

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.

VII.

In conclusion, when he spoke of others who were waiting to attack us in the rear, he grew pale, and said it would be the frightful side of the war if these people continued their intrigues; for the patriots would be compelled to apply to traitors, in order to save the country, the same laws of blood which they destined for us. Then this man, so firm, who always gave most solid reasons for what he said, became affected, and the whole club started when they heard him say, in a broken voice—

"They will have it, unhappy people, they will have it. We have offered them peace a hundred times, we stretch out our hands to them; we say to them; 'Let us be equal; let us forget your injustice; let us think no more of it. But commit no more wrong; renounce your unnatural privileges.' But their reply is, 'No, you are our rebellious slaves; God has ordained you should grovel in the earth before us, and keep us with the fruits of your labour, from father to son. We will neither reject an alliance with our country's enemies, nor shrink from anything to remain free; what reproach can they make us? I have done; citizens, let each man be ready to march when France calls on him to do so. Let us remain united, and let our rallying cry be, 'Live free or die!'"

He sat down. The enthusiasm was like the rolling of thunder. Those who have not seen similar scenes cannot form an idea of them; workmen citizens, and peasants became brothers there were but patriots and aristocrats, to love and to hate.

Others spoke on the subject also; our mayor, Boileau; Pernett, the contractor for the fortifications; Collins, &c. But none made the same impression as Chauvel.

We reached home very late; it rained all the time, and on the road, in the darkness of night, every one reflected in silence. Maître Jean alone from time to time raised his voice; he said the first requisite now was to have patriot guards, and this question alone gave rise to serious considerations, as the king would appoint them. To enthusiasm succeeded distrust, and in spite of ourselves we thought Chauvel was right when he said that traitors were our greatest danger. The numerous ideas which passed through one's head at such a moment are not to be described. I can only say I felt a great change in my life impending, and that I should have to march, without doubt; and that love for my country was for me, as for thousands of others, to take the place of love for my village, the old cottage, my father, the forge, and for Margaret. While thinking these things over I mounted to my garret. It all looked very serious; but, nevertheless, in spite of what Chauvel had said of the patience we should require, neither Maître Jean, nor Letumier, nor myself could have believed we were beginning a war to last for twenty-three years, and that all the nations of Europe, beginning with the Germans would come with their kings and princes at their head to subdue us, because we sought their welfare at the same time as our own, by proclaiming the rights of man; no, such folly is unnatural, and it is with difficulty one can understand it even when one has seen it.

VIII.

You must know for several months many young National Guards had joined the army as volunteers; notaries' clerks, sons of employes, and tradespeople, strong, educated, and courageous lads. Rottenbourg, Neulingre, Duplain, and Soye were of the number. Some have died for their country, others are become captains, colonels, and generals. They were enrolled at the commune; they received a bounty of eighty livres, and joined Rochambeau at Maubeuge, Lafayette at Metz, or Luckner in his camp between Bitche and Belfort. We used to think when we saw them leave—

"These are the real supporters of liberty. If the Austrians rent these fellows, we shall have some trouble to replace them."

Only fancy our astonishment when, April 29th, the news came that our national volunteers had retreated before the Austrians without waiting to cross bayonets, and that our regular soldiers had followed their example! It seemed so impossible that people said—

"Refractory priests have spread this report; they must be hunted out of the mountains."

Unfortunately, the same evening a Paris courier confirmed this news. Our paid National Guards and other troops had set out from Valenciennes in three columns to surprise Fleurus, Tournay, and Mons, where the patriot inhabitants were expecting us. But Rochambeau, who had just been named marshal by the king, as he acknowledges in his journal, April 20th, had given notice to the Austrian general Beaulieu by a private letter, that he was about to attack him, so that our columns, full of confidence in their advance, found a force of three times their strength in position on the road, with guns and cavalry and all that was needed to defeat them.

It is Rochambeau himself who relates this

story to the king. If, in later times, Bonaparte, Hoche, Massena, Kleber, and other republican generals had given our enemies notice of their intended movements, I do not think they would have gained many victories.

