

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

THE story of the Great Revolution of the people and the middle classes against the nobles in 1789 has been told by many. But they were men of wit and learning, who took an extended view of the matter. I am an old peasant, and I will only speak of these facts as they affected ourselves. Let us attend to our business; we must be acquainted with what occurred before our eyes; let us profit by them.

You must know, before the Revolution, the district and lordship of Phalsbourg had five villages belonging to it—Vilschberg, Mittelbronn, Lutzelbourg, Hultenhausen, and Hazelbourg. The townspeople and those of Valschberg and Hazelbourg were free, but those of the other villages were serfs, men and women alike; they could not leave the lordship or otherwise absent themselves without the prévôt's permission.

The prévôt administered justice at the town-hall; he had both civil and criminal jurisdiction; he wore a sword, and could send a man to the gallows.

Accused persons were put to the torture in the vaults under the town-hall, where the guard-room now stands. If they refused to confess, the prévôt's sergeant and the executioner put them to such pain that their cries could be heard on the open square.

The gallows were erected on market days under the old elms, and the hangman despatched them by resting his feet on their shoulders. In those days it required a stout heart to do wrong only in imagination. Phalsbourg had also a right to levy a toll on all commodities; for instance, every cart laden with cloth, wool, or similar wares paid a florin at the gates; every load of poles, planks, frames, or of wood-work, six gros de Lorraine; and rich stuffs, either velvets, silks, or cloths, paid thirty gros a waggon-load; one packhorse, two gros; one basket of goods, half a gros; a truckful of fish, half a florin; of butter, eggs, or cheese, six gros; every hoghead of salt, six gros; every rezel of rye or wheat, three gros; of barley or oats, two gros; one hundred pounds of iron paid two gros; a cow or an ox, six pfennings; a calf, pig, or sheep, two pfennings, &c.

In this wise the Phalsbourg people could neither eat, drink, nor clothe themselves without paying a round sum to the Dukes of Lorraine.

Then came the gabelle—that is, every hotel-keeper and tavern-keeper living in Phalsbourg or the villages belonging to it was obliged to pay his highness a certain tax on every measure of wine or beer which was either stored in their cellars or consumed by them. Then there were fines on alienation, which means five per cent. on the sale of houses or inherited property. Then came the tax on grain—every rezel of wheat, rye, barley, or oats sold in the market paid his highness one sou.

Then there were the standings at the fairs, that took place three times a year; the first, St. Matthew's day, the second, St. Modesty's, and the third, St. Gall's day. The sergeant put a price on these standings for the benefit of his highness.

Next, the town weights—every hundred pounds of wool, flour, or other goods paid one sou; then the fines, which were always disputed before the prévôt, but which his highness's counsellors usually decided in his favour; then the right to gather acorns, the right to pasture, of mowing, of felling; the great tithes, two-thirds for his highness, and one for the Church; the small tithes on wheat for the Church only, but which his highness finished by appropriating, loving himself better than the Church.

If any one wants to know how so many people found themselves in the clutches of his highness and his prévôts and bailiffs, they must remember that about 200 years before this miserable state of things, a certain George-John Count Palatine, Duke of Bavaria, and Count of Weldenitz, who possessed immense forests in our country by the grace of the Emperors of Germany, but who profited nothing by them for want of inhabitants, want of roads to transport the wood, and of rivers to float it down to a market for it, published in Alsace, Lorraine, and the Palatinate, "That all those who were not afraid to work had but to betake themselves to these woods, that he would give them land, and they would live in abundance." That he, John of Weldenitz, did all this for the glory of God! That Phalsbourg being on the high road between France, Lorraine, Westrich, and Alsace, artisans, tradespeople, blacksmiths, coopers, farriers and shoemakers, would find a market for their productions, as would locksmiths, armourers, innkeepers, furniture-makers, and other industrious persons; that as the honour of God ought to be the beginning of every great undertaking, all those who found themselves in his good town of Phalsbourg should be free from servitude; they should be free to build, and should have wood for nothing! He would construct them a church wherein to preach purity, simplicity, and good faith; and a school to teach their children true religion, seeing that the mind of youth is a

beautiful garden with delicious plants therein, the scent of which rises to God!

