

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

XV.

I listened in silence, close to Margaret. I was the happiest lad in the country. And very late after ten, when the others were all gone and Maitre Jean closed his door, crying, "Good night, friends, good night! What a fine day's work!" and some went off right and left by twos and threes, Margaret and I last of all left the yard, shut the trellis-gate, and slowly took the road to the village.

We were both of us thoughtful, looking at this fine moonlight night, the trees throwing their shadows across the road, and the countless stars overhead. It was absolute silence; not a leaf stirred; some old women wished us good night and in front of Chauvel's house, under the hedge of their little sloping orchard, the spring which flowed out of the bank through the old pipe bubbled in its trough, nearly level with the ground.

I see the water flowing over the trough; the watercresses and the iris which cover the rotten old pipe; the shadow of the great apple-tree at the corner of the house, and the moon, which was reflected in the trough like a looking-glass; everything is quiet; Margaret looks on a moment, and then says—

"How quiet everything is, Michel!"

Then she stoops with her little hand on the pipe and her mouth under it, her beautiful hair falling down her cheeks and over her pretty brown neck, and she drinks. I look at her in ecstasy. All of a sudden she stands up, wipes her chin with her apron, and says—

"Yes, Michel, all the same, you are the boldest of all the village lads. I saw you well enough behind me; you did not look very kind—no; and that is the reason Poulet was in such a hurry to go after looking at you!" She began to laugh, and while I was delighted to hear her in the quiet street, she asks me—

"But tell me, Michel, what were you thinking about to make such a face as that?"

"I was thinking he had the misfortune to touch you, or say even a word to shock you, that he was a lost man."

Then she looks at me again, and her cheeks grow red.

"But you would have been sent to the galleys."

"But would that have mattered? I should have killed him first."

How all this comes back to one after the lapse of so many years! I can hear Margaret's voice; every word is now in my ear, and the small murmur of the spring, all, all comes back. Oh, love! what a pleasant thing! Margaret was then sixteen; for me she has never grown old.

We stood dreaming there an instant, and then Margaret turned towards their door; she said nothing; but just as she opened it, with her foot in the passage, she turned round and stretched out to give me her little hand saying—

"Come, good night, Michel, and thanks."

And I felt her press my hand. I was very much troubled at it. After the door was closed I stood for two minutes listening to Margaret moving about their cottage, go upstairs, and then seeing the lamp lighted through the crack in the shutters, "Now she is going to bed," said I to myself, and I set off, saying in my inmost soul, "Now she knows you love her."

I have never since felt similar agitation or similar enthusiasm.

I fancied all this to myself, with tears in my eyes; and I thought too that Father Chauvel would be pleased to have me for a son-in-law. What could he have much better than a good workman, hard-working, saving, and capable of putting money by; a plain and honest man like myself? I felt sure he would give his consent; everything seemed reasonable, and I became quite affected at my own happy imagination.

Unhappily, things happen in this world when they are the least expected.

One morning, five or six days after the arrival of the revenue officers, we were shoeing the old Jew Schmoule's cart-horse in front of the forge, when the woman Steffen came in from the Barriques. She was returning from selling her eggs and vegetables in the town market, and said to Maitre Jean—

"Here is something for you."

It was a letter from Nancy, and Maitre Jean cried out—

"I bet it comes from Chauvel! Read it to us, Michel; I have no time to look for my spectacles."

I opened the letter, but had scarcely read the two first lines when my knees began to tremble, and I felt a cold shiver all over my body. Chauvel informed Maitre Jean that he had just been named deputy from the Third Estate to the States-General, and begged him to send Margaret to the inn of the Plat d'Etain, Rue des Vieilles Boucheries, at Nancy, as they were to set out together for Versailles.

That is all I can recollect of a tolerably long letter. I continued to read without understanding it, and at last I sat down on the anvil quite

upset. Maitre Jean crossed the street, calling out—

"Catherine, Chauvel is named deputy for the Third Estate to the States-General."

