

# THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

## OR

### THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE SECOND.  
THE COUNTRY IN DANGER.  
1792.  
II

Of course we talked about what had happened at Nancy; Mouton cried out—

"What a pity I did not see it! My master is sergeant-major of his company; he is full of ambition, and has left his shop for me to take care of while he goes and passes for a man of courage down there. If he has only got a slight wound, that would be some consolation; but I know him; he is the man to cry 'forwards!' with his men in front of him."

"Ah," said Maitre Jean, "you would only have seen the rascality of the nobles."  
"Another reason why. I have always hated those cadets who stop promotion in the army, and drive us to become grocers if we wish to get on; I should have detested them still more, and it would have done me good!"

And as Maitre Jean expressed his fears for liberty in consequence of this massacre—

"Bah!" said he. "This is the end of the play. If the aristocrats had gone on gently, they might have drawn their pensions for ten, fifteen or twenty years more; now the affair is at issue between the officers and the soldiers; they must come to blows, and one side must lose; and it will be the gentlemen. Well, Maitre Leroux, let us hope it will be soon; for I confess a musket on my shoulder would suit me such better than an apron round my legs."

Maitre Jean laughed, and said—  
"With your ideas you will not get a business of your own, but one must suit oneself to the times; I think as you do that opportunities will not be wanting for young men to get on. Bouilli, who has struck his successful blow, will be sure to try to lead his Germans to Paris."

"So much the better," cried Mouton; "it is the greatest service he can render us."

As they were beating the rappel, we were obliged to go. Mouton went with us to the trees and shook hands with us, sending his compliments to his friends and acquaintances at Phalsbourg. We then set off, and he returned to his shop. We little thought we had seen the man who was to replace Lafayette in the command of the Paris National Guard!

The world is a strange thing, especially in revolution. He who in ordinary times would be either a publican, or a grocer, or a sergeant, becomes a Marshal of France, a King of Sweden, an Emperor of the French! And others, who were looked on as eagles in point of birth, take off their hats to him for employment and advancement.

The same evening we reached Blamont, and the next day home without any fresh occurrence.

Bad news had gone faster than our detachment; the whole country was alarmed; every one expected the Austrians would soon be at home in Lorraine. The worst of it was, we dared not say so; our good king represented order; and the venal deputies of the Assembly, of whom Chauvel had written to us, voted thanks to General Bouilli. But, thank God, the Count d'Artois and his friends were not yet where they hoped to be; some time must pass before they saw Paris again, with their laws of primogeniture, of sacrileges and other follies; the revolution had other roots to throw out in the soil of France—roots which all the aristocrats and all the nobles in the world will never be able to pull up, and which will constitute the eternal honour and strength of our country.

#### III.

About this time great changes took place at the forge which I must relate to you in detail, for they were the cause of the happiness of my life, although I was very much grieved in consequence of them during the first few days.

You must know that Valentine took his meals with our neighbours the Rigauds; he liked being with these old people, who continually called him M. Valentine; his ideas on the difference of rank rendered these little attentions very pleasing to him. Every evening he sat in the arm-chair of the house, opposite a good omelette au lard, or a plate of meat, his pint of wine in his right, a water-bottle on his left, his feet in his slippers, while the two old people at the bottom of the table peeled their potatoes and ate their curds and whey. He thought that was very natural; he was senior journeyman blacksmith, and no doubt said to himself—

"I am in a different position to these Rigauds, that is why I have choice morsels to eat, while they can only smell them."