He promised them a thousand exemptions and advantages besides; the news soon spread over Germany, and crowds of people hurried to have a share in these good things.

They built, they cleared, they cultivated, and made the woods of George-John of some value, instead of being worthless.

Then did the said George-John, Count of Weldenitz, sell lands, beasts, and inhabitants to Charles III., Duke of Lorraine, for the sum of 400,000 florins, in honour of good faith, justice, and the glory of God.

The greater number of the inhabitants were Lutherans. George-John had declared that faith, pure and simple according to St. Paul, should be preached at Phalsbourg, in virtue of the Confession of Augsburg; but as soon as he had pocketed the 400,000 florins, his promises never kept him awake, and the successor to Charles III., who had promised nothing at all, sent his trusty and well-beloved counsellor of state, Didier Dathel, to exhort his townsmen of Phalsbourg to embrace the Catholic faith; should any persist in their errors, to order them to leave the town on pain of expulsion and loss of property. Some were after this fashion converted; the rest, men, women and children, left, taking their carts loaded with old furniture with them.

Order being thus established, the dukes employed "their dearly-beloved inhabitants of Phalsbourg in raising and repairing the ramparts; in building the two gates of Germany and France of hewn stone; in clearing out the ditches, building a town-hall for the administration of justice, a church for the instruction of the faithful, and a home for the curate adjoining the said new church, to watch over his flock; last of all, to build the market hall, where the dues were levied and paid." After which the officers of his highness settled what duties, charges, service, and forced labour, or *corvées*, they thought proper; and so these poor people worked from father to son, from 1583 to 1789, for the benefit of the Dukes of Lorraine and the Kings of France, for having believed in the promises of George-John of Weldenitz, who was only a rogue, like many others in the world.

The dukes also established several corporations in Phalsbourg by letters patent, associations among men of the same trade, to prevent all others from working at it, and consequently enabling themselves to plunder the public between them without let or hindrance.

The state of apprenticeship lasted three, four, or five years. The master was well paid for admission to the trade; then, after making his masterpiece and receiving his certificate, the quondam apprentice treated his neighbours as he had been treated himself.

The town was nothing like what it is now. The lines of streets and the stone-built houses are of course the same, but not one house was painted; all were in rough-cast; the doors and windows were small and arched, and behind the leaden framework of the windows the tailor was to be seen sitting cross-legged on his board, cutting out or sewing, and the weaver at his loom throwing his shuttle in the obscurity.

The soldiers of the garrison, with their large cocked hats, their patched white coats hanging about their heels, were most wretched of all; they were only fed once a day. The tavern-keepers and chop-house-keepers went from house to house collecting broken victuals for these poor devils; this was still the case some few years before the Revolution.

The people themselves looked wan and dismal; a dress was handed down from grandmother to granddaughter; the grandfather's shoes were inherited by the grandson. No pavement in the streets, no lights at night, no gutters to the roofs; small panes of glass in the windows, mostly replaced for twenty years by pieces of paper. In the midst of this squalor the prévôt passes and mounts the staircase of the town-hall, a black cap on his head; young officers, nobles, march about in their little cocked hats and white uniforms, their swords against the calves of their legs. I see all in my mind as if it were yesterday, and say to myself, "What happiness for wretches like us that the Revolution happened, and most of all for the peasants!" For if the misery and want in the town were great, in the country they exceeded all description. In the first place the peasants paid the same dues as the townsfolk, with many others besides. In every village in Lorraine there was a farm belonging to the seigneur or to a convent; all the best land belonged to this farm; the poor had only the worst as their share. Nor were the unfortunate peasants allowed to cultivate their land as they wished; grass land must remain grass land, arable land arable. If the peasant laid any of his land down in grass he robbed the curé of his tithe; if he ploughed up his meadow he diminished the grazing land; if he sowed his fallows with clover, he could not prevent the flocks of the seigneur or of the convent eating up his crop. His land was burdened with fruit trees, which were let for the benefit of the seigneur or the abbey; these trees he could not destroy, but was obliged to replace them when dead. The shade of these trees, the damage caused by

gathering the fruit, and the ground occupied by their roots, caused him a very great loss.