Valentine joined his hands together and stammered—

"Chauvel at court, among the seigneurs and the bishops! Oh, Lord!"

And old Schmoule, the Jew, said—

"Why not? he is a sensible man, a true man of business; he is as fit for that place as any one."

I was in great trouble. I kept saying to myself—

"Now it is all over—all is lost; Margaret is going away, and I am left behind."

I had a great mind to cry, but shame prevented me; I reflected—

"If they know you love her the whole country will laugh at you. What is a journeyman blacksmith compared to the daughter of a deputy of the Third Estate? Nothing at all. Margaret is up in the sky and you down on the ground."

My heart was broken.

The street was already full of people, Dame Catherine, Nicole, Maitre Jean, and the neighbours crying out—

"Chauvel is deputy for the Third Estate to the States-General!"

"We are all crazy on account of the honour to the country—we think of nothing else. Michel, run and tell Margaret!"

I got up. I was afraid to see Margaret. I was afraid of crying before her, of betraying that I loved her, and of making her feel timid. Even in the passage I stopped a moment to summon up courage, and then I entered.

She was ironing in the little room.

"Why, it is Michel!" said she, surprised to see me in my shirt-sleeves, for I had forgotten to put on my jacket and wash my hands.

I replied—

"Yes, it is I; I bring you good news."

"What is it?"

"Your father is named deputy to the States-General."

While I was speaking she became very pale, and I cried—

"Margaret, what is the matter?"

But she could not answer; joy and pride were the cause; and then, suddenly bursting into tears, she threw herself into my arms, saying—

"Oh! Michel, what an honour for my father!"

I held her tight; her arms were round my neck; I felt her sob; her tears rolled down her cheeks! How I loved, how I should have liked to keep her! In my soul I said, "Let any one try to take her from me! and yet I must let her go." Her father's will was law. Long did Margaret cry; then letting go her hold on me, she ran and wiped her face on the towel, laughed, and said—

"How silly I am, Michel! How can one cry about such things?"

I said nothing. I looked at her with a love which cannot be described. She paid no attention to it!

"Now," said she, taking my arm, "come!"

And we walked off.

The great room of the Three Pigeons was full of people. I do not care to describe to you the embraces of Maitre Jean, Dame Catherine, and Nicole; nor the compliments of the notables, Letumier, old Rigaud, and Hure. That day the inn was not empty till nine in the evening; men, women, and children coming and going, waving their hats, their caps, falling about, and shouting loud enough to be heard at little St. Jean; glasses, bottles, and pipkins tinkled, Maitre Jean's loud voice was to be heard above the tumult, with shouts of laughter which seemed never ending; it was an indescribable fête. Seeing all this, I said to myself—

"What a wretch you are! The village is rejoicing in honour of Chauvel and Margaret, everybody is delighted, and there you are as sad as death—it is shameful!"

Valentine alone was of my way of thinking.

"It is the end of all; the rabble goes to court now; the seigneurs are mixed up with ragamuffins; there is no respect for anything; Calvinists are named instead of Christians; the end of the world is coming."

And in my great sorrow I thought he was right; my courage was disappearing. I could not remain there in the crowd; Margaret herself was forced back into the kitchen, where the notables went to congratulate her. I took my cap and walked off. I went God knows where! straight before me, by the side of the road, I believe, across the field.

It was as fine as it had been for a fortnight; the oats began to grow green, the wheat to shoot, along the hedges the linnet chirped, and in the air the larks hovered and sang their everlasting song; the sun and moon rose and shone in spite of me; my misery was dreadful. I sat down three or four times under the shade of a hedge, with my head in my hands; and I dreamed! But the more I dreamed the sadder I became. I saw nothing either in the past nor in the future, as they say of wretches lost at sea, who can see nothing but water and sky, and who cry—

"Now it is all over—now we must die!"

This is what my thoughts were. All else was nothing to me.

