of wearing ribbons to distinguish them from the vulgar; their time is occupied by questions of etiquette; they say not a word about the people; they recognise none of their rights, and they grant them nothing, or merely some modification of taxation not worthy of mention. Our bishops, nearly all noble, side with the nobility, and we children of the people go with the people; there exist now but two parties, the privileged and the unprivileged, the aristocracy and the people.

"In all that Chauvel is right. But he speaks too freely of the king, the princes, and the court. Royalty is a principle. I fancy I see the old Calvinist who believes he has now got the descendants of those who martyred his ancestors at the foot of the wall. Do not believe, Jean, that Charles IX., Louis XIV., or even Louis XV., were so inveterate against the reformers on account of their religion; they made the people believe so, for the people only interest themselves about religion, country, and things which they feel; they care not for dynasties, nor to break their bones for the interests of Peter, Paul, or James. Kings, then, have made them believe they were defending religion because these Calvinists, under pretence of religion, sought to found a republic in Switzerland, and from their nest, La Rochelle, they disseminated their ideas of liberty and equality over the south of France. The people thought they were fighting for religion; they were in truth fighting despotism against equality. Do you see it now? It was necessary to root out these Calvinists and destroy them, or they might have established a republic. Chauvel is well aware of this. I am sure his idea in reality is the same, and herein we no longer agree."

"But," said Maitre Jean, "it is abominable to treat the deputies of the Third Estate as the princes and nobles have done."

"What would you have?" replied the curé. "Pride has already flung Satan into the abyss. Pride begins by blinding those it possesses. It drives them to unjust and senseless actions. In