In addition to all this the seigneur had the right of sporting, of walking over the crops and injuring the harvests in all seasons; and if the peasant killed one single head of game even on his own land he risked being sent to the galleys. The seigneur and the abbey had also the right to send their cattle to graze an hour earlier than the peasant could send their beasts, which of course suffered in consequence.

The farm of the seigneur of the country had also exclusive right to a dovecot; the pigeons covered the fields by thousands, and hemp, peas, beans, had to be sown thrice over if a crop was to be hoped for. Then, every father of a family owed the seigneur in the course of the year fifteen bichets of oats, ten fowls, twenty-four eggs. He had to give up to him three working days—three for each of his sons or his servants, and three days' cartage or horse labour. He had to mow his meadow round the château, make his hay, and cart it to the barn at the first sound of the bell, subject to a fine of five sous each time he failed. He had also to cart both stones and timber when required for repairing the château or the farm. The seigneur fed him on a crust of bread and a clove of garlic—that is what was called the *corvée*, or forced labour. I must also mention the manorial bakehouse, the manorial mill, the manorial press, where the whole village was obliged to go, of course by paying. I will just notice the executioner, who had a right to the skin of every dead beast. If I were to speak of all these impositions, and of a thousand others which crushed the country population down to the ground, I should never come to an end.

And even now the measure was not yet full. As long as our country remained under the rule of the dukes, the exactions of his highness, as well as those of the seigneurs, were quite enough to ruin us all; but after the death of Stanislas and the incorporation of Lorraine with France, there had to be added the king's capitation tax—that is, the father of every family had to pay twelve sous a head for every child and every servant—the king's supply; so much for the furniture—the king's twentieth, which meant the twentieth of the net produce of the land, but only of the peasants' land, then and lastly the king's excise or assessed taxes.

Then, again, if the princes, seigneurs, and nobles who had kept the best land to themselves for ages past, obliging the wretched peasants to plough, to sow, to reap for them, compelling them to pay all costs or contributions as well—if they had used their wealth in making roads, digging canals, draining marshes, manuring the soil, building schools and hospitals; if they had done this the evil would have been only half as great; but their only cares were their pleasures, their pride, and their greed.

When one saw at Neuville, Bouxville, Hildeshausen, the great men build pheasantries, orangeries, and bothouses; lay out gardens, half a league in extent, full of vases, statues, and fountains, in imitation of the king at Versailles; not to speak of the loose women dressed out in silks, that they carried about with them amongst these poor people; when one saw bailiffs, prévôts, seneschals, notaries, and judges of all sorts, only thinking of their fees, and living on exactions and fines; when one saw a thousand similar grievances, it was sad indeed, the more sad because the sons of the peasants alone supported this state of things against their fathers, their friends, and themselves.

Once enlisted, these sons of peasants forgot the distress in their villages, forgot their mothers and sisters; they only acknowledged their officers, their colonels—nobles who had bought them, and at whose command they would massacre every one, for the honour of their colours! Yet not one of these men could rise to become an officer; clowns were unworthy of the epaulette; but after having been wounded in battle, they were allowed to beg their way. The knowing ones picked up recruits in the taverns and tried to swindle them out of the bounty money, the bolder turned highwaymen; sometimes one or two companies of gendarmes were sent against them. I saw a dozen hanged at Phalsbourg, nearly all old soldiers, disbanded after the seven years' war. They had lost the habit of work and did not get a livre of pension, and were all taken at Vilschberg after having stopped a diligence near Saverne. Any one can now understand what the *ancien régime* was like.

II.

Thank God this is all over now! The peasants have acquired their share in the good things of the earth, and naturally I have not remained behind. Every one hereabouts knows Father Michel's farm, his Valtin meadows, his fine Swiss cows, wandering about the fir-forests, and his twelve big plough oxen.

I have nothing to complain of: my grandson, Jacques, is at the Polytechnic School in Paris, in the first class; my granddaughter, Christine, is married to the inspector of forests, Martin, a man with plenty of good sense; my granddaughter, Juliette, is the wife of Commandant Forbin of the Engineers; and the last one, Michel, whom I may be said to like the best,

because he is the last, is going to be a doctor—he passed his bachelor examination last year at Nancy; if he works he will get on.