At last, at night I returned to the village, I knew not how, and I reached the back of our cottage. At a distance, at the other end of the street, I could still hear their cries and songs. I listened, and said to myself—

"Cry and sing; you are right; life is a trouble! and I went in; my father and mother were sitting on their stools spinning and plaiting. I wished them good evening; my father looked at me and said—

"How pale you are, Michel; you are ill, my boy!"

I did not know what answer to make, when my mother smiled, and said—

"Why, don't you see he has been drinking with the others? He has had as much as he could carry in honour of Chauvel!"

I answered in the bitterness of my soul—

"Yes, you are right mother, I am ill. I have had too much—you are right; we must take advantage of an opportunity."

My father said gently—

"Well, my child, go to bed; that will go off; good night, Michel."

I climbed the ladder with the little tin lamp, quite worn out; I was obliged to rest my hand on my knee to help myself up. When there I set down the lamp on the floor, and I looked at my little brother Etienne, who was sleeping so soundly, his fair head thrown back on the coarse linen pillow, his small mouth open, and his long hair round his neck; I looked at him, thinking, "How like he is to my father, how very like!" And I kissed him, crying to myself, and saying, "Now I shall work for you, since everything is going, and nothing remains for me, it is for you that I will labour, and perhaps you will be happier than I. She whom you may love perhaps will not go away, and we shall live altogether."

Then I undressed myself and lay down by him; and all night long I did nothing but dream of my misfortune; repeating to myself that no one ought to know of my love for Margaret, that it would be disgraceful; that a man ought to be a man, and so on. And next day early I went to the forge, determined to be firm. That did me good.

That day the compliments continued; and it was not only the Baraquins, but the town notables, MM. the mayor's officers; MM. the échevins, assessors, syndics; MM. the secretaries, registrars, treasurers, receivers, and comptrollers; MM. the notaries and hammer-keepers of the freedom of the waters and forests, and how many? More than I can tell.

All this crowd of people, whom no one knew, came one after the other with their cocked hats, their great powdered wigs, their long ivory-topped canes, their ratteen coats, silk stockings, shirt-frills and lace. They came like swallows round a church-tower in autumn; they came to compliment Madlle Margaret Chauvel, the daughter of our deputy from the balliwick to the States-General. They seemed as pleased as if our elections had anything to do with them. What an abomination! The whole room smelt of musk and vanilla. I have often thought since that they were true cuckoos which occupy the nest when it is completed, but which never brought a single straw to help to build it. Their chief business is to profit by everything without trouble, and to obtain good good places by bowing and scraping.

Before the elections they would have wished neither good night nor good morning; but now they came to offer their services to us, thinking that Chauvel at Versailles could return it to them twice and thrice over. The wretches! only seeing them made me feel ill-will towards them.

Valentine and I could see from the forge opposite, while Maitre Jean, Margaret, and Dame Catherine were receiving all these fine people. We could see all their grimaces through the open windows; and Valentine, yellow with indignation, said to me—

"Look at Syndic this, or M. Hammer-keeper that, making his bow; that is the proper way to bow. Now he is taking his pluch of rappee on his thumb; he knocks the tobacco from his shirt-frill with the end of his finger-nails; he learned that at Mgr. the Cardinal's, but that does very well to an innkeeper's; that flatters the daughter of M. the Deputy Chauvel; now he turns on his heel and bows to the rest of the company."

Valentine laughed; but I hammered away without looking, choking with rage. I then perceived still more clearly the distance there was between Margaret and myself. The Baraquins might have erred in respect to the importance of a deputy of the Third Estate to the States-General; but these others ought to know something about it; they would not make their bows and pay their compliments for nothing. Margaret had only to choose—in fact, I felt she would be wrong to take a journeyman smith instead of the son of a counsellor or a syndic. That seemed to me a matter of course and grieved me all the more.

Well, this scene was repeated up to five o'clock.

