

THE STORY OF A PEASANT (1789.)

OR

THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION.

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PART THE FIRST.

1789.

XVII.

"Other deputies were now arriving by different alleys. As nine o'clock struck we drew near the hall, M. Bailly and two secretaries at our head. Some Gardes-Français were before the door. As soon as they saw us coming an officer in command appeared and came forward; M. Bailly had a lively discussion with him. I was not near enough to hear, but at the same time was stated that the door was closed to us. The officer (the Count de Vertan) very politely justified himself by his orders. We were indignant. In the course of twenty minutes the Assembly was nearly complete; and as the officer on guard, notwithstanding his politeness, would not allow us to pass, several deputies made a vigorous protestation, and then we ascended the avenue nearly up to the railing, in the midst of great confusion. Some proposed to go to Marly and hole the Assembly under the windows of the château; others said the king sought to plunge the country into the horrors of civil war, and starve it, and that nothing similar had been seen under the greatest despots, Louis XI., Richelieu and Mazarin. Our indignation was shared by half Versailles; the people, men and women, surrounded and listened to us.

"M. Bailly had left us about ten; we did not know what had become of him, when three deputies came and informed us, that after having removed our documents from the hall by the help of the commissioners who accompanied him, he had betaken himself to a large hall where they usually played at tennis, in the Rue Saint-François, nearly opposite my lodgings and that this hall was large enough to hold the Assembly. We set off escorted by the people to the tennis-court, descending the street which runs along the back of that part of the château which is called 'les grands communs,' and we entered the old building about twelve o'clock. The affront we had just subjected to was sufficient evidence that the nobility and the bishops were tired of temporising with us, and that we must expect further insults; and we should be under the necessity of taking measures, not only with a view to assure the fulfilment of our mission, but also to guarantee our own existence. These people, accustomed only to employ force, knew no other law; happily we were near Paris which counteracted their plans.

"Let us go on.

"The hall of the tennis-court is a square building about thirty five feet high, paved with large flags, with neither pillars, beams, nor cross-beams, and the roof of thick planking; light is admitted by windows very high up, which gives a sombre appearance to the interior. All round it there are narrow boarded galleries; we had to traverse them to reach this species of *halle aux blés*, or covered market, which must have been a long time in existence. Under any circumstances buildings were not erected in stone for a childish game. It was deficient in everything, chairs, tables, &c. They were obliged to fetch them from the neighbouring houses. The master of the establishment, a little bald man, seemed pleased with the honour that we did him. A table was set in the middle of the hall, and some chairs round it. The Assembly. The crowd filled the galleries.

"Then Bailly mounted a chair, and began by reminding us of what had just occurred; he then read to us two letters from M. the Marquis de Brezé, master of the ceremonies, in which that nobleman communicated the order to him to suspend our meetings until the royal sitting. These two letters were written in the same terms; the second merely added that the order was positive. In conclusion, M. Bailly recommended us to deliberate on what plan we should adopt.

"I need not try, Maitre Jean, to make you understand our emotion; when one is the representative of a great people, and one sees this people insulted in one's own person—when one calls to mind what our fathers have suffered at the hands of a stranger class, which for hundreds of years has lived at our expense, and now endeavours to keep us in subjection—when but a few days previous you are insolently reminded that the superiority of 'the descendants of our haughty conquerors over the humble posterity of the conquered' is graciously forgotten for a moment; and one then sees that by means of insolence and trickery they are seeking to perpetuate the same system with us and our descendants; then, if such treatment be not deserved, we are ready to sacrifice all to maintain our rights and humble the pride of those who humiliate us.

"Monnier, calm though indignant, had a truly great idea. After having shown us how strange it was to see the hall of the States-General occupied by armed men, and us, the National Assembly, at its door, exposed to the laughter and insults of the nobles and their servants; forced to take refuge in a tennis-court, that our labours might not be interrupted; he cried—'The intention to wound us in our dignity had been openly shown, and it warned us of the liveliness of intrigue and of the rage with which they endeavoured to drive our good king to take dis-

trous steps; and in this state of things the nation's representatives had but one course to pursue—to bind themselves to the public safety and the country's interests by a solemn oath.'

"This proposition excited great enthusiasm, every one comprehending that the union of the good causes terror to the bad; the following resolution was immediately passed:—

"The National Assembly, considering that having been invited to determine the constitution of the kingdom, effect the restoration of the public order, and maintain true monarchic principles, nothing can prevent the continuance of its deliberations, in whatsoever place it may be forced to establish itself, and that where its members are met, there is the National Assembly:

"Resolved that all members of this Assembly shall at this instant take a solemn oath never to separate, and to meet wherever circumstances may require it, until the constitution of the kingdom is strengthened and established on a solid base; and the said oath having been taken, that all and each member shall confirm by their signature this irrevocable resolution.'

"How pleased you would have been, Maitre Jean, to see this great sombre hall, us in the centre of it, and the people all around; to hear the hum of astonishment, satisfaction, and enthusiasm; then the president, Bailly, standing on a chair, reading to us the form of the oath, amidst a religious silence; then suddenly our hundreds of voices, like a clap of a thunder, burst forth in the old building with, 'We swear it!—we swear it!'

"Ah! our ancestors who have suffered so much ought to move in their graves. I am not a very susceptible man, but I had not a drop of blood in my veins. I never believed such happiness could be in store for me. Near me the curé Jacques was in tears; Gerard de Vic was very pale; at last we fell into the arms of one another.

"Outside, shouts of applause extended over the old town; then it was I recollected this verse of the Gospel, when the soul of Christ ascended to heaven—'The earth shook and the veil of the temple was rent in twain.'