I owe all this to the Revolution! Before '89 I could have possessed nothing.

Sitting, as I do now, in my old arm-chair, in the middle of the big room, the old crockery in the rack over the door shining in the fire-light; the old hen and her chickens coming and going; my old dog stretched before the fire, his muzzle resting on his forefeet, looks me in the face for hours together; when I see through the windows my apple-trees white with blossom, my old beehives, and I hear the farm-lads singing and chattering with the girls in the yard; the ploughs going out, the hay-waggons coming in, whips cracking, horses neighing; as I sit thinking there, I call to mind the horrible hut in which my poor father and mother and sisters and brothers lived in 1789—its four bare and crazy walls, the windows stuffed with straw, the thatch worn down by rain, melted snow, and wind; a sort of black, rotten den, where we used to be smothered in smoke, and shiver from cold and hunger; when I think of these really brave people, of my good father, and of my mother courageously and ceaselessly working to give us a few beans for food; when I see them before me covered with rags, the picture of misery—it makes me shudder, and, if I am by myself, I begin to cry.

The indignation I feel for those who made us drag out such a miserable existence, in order to screw the last farthing from us, will never be extinguished; my eight-five years count for nothing; the older I grow the stronger I feel. And when I think that sons of the people, the Gros-Jaques, the Gros-Jeans, the Guillois, dare to write in their papers that the Revolution destroyed everything—that we were much more honest, much happier before '89—what liars! Every time I get hold of one of their papers I trembled with rage. It is of no use for Michel to say—

"What is the use of being angry, grandfather? Those fellows are paid to deceive people, to lead them back into ignorance; it is their business, it is their only means of living."

I reply—
"No; we shot dozens of men from '92 to '99 a thousand times better than these; they were the nobles, the soldiers of Condé, they fought for their principles! But to betray father, mother, children, and country, to fill one's belly, is too much!"

If I were to read these rascally papers often I should have a fit; fortunately my wife puts it out of sight if one chances to find its way to the farm. But they are like the plague, they get everywhere without being sought for.

This, then, is the reason I have made up my mind to write this story—the story of a peasant—to destroy this spite, and to let the world know what we underwent. It is some time since I first thought of it. My wife has preserved all our old letters. This work will give me some trouble, but one must not mind trouble if one means to do good; besides, there is a great deal of pleasure in worrying those who vex us; were it only for that I could spend years at my desk, spectacles on nose.

It will amuse me, and will do me good, to think we have driven those rascals away. I need not hurry myself; just one thing will occur to me and then another, and I shall put down everything in its turn; without order nothing goes right.

Now I begin.
I am not to be made to believe that the peasantry was happy before the Revolution; I have seen what they call "the good old times; I have seen our old villages; I have seen the manorial bakehouse where they baked their cake once a year, and the manorial wine-press, where they only went when forced to work for the seigneur of the district; I have seen the lean, scraggy labourers, with neither shirts nor sabots, but only a frock and linen pantaloons, summer and winter alike; their wives, so sunburnt, so filthy and ragged, that they might be taken for beasts; their children hanging about the doors, with nothing but a rag to cover them round their loins. Even the seigneurs themselves could not help writing in their books at that time "that the poor animals bent over the ground in sunshine and in rain to get bread for every one, ought at least to have a little of it to eat." They wrote thus in a moment of good feeling, and then they thought no more of it. These things are never to be forgotten; ask Mittelbronn, Hultenhausen, Baraqueus, ask all the country round. And the old people use to speak of a state of things still worse; they talked about the great war of the Swedes and the French, and the Lorrainers—the seven years' war—when they hanged the peasants to the trees in bunches. They spoke of the great plague which followed to complete the ruin of every one. You could go for leagues without meeting a soul. They used to cry with uplifted hands, "O Lord God, save us from the plague, from war, and from famine!" As for famine, they had it every year. They had not yet learned to plant potatoes, and the poor had nothing but hard pulse to eat; how could they get food enough?

No day labourer could.