The same gazettes asserted that the national volunteers as they fell back cried out—

"We have been betrayed!" Many men of sense thought they were right, and insisted that those officers of noble birth who still remained in the army intended to betray them. Every one cried, "Treason!" and it was not only at our club that such opinions were held. See what the *Moniteur* of May 3rd, 1792, says:—

"A deputation from the Cordeliers presented itself at the bar of the National Assembly. The spokesman of the deputation said—

"Three hundred of our brothers are dead; they have had the fate of the Spartans at Thermopylae. The public voice asserts they have been the victims of treason."

"A hundred voices cried—

"Turn those fellows out!"

"The cries became louder. The deputation was obliged to retire. Some Montagnards asked leave to speak. The assembly passed to the order of the day."

The majority of this Legislative Assembly, elected by active citizens only, was not in favour of equality. Lafayette was its God, and Lafayette wanted to have two chambers as in England, the first to consist of nobles and bishops, the second of the commons. The first chamber would possess the king's veto to check whatever the commons might attempt against the interest of the privileged orders. This was re-establishing the three orders abolished by the Constituent Assembly. Fortunately Louis XVI. and Queen Marie-Antoinette distrusted the marquis, and the Duke of Orleans was backing the Jacobins, whose power increased daily.

Treason was spreading in La Vendée, Brittany, the south, the centre, along the frontiers, and even to the Legislative Assembly. But what gave us the greatest blow was that in the same fortnight as that in which Rochambeau was beaten by General Beaulieu, when all the scoundrels rejoiced over our defeat, when the émigrés called our National Guards an army of cobbles, on the 10th of May—I shall always remember it—we heard that the evening before, at eleven, the brave hussar regiment, Saxe, which had cut down the patriot soldiers of La Fère, which had been approved by the king, had just deserted in a body to the enemy, every man having received six livres the day they went over; also that on the same day, May, 10th, at five in the morning, the Royal Allemand regiment had left Saint-Avoid on the pretext of a march out for exercise, and had crossed the bridge at Sarrebruck, with arms, horses, and baggage. Such was these respectable leaders' plan: in the north, the desertion of the generals; in the east, desertion of the men; in our rear, insurrection in the provinces.

I had been expecting something of the sort for a long time. Since my meeting with Nicholas after the Nancy massacre I felt that a worthless fellow, without sense or education, and who could only talk of his colonel, his captain, his king, and his queen as a servant talks of his master, would be capable of treason, and would turn his sword against the country which had fed him. I did not intend to tell my poor father this; but how was he to be made acquainted with such terrible news? The report of these desertions had reached the village. People were already talking about them, and from one minute to another some ill-disposed neighbour might go into the cottage and tell the old people out of mischief, as so frequently happens in the world.

I set off in my shirt-sleeves in very great trouble, thinking I might do better if I told him of our misfortune quietly myself; but when I saw my father working at the cottage door, and he smiled at me as I went up to him, I was so distressed that I forgot all caution, and as he came to meet me under the little shed, I called out to him—

"Such a misfortune! Nicholas has deserted to the enemy!"

I had hardly spoken before I was shocked at my stupidity. I shall never forget the poor old man's cry. He fell on his face as if he had been struck dead. I am very old myself now and I can still hear that cry. It was something frightful, and I grow pale when I think of it.

I could not stand. I leaned against the wall. If some neighbour had not come, I should have fallen down by him.

My mother, too, came out of the cottage crying out—

"What's the matter? What has happened?" The great woodcutter Rougèreau, who was carrying my father in his arms, replied—

"This is the work of your brave Nicholas, who has just deserted."

She disappeared, and I went into the cottage just as Rougèreau laid my father on his bed. I sat down by him with my head on my knees. The perspiration ran from me like water. I wished to cry but could not.

Amidst such distress it is, however, a great consolation to know how many good friends a good man possesses whom he did not know of before his misfortune. I could not have believed it. The whole village, men, women, and children, with tears in their eyes, came to see good Father Bastien. The rickety old cottage was full of people, stepping lightly and leaning over the old linen curtains, and saying—

"Poor Father Bastien! that rascal Nicholas has given him his death-blow."