Each time they baked at the Rigauds, every fortnight or three weeks, he had two or three good cakes put in the oven, and invited me to feast on them with him. He then uncorked a bottle of small grey Lorraine wine, which he kept in the cellar for himself; the idea of offering a glass of it to Father Rigaud never came into his head! I was annoyed at it, the more so that the old people looked at us with curious eyes; but I did not dare make any observation to Valentine; he would have been indignant to see that I could forget our position, and perhaps he would not have invited me any more. Some-

times he told me to bring my brother Etienne with me, whose little nose anticipated the smell of cakes, and whose excellent appetite made us laugh. Valentine was very fond of him, and every Sunday after vespers would tell him his secrets for bringing up, feeding, and catching birds; for he loved birds either to eat, such as thrushes and blackbirds, or to hear them sing, such as warblers and nightingales; that was his delight. At the end of July, his room on the first floor at the Rigauds' was full of birds which he had caught in the woods, and his windows were covered with dirt; he had hundreds of all sorts. Those which sing and feed themselves on worms and flies, like nightingales and linnets, he let fly towards winter-time, and he kept those which lived on seeds—you could hardly cross the passage to his little room above, it was so full of dried poppy-heads, hemp and millet seed, hanging up in strings, and which he cultivated himself in a little plot of ground behind the hut, to feed them.

That was how he lived. In the winter, while snow was on the ground, he prepared his snares, his springs and traps, and talked of nothing else but the passage of the fieldfares, the arrival of the blackbirds, and how many he hoped to take that year.

Before the revolution he never talked of anything else to me, and always with pleasure; but since the States-General he had been out of humour and cross. Every evening we were together, talking while he was getting ready for bird-catching, he did nothing but complain of Maitre Jean's pride and folly; he would shrug his shoulders, and say—

"That man does nothing but talk nonsense; he sees nothing but sabot-makers become colonels, woodcutters princes, and Maitre Jean's deputies. Nothing is too great for a patriot like himself; he already thinks he has possession of the forests of Mgrs. the cardinal bishops, and has paid for them in assignats; neither excommunication, nor the king's numerous armies, nor the assistance of Christendom can make him feel the least uneasy!"

He laughed bitterly, and even at the forge, instead of remaining silent, he would throw out very pointed and spiteful remarks about the National Assembly, the citizen guard, and all those who sided with the nation. It was a great annoyance for Maitre Jean to be compelled to listen to him, and to have a journeyman who was an obstacle to his abusing bishops and nobles as much as he liked. He restrained himself as much as he could; but on days when we had bad news he would blow out his cheeks, and after a pause cry out—"Oh, the rascals! ah, the canaille!" without saying who.

Valentine understood very well that he referred to the seigneurs, and possibly to the bishops, and answered him, also without saying who—

"You are right, there is no want of rascals of all sorts in the world, nor of canaille either."

Then Maitre Jean would take a side-look at him, and say—

"Nor fools either."

And Valentine would answer—

"I believe you; especially those who think themselves clever; they are the worst."

And so it went on. I often saw Maitre Jean grow red and Valentine pale with anger, and I used to say to myself—

"They will come to blows."

But up to the day on which M. Christopher took the oath, all these little disputes had calmed down, when, during January, 1791, something fresh happened every day; now it was the curé of this village had taken the oath; then, another; then, that the curé Dusable of Mittelbronn had replaced M. at Phalsbourg; that all the curés in the National Assembly, the Abbé Grégoire at their head, had renewed their oaths, &c.

Maitre Jean laughed, and gave way to his enthusiasm, and sang "Ca ira! ca ira!" while Valentine became more sullen. I began to think that he was afraid of Maitre Jean, and did not dare to anger him, when one morning the news came that the Bishop of Autun, Talleyrand-Perigord, would consecrate those bishops who had sworn to the constitution, notwithstanding the pope's prohibition. Maitre Jean was so overjoyed at it, that he began by saying that Mgr. Talleyrand-Perigord was a true apostle of Christ; that he had already proposed the sale of Church property; that he had officiated at the mass on the Champ de Mars, at the altar of the country, on Federation Day; that he would put the finishing touch to his glory by consecrating the bishops; that he deserved the esteem of all honest people, and that the refractory bishops were asses in comparison.

But all at once Valentine, who had listened quietly, while going on with his work, raised himself upright, and went close to him, saying—

"You mean that for me, do you not? Well, then, listen: your Talleyrand-Perigord is a most cowardly Judas! Do you understand, a Judas! and those who praise him are the same!"