Margaret was to leave at night with the Paris courier. Maitre Jean lent her a trunk; it was

a large one, covered with cowskin, which he had inherited from his father-in-law, Didier-Ramel; it had been in the loft for thirty years, and I had the job of strengthening the corners with sheet-iron. Twenty times that day did the idea of smashing it to pieces with my hammer come into my head; but thinking I was working for Margaret, and that, doubtless, for the last time, filled my eyes with tears, and I continued to work with a zeal which one no longer feels after twenty. It would not be finished; I had always something to file or a hinge to fit; however, some minutes before five there was nothing more to be done; the lock acted well; the claw of the padlock fitted perfectly; everything was strong.

Margaret had just left. I saw her go into their house. I told Valentine I was tired, and should feel obliged if he would carry the trunk to Chauvel's. He took it on his shoulder, and went off with it at once. Quite done up, I had not courage to go there, or to find myself again alone with Margaret. I felt that my wretchedness would betray itself so I put on my jacket and went into the inn. Every one else was gone, thank God! Maitre Jean, with his cheeks red and his eyes bright was singing the glories of the Three Pigeons. He declared that no other inn had ever received such an honour, and Dame Catherine was of the same opinion.

Nicole was laying the cloth.

Maitre Jean, seeing me, said that Margaret had had her supper and was in a hurry to get her baggage together and to choose those of her father's books which she had to take with her. He asked about the trunk; I told him it was finished, and that Valentine had taken it to Chauvel's house.

At that moment Valentine came in; we sat down, and we had our supper.

I intended going home before eight o'clock, without taking leave of any one. What was the use of paying compliments, since it was all over, and I had nothing to hope for? I thought, "When she is gone Maitre Jean will write to Father Chauvel that I was ill, if he troubles himself at all about it; if he does not, so much the better."

That was my idea; as soon as supper was over, I quietly got up and went out. It was dark; there was a light in the upper room in Chauvel's house. I stopped a minute to look at it; and then seeing Margaret come to the window, I ran away, but just as I turned the corner of their orchard I heard her cry out, "Michel! Michel!"

And I stopped as if the chimney had fallen on my head.

"What do you want, Margaret?" said I, my heart beating as if it would burst my bosom.

"Come up," she answered; "I was going to look for you; I want to speak to you."

So I went upstairs very pale, and I found her in the upper room before an open wardrobe. She had just filled the trunk, and said to me—

"Well, you see I have made haste; the books are at the bottom, the linen above them, and on the top of all my two dresses. There is nothing more to pack. I am looking—"

And as I made no reply, being so very much embarrassed "Look here," said she, "now I must show you over the house, for you will have to take care of it; come!"

She took me by the hand and we entered the little back room, above the kitchen; it was their fruit room, but there was no fruit, only the shelves to lay it on.

"See," said she, "here you must put the apples and pears of the orchard. We have not many, so much the more reason for taking care of them. Do you see?"

"Yes, Margaret," said I looking at her, much affected.

Then we went downstairs; she showed me the lower room, where her father slept, their little cellar, and the kitchen opening on the orchard; and then she recommended her roses to my care, saying that that was her chief anxiety, and that she should be very angry with me if I did not take care of them. I thought to myself, "They will be well looked after, but what is the use of that if you are going to leave us?" Nevertheless I felt a sort of hope gently revive, my eyes grew dim, and seeing myself alone talking to her, I said to myself—

"My God! is it possible it is all over?"

As we returned to the lower room Margaret pointed out her father's books, arranged on the shelves between the two small windows; she said—

"While we are away you must often come and fetch books from here, Michel; you must teach yourself; without learning you can never be anything."

She spoke, but I could not answer, being so touched to see that she could think of instruction for me—the very thing I had so often considered as first of all. I said to myself—

"She must love me! Yes, she does love me! How happy we should have been!"

After putting the lamp on the table, she gave me the house-key, and told me to open it from time to time to preserve it from damp.

Just as we went out she said, "I hope it will be in a good state, Michel, when we come back."