When I saw that, I understood the others had more sense than I, and I bitterly reproached myself. When I heard Maître Jean say, "My poor old friend!" my heart broke, and I groaned out aloud that I had caused my father's death. However, for all that my father did not die. Doctor Steinbrenner, whom Margaret had despatched as soon as she heard of the accident, attended him very successfully, and he recovered, but with a pain in his side; he seemed to be choking sometimes. People constantly came to see him, and he would smile and say, "It's nothing." My mother could not keep those people away. I saw by her face she was put out by it, for it was the condemnation of Nicolas and Nicolas was the one she loved.

One thing had a great effect upon her; Jean-Pierre Piralle, our neighbour, told her that Nicolas could never return to France without being tried by court-martial and shot. Miralle had been a grenadier, and was acquainted with military law; but still she did not believe him, until afterward Maître Jean told her it was true, and that traitors were only received with shots in France. When she thought she would never see Nicolas again, she put her apron to her eyes and went into the fields to cry.

Sometimes after, one day when we were alone and my father put his hand to his side as if he had a difficulty in fetching his breath, I asked him if he felt pain there.

"Yes, my boy," said he, after looking to see if my mother was gone out, "as if some one had pricked me under the left nipple."

He remembered the letter of Nicolas when regimental fencing-master in the Royal Allemand regiment, and made an attempt to smile. But almost immediately he burst into tears, and lifting his hands above his head, he said—

"Oh, my God! pardon him, pardon him! The unhappy boy does not know what he is about!"

That is all he ever said, but he suffered considerably, and sometimes at night, when every one was asleep in the cottage, and he thought I slept also, I could hear him groan in his bed.

I kept as cheerful a countenance as I could. Every day when I went home I sat down by my father and told him how Etienne was improving, and that he walked better, and every Sunday I sent for him to visit his parents. That day things went on well; the poor man's face changed, his eyes showed how he felt; he thought no more of Nicolas, and said—

"We are the happiest people in the world."

But during the week—in those days which begin at five and end at nine in the evening, during which time a basket-maker is always bent over his work—his only pleasure was to hear me whistle and sing as I came in; for I had got into that habit to conceal my uneasiness; each time he got up and came to the door, saying—

"Is that you, Michel? I heard you. Have you been busy to-day?"

"Yes, father, very."

"So much the better. Wait—sit down there while I finish this basket."

My mother remained in her corner, her hands crossed on her knees, her lips pressed together; she said not a word; she was thinking of Nicolas.

When I went to town Margaret used to give me a parcel of newspapers, and every evening I read one to my father, who chiefly admired the speeches of Vergniaud and the other Girondins. He was astonished at their courage, and began to see better why the people ought to rule. These novel ideas entered with difficulty into the mind of the poor old man, so long a slave under the rule of the seigneur and the noble. His mind always reverted to the past; he could not believe in the equality of men, and that the only difference between them was that of virtues or ability. Old ways of thinking are not easy to change, although in the end a man of feeling would find himself on the side of justice, which is the reason why my father ended by understanding these things.

As may be supposed after the treason of the Saxe Hussars and the Royal Allemand, Marshal Rochambeau, attacked on all sides could not retain his command. He resigned it, and our three armies on the frontier became but two; that of the north from Dunkirk to the Moselle, under Lafayette; and that of the east from the Moselle to Jura, under Luckner, an old German hussar who could hardly speak French.

The Austrians, instead of advancing, waited a long while for the King of Prussia, Frederick William, who was in no hurry to move, notwithstanding the complaints of the émigrés. Most fortunate indeed was it for the nation, which was alive to its danger; they discovered they had no muskets, and if the enemy had

taken advantage of our dismay to invade us, we could hardly have offered any resistance. Every patriot wanted a gun, but the arsenals were empty; they had been obliged at first to arm the volunteers with old rubbish of the time of Louis XV., the locks of which refused to act. Everything was in keeping. The old cannon were honeycombed; the balls, either too large or too small, fell to the bottom of the cannon at once or stuck fast in the muzzle. The powder was always good and dry, because the powder-magazines of Phalsbourg, cut out of the solid rock, are perhaps the best in France.

