

After forced labour in ploughing, sowing, hoeing, mowing, haymaking, carting—and in the vine districts in the vintage also—in fact, after this amount of forced labour, when the good times were employed in getting in the crops for the seigneur and the abbey, what could a man do for self and children? Nothing. So as soon as the dead season arrived three-fourths of the villagers set out to beg. M. Schneider, the prévôt, and the Marquis Talaru, the governor of the town, forbade mendicancy, and police-sergeants, and even detachments of the regiments of Rouergue, Schénau, and La Fare gave their help to the authorities. It was risking the galleys, but life was sweet; the poor set out in troops, in spite of all, to look for food.

Unfortunately it is not enough to beg for bread if one is hungry, but others must have it to give; it was the usual phrase, "Every one for himself, God for us all!"

Towards the close of the winter a report was usually spread that some band had been robbing carriages either in Alsace or Lorraine. Troops were put in motion, and the business was concluded by hanging a number of men.

Just fancy in these days a poor basket-maker with a wife and six children, without a sou or an inch of ground; neither goat nor fowl—in fact, with no other means of subsistence but his labour, and no hope either for him or for his children of a change for the better! So it was ordained—some came into the world noble, and ought to have everything, and the others were born labourers, and consequently were doomed to live in misery from generation to generation. Fancy this state of things; long days of hunger, winter nights without covering, the dread of tax-gatherers, police-sergeants, gamekeepers, bailiffs! Well, in spite of all that, when spring came, after a long winter, when the sun shone upon the lonely hut, lighting the cobwebs on the beams, the little hearth, in the left-hand corner, the foot of the ladder on the right, the clay floor, and the heat, the pleasant heat which warmed us; when the cricket began to chirp, the woods to grow green again, in spite of all we were happy in life, happy to stretch ourselves at the door, holding our little naked feet in our hands, happy to laugh and whistle, to look up in the sky while rolling in the dust.

When we saw our father coming from the woods, with a great faggot of green broom or branches of birch on his shoulders, his hair hanging over his face, with a smile upon it when he saw us at a distance, we used all to run and meet him; then he would put the faggot on end for a minute while he kissed the little ones, his face, his blue eyes, his nose a little heavy at the tip, his thick lips lighted up; he really seemed happy.

How good he was! how he loved us! And then our mother, grey and wrinkled at forty; for all that, full of courage, always in the fields, digging others' ground, every evening spinning others' hemp and flax to feed her brood and pay all sorts of dues and exactions. What courage, and yet what misery, thus to work continually with no other hope of reward than what is to be found in life eternal! And this was not all. The poor creatures had another sore the worst of all the sores of the peasant; they were in debt!

I remember, when quite a child, hearing my father say, on his return from selling some baskets or a few dozen brooms in the town—

"Here is the salt, the beans, and the rice, but I have not a sou left. O Lord! O Lord! I was in hope of bringing back a few sous for M. Robin!"

This M. Robin was the richest rogue in Mitelbronn, a big man with a great grey beard and an oter-skin cap tied under the chin, a large nose, yellow complexion, round eyes, with a sort of bag over his shoulders like a short gown. He went about on foot with long linen gaiters up to his knees, a large basket on his arm, and a wolf-dog at his heels. This man went all round the neighbourhood getting in the interest owing him, for he lent money to every one, three livres at a time or six livres, up to one or two louis d'or. He used to walk into the houses and if his money was not ready, he would pocket anything in the interim; half-a-dozen eggs, a pound of butter, a bottle of kirsch, a piece of cheese, or whatever they had. So that they got time from him, they would rather let him rob them in that way than have a visit from a bailiff.

How many there are to this day eaten up by similar robbers! How many there are labouring in misery under the weight of debt, and wear away without seeing any end to their troubles!

In our place there was nothing for Robin to take, so he tapped at the window and cried out, "Jean-Pierre!"

Then my father would run to the door in a tremble, and, cap in hand, say—

"M. Robin!"

"Ah, look here, I have two *corvées* to work out on the road to Herange or to Lixheim—can you come?"

"Yes, M. Robin, yes."

"To-morrow, without fail?"

"Yes, M. Robin."

And off he went. My father would come in quite pale, sit down by the hearth, and go on plaiting without speaking, holding his head down and biting his lips. Next morning he was working out the *corvées* of M. Robin, and mother would cry, "Oh, that beggarly she-goat! we have already paid for her ten times over; she's dead, and she will be the death of us all. What an unlucky idea it was to buy that old she-goat—unlucky indeed!" And then she would make herself miserable.

My father was off long before, with his pickaxe on his shoulder. But on those days the poor man brought nothing home. He had paid his interest for a month or two. That did not last long; just as they had become a little easy, M. Robin came tapping at the window again. I have heard talk of diseases which wear away the heart and dry up the sources of the blood,

but this is the true disease of the poor. It is these usurers, who pretend to help you, and who live upon you till you are buried, and then they try to get the widow and children in their power. What my parents endured through this Robin is not to be described; they grew old in trouble, they could not sleep, they had not a minute's rest, and their only consolation was if one of us escaped the conscription he could take the bounty as a recruit, and they could pay the debt.

(To be Continued.)

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