And as Maitre Jean had drawn back in astonishment, he went on—

"Asses! Our bishops asses! You are an ass! a creature full of pride, vanity, and folly!"

When he heard that Maitre Jean stretched out his hands as if he was going to strangle him; but Valentine raised his hammer, and cried—  
"Do not lay a hand on me!"

His face was frightful to look at, and if I had not thrown myself between them as quick as lightning, some accident would have happened.

"In the name of Heaven, Maitre Jean! Valentine! think what you are doing!"

They both became pale. Maitre Jean wanted to speak, but could not, his indignation choked him; and Valentine, throwing his hammer in a corner, said—

"Now I have done! I have put up with enough of it for the last two years. You must get yourself another journeyman."

"Yes," stammered Maitre Jean, furious, "I have had enough of an aristocrat like you."

But Valentine, in reply, said—

"You will pay me my wages, and you will give me a character for the fifteen years I have been working for you; do you understand? A character, good or bad! I should like to see what sort of character a patriot like you can give to an aristocrat like me!"

At the same time he walked out, putting on his jacket, and went into Rigaud's house. Maitre Jean was confounded.

"Rascal!" said he.

A minute or two after he asked me—

"What do you think of such an ass?"

"Why," said I, "he is mad there is no doubt, but at the same time he is a brave fellow, an honest journeyman, and a good workman. Maitre Jean, you have been wrong to annoy him for such a length of time."

"What! I am in the wrong?" cried he.

"Yes," said I; "you lose a good journeyman, a man who liked you—you lose him through your own fault; you should not have pressed, him so hard."

He seemed quite surprised, and finished by saying—

"I was his master! If I had not been his master he would have suffered for it! All the same, Michel, you say what you think—that is right. I am sorry for what has happened. Yes, I am sorry; but it is done. I could not believe there was such a fool in existence!"

Seeing he was sorry, I put on my jacket and ran to the Rigauds', to try and make matters up; for I liked Valentine; it seemed we could not live without one another. Maitre Jean understood it, and let me go. He went into the inn.

As I opened the door, Valentine was telling the old people what had occurred. They listened quite frightened. I interrupted him, crying—

"Valentine, you must not go; it is not possible; you must forget it all! Maitre Jean would be so glad. Don't think he is angry with you; on the contrary, he respects and likes you. I am sure of it."

"Yes," said old Rigaud, "he has told me so a hundred times."

"What is that to me?" said Valentine. "Before the States-General, I liked that man too; but since he has taken advantage of the misfortunes of the times to seize on the goods of the Church, I look on him as a robber. And besides," cried he, sitting down and striking his fist on the table, "it is this pride of his to believe all men are equal, this pride which disgusts me. His spirit of plunder will be his ruin, I warn you, and so it ought. You, Michel, you are not to blame; ill luck would have it that you should fall into the society of a Maitre Jean and a Chauvel; it is not your fault. If things had remained as they were, in four or five years you could have bought your freedom; I would have helped you; I have sixteen hundred livres saved up in the hands of Maitre Boileau, at Phalsbourg. You would have married like a Christian; we would have worked together, and the old journeyman would always have been respected by the children and the family."

While he spoke he became affected, and I repeated over again—

"M. Valentine, indeed you must not go."

But directly after he passed his hand over his eyes, and said as he rose, in a firm tone of voice—

"To-day is Thursday; the day after to-morrow, Saturday, I shall go, early in the morning. A man must do his duty; remaining in a cavern at the risk of his soul is wrong—nay, more, it is criminal. I have already risked too much; I ought to have gone long ago, but the weakness of habit kept me here. Now it is all over, and I am glad of it. Tell Maitre Jean Leroux to have all settled by to-morrow morning, do you hear? I do not wish to speak to him again—he might think he was going to convert me."

Then he went up into his own room. I crossed the street, full of snow, and I went into the Three Pigeons very much distressed, where Nicole was laying the cloth for dinner. Dame Catherine, who helped her, was much out of sorts; Maitre Jean had just been telling her about his quarrel with Valentine; he was walking up and down the room with his hands behind his back, holding his head down.