"When quiet was re-established, each in turn approached the table and took the oath, which the secretaries wrote down and each one signed. I never wrote my name with so much pleasure; I laughed as I signed, and yet I could have cried—what a grand day!

"One deputy, only, Martin d'Auch, of Castelnau-dary, signed 'Dissentient.' Valentine will be happy that he is not the only one of his species in France, and that another son of the people loves the nobles better than his own race—there are two of them!

"The opposition of Martin d'Auch was inscribed on the register. And as some suggested sending a deputation to his majesty to represent our profound grief, &c., the Assembly adjourned to Monday, the 22nd, at the usual hour, resolving that, if the royal sitting took place in the Salle des Menus, all members of the Third Estate would remain there after the sitting to take into consideration their own affairs, which are those of the nation.

"We separated at six.

"When he heard what had taken place, the Count d'Artois, surprised to find that it was possible to carry on deliberations in a tennis-court, sent to engage it for his own amusement on the 22nd. This time the poor prince thought we should find no refuge anywhere.

"The next day the king sent us word that the sitting would not take place on the 22nd, but the 23rd. It was prolonging our anxieties; but these profound geniuses had not taken into consideration that at Versailles there are other localities besides the tennis-court and the Salle des Menus, so that on the 22nd, finding these two places closed, the assembly first betook themselves to the Recollets Chapel, which was not large enough, and then to the Church of Saint Louis, where every one was at his ease.

"The grand plan of M. the Count d'Artois and the princes de Condé and de Conti was thus rendered abortive. One can never think of everything. Who could ever have supposed that we should go to the Church of Saint-Louis, and that the clergy themselves would come and join us there? And yet, Maitre Jean, these are the great men who have held us so many ages in abasement! It is easy to see now that our ignorance only has been to blame, and we cannot reproach them for it. Silly Jeannette Paramel, of Barques, with her great throat, has more wit than they.

"Towards midday, M. Bailly announced that he was informed the majority of the clergy was about to visit the Assembly to verify the powers in common. The court had been aware of this since the 18th; it was to prevent this meeting at any hazard that the Salle des Menus had been closed to us, and that preparations had been made for a royal sitting.

"The clergy first congregated in the choir of the church; then it joined us in the nave, and we had again a moving scene; the curés had gained over their bishops, and the bishops themselves were nearly all rallied to the cause of good sense.

"One ecclesiastic only, the Abbé Maur they

son of a shoemaker of the Comtat-Venaissin, felt his dignity wounded by being confounded among the deputies of the Third Estate. One does see strange things in this world!

"Notwithstanding this abbé, of all his order the greatest opponent of this union, documents were examined, and speeches of mutual congratulations were made; after which the sitting was adjourned, to be continued the next day, Tuesday, in the usual place of the assemblies, the Salle des Menus.

"We now come to the 23rd, the day of the royal sitting.

"The next morning, on rising and opening the shutters, I saw we were going to have very bad weather; it did not rain yet, but the sky was overcast. That did not prevent the street being full of people. Some instants later Father Gerard came up to breakfast, followed by the curé Jacques. We were in full dress, as on the day of our first meeting. What did this royal sitting indicate? what had they to say to us? Since the evening before we knew that the Swiss and the Gardes-Français were under arms; there was a report that six regiments were marching on Versailles. While at breakfast we heard the patrols up and down the Rue Saint-François. Gerard was afraid something bad was going to happen—a *coup d'état*, as it was called—to compel us to vote the money and then send us home. The curé said it was rather like saying, 'Your money or your life,' and that the king, notwithstanding his complaisance to the queen and the Count d'Artois, was incapable of striking us such a blow as that. I thought as he did. But as for knowing the object of the royal sitting, I was no farther advanced than the others. I thought perhaps they might try to frighten us; however, we were soon to know what we were to expect.

"We set out at nine; all the streets abutting on the hall of assembly were thronged with people already; patrols came and went; people of all sorts, citizens, workmen, and soldiers, seemed uneasy; every one was distrustful.

"The moment we came near the hall it began to rain; a shower was imminent; I was on before, and I hurried. About one hundred deputies were standing before the door at the grand avenue; they were not allowed to enter, while the clergy and the nobility passed without notice; and as I arrived a sort of lacquey came and told the gentlemen of the Third Estate to enter by the Rue du Chantier to avoid obstruction and confusion.

"M. the Marquis de Brezé having had so much trouble in finding places for all in their order the day of the first meeting of the States-General, had, I suppose, adopted this plan on his own responsibility.

"We began to grow angry; but as it rained fast we made haste to reach the door of the Chantier, expecting to find it open. But M. the Marquis de Brezé had not placed the two first orders to his satisfaction; the back door was, therefore, still closed. We had to take refuge under a sort of shed on the left, while the nobles and the bishops entered boldly and majestically by the Grande Avenue de Paris. M. the grand master of the ceremonies did not put himself out of the way for us; he thought it quite in the order of things to keep us waiting; we were only there for form's sake after all. What are the representatives of the people? What is the Third Estate? Only canaille! Doubtless such was the opinion of the marquis, and if peasants, citizens like myself, had some difficulty in digesting these affronts, revived from day to day by a species of upper-servant, imagine the rage of a noble like Mirabeau; his hair stood on end, his fleshy cheeks trembled with rage. The rain poured down. Twice our President had been turned back; M. the marquis had still to find places for some great personages. Mirabeau, seeing that, said to Bailly in a terrible voice, pointing to the deputies of the Third Estate—

"Monsieur the president, conduct the nation before the king!"

"At last, for the third time, Bailly went up and knocked at the door, and the marquis condescended to appear, having, no doubt, finished his noble task. That man, Maitre Jean, can boast