Such was the state of things, which was perhaps why the idea of using pikes spread over the mountain. All May, 1792, we had an enormous amount of work to do. A model for pikes was sent from Paris. The shaft was of horn-beam, seven feet and a half long, the head fifteen inches, shaped like a billhook, sharp on both sides, with a hook on the lower part by which to hold cavalry. I have often said to myself while working at this cramp—

"I hope this cramp will pull the vagabond off his horse who cost my father so much regret. I hope it may catch him by the neck."

I conjured up all this till I got into a rage; my hammer flew up and down. What thoughts for a brother to have! Here is civil war already dividing, not only men of the same country, but even children of the same mother.

We must have forged a thousand or fifteen hundred pike-heads in a couple of months. I was obliged to engage two more journeymen, and Maître Jean, to help me, only went to his farm at Pickedt once a week. It was worth while seeing us stripped to our shirts, with the red cap and cockade on our heads, working away in the street, surrounded by fifty or sixty mountaineers, every morning, before the Three Pigeons. The forge was too small for such work and the furnace was kept alight from morning till night. One journeyman did nothing but carry the iron between the fire and the anvil.

Maître Jean was in his element; he wore a great red cap which half covered his whiskers, and when the perspiration was pouring down our backs, and we could hardly breathe, he kept crying out—"Get on, get on; ça ira! ça ira!" And the hammers went on rattling like a diligence over the stones of the street.

We did get through some work then. Hot weather had come again; the village was quite green; it was splendid weather, but in the evening the journeymen, Maître Jean, and myself were so tired that we preferred lying down after supper to going to the club, except on Saturday evening, as we could lie in bed late on Sunday morning and make up for lost time.

It has happened once or twice in my life that when travelling about on the mountain I have found one of those old pikes among the woodcutters or lumberers behind the bed-head, or against the clock-case. The people did not know what it was! I would take the old rusty pike, look at it, and turn it over, and then past patriotic times would come into my mind; and I used to think—

"You may have been all over Alsace, Lorraine, and Champagne. You may have parried the blow of one of Wurmsers' lances, and the roar of Brunswick's cannon may have failed to appal the hand which grasped you."

Those far-distant histories reappeared. I heard the cries of "Vive la nation!" "Vive la liberté!" "Vaincre ou mourir!" How the times have changed! How indeed, and men too!

In the meantime, elsewhere the Feuillants accused the patriots of factional conduct; the Girondins called the Montagnards friends of anarchy; the Montagnards reproached the Girondins with having provoked a war which had begun so badly; they accused them of glorifying Lafayette, the man of the Champ de Mars, the man who moved votes of thanks to Bouillé after the Nancy massacre. They said, "Deprive Lafayette of his command, since the ministry is in your hands. Lafayette is a general, in violation of the article in the constitution which forbids any member of the Assembly to accept employment from the king until four years from the date of the dissolution of the Assembly have expired. Take his command from him, then. It is your duty."

Marat told the soldiers to shoot the generals who betrayed them; Royon asserted in his gazette that the last hour of the revolution had come; in La Vendée a Marquis de la Rouarie levied taxes and collected arms and ammunition in the king's name; nobles who wanted to get to the enemy enlisted under false names among the volunteers in the hope of escaping into Switzerland or the Low Countries.

There were no bounds to the fury of these people, especially on Palm Sunday in April. Before the revolution the peasants used to come to town on that day carrying fir-branches to have them blessed; there were processions in the streets, and Protestants, Jews, and Catholics alike were obliged to hang tapestry from their windows. It was with difficulty that Jews and Lutherans were allowed to close their shutters during the singing round the altars set up in the streets. But many patriots, Chauvel at their head, having complained of this ceremonial, the municipal body, at the requisition of the procureur of the commune, had ordered that as the