"Well?" said he.

"Well, Maitre Jean," said I, "he goes away early on Saturday morning, and he tells me to

give you notice to have everything ready in time."

"Good; the sixty livres for the month are ready; the character shall soon be written, as he means to go; but go and tell him I bear him no ill-will, and invite him to dinner; tell him there shall be no mention either of seigneurs, or capuins, or patriots; go and tell him so from me, and tell him two old workmen like ourselves can at least shake hands and drink a bottle of wine together before parting, though they do not agree in politics."

I saw he felt it a good deal; I did not dare tell him that his journeyman would not even speak to him. Just then Valentine passed the window with his stick in his hand, stepping out towards the town. He was no doubt going to fetch his money from the notary. Maitre Jean opened his window and called after him—

"Valentine! Valentine!"

He never turned his head, but went straight on. Then indignation again got the better of Maitre Jean.

"The fellow won't hear me," said he, as he closed the window; "he is revengeful. I was in the wrong; I was sorry for having been so touchy; well, now I am satisfied. Ah, you aristocrat, so you won't listen to me!"

At the same time he opened his desk in the corner of the room, and said—

"Sit down, Michel, and I will dictate his certificate."

I was afraid he was going to give him a bad character, and I ventured to observe that after dinner he would be quieter, and it would be better done then.

"No," said he, "I will do it at once, and think no more of it."

I sat down, and Maitre Jean, notwithstanding his anger, dictated the best character for Valentine that could be conceived, saying he was an excellent workman, a good, honest, and faithful man, that he very much regretted losing him; that private reasons deprived him of this excellent journeyman, and he recommended him strongly to all master blacksmiths. After which having made me read over what he had dictated—

"That is right," said he, as he signed it; "take it to him to-night or to-morrow. Take his money also; let him see if it is right, and give you a receipt. If he asks you to go with him part of the way, as is usual among journeymen, you can have all Saturday. And now let us sit down and have our dinner."

The soup was on the table, so we sat down. All day nothing fresh occurred. Valentine was seen no more at Baraques, and next day I went to his room; he was engaged in putting his traps and cages in order. I gave him his character, which he put in his pocket without speaking, then he counted his money and gave me a receipt for it.

"Everything is settled now," said he. "I give all my birds, cages, and seeds to you and your brother Etienne."

I thanked him, with tears in my eyes, for Etienne and myself, then he said—

"You must accompany me to-morrow at eight as far as the turning to Saverne. We will part there. Maitre Jean cannot refuse."

"No," said I, "he has even given me the whole day."

"It is the custom among journeymen," replied he, "so we will set off at eight without fail."

I then left him, and on the next day, Saturday, we set off together as we had arranged. I carried his bundle; he walked behind, leaning on his journeyman's stick, for, though very strong in his arms, his legs soon tired.

I shall never forget that day, not only on account of the quantity of snow we had to pass, and of seeing Alsace from the top of the hillside white for more than twenty leagues as far as the Rhine with its little villages and lines of trees and forests, but still more on account of what Valentine said to me when we reached the Arbre-Vert about nine. The carriers stopped there occasionally in ordinary weather; but none of them ventured to travel by this road in the month of January.

The little inn in the middle of the pines on the edge of the slope was half-buried in snow; you could only see the path where two or three persons had passed since the previous evening, and the small windows which had been swept clear of snow; had it not been for the smoke rising from the roof, everything about it seemed dead.

When we went in we saw an old woman asleep by the hearth, her foot on her wheel. We had to awake her, and then the Spitz dog, with his long white coat, feathery tail, pointed nose and ears, began to bark under the table; he was frightened when he heard us coming, and hid himself there. The old woman could only speak German; she had long black ribbons in her hair. Her husband was just gone to buy provisions at Saverne. She brought us some wine, a loaf of brown bread, and some cheese. Valentine put his bundle on the bench, and sat down by it, with his back to the window, his stick between his knees, and his hands crossed upon it. I sat down in front of him, and the old woman went to sleep again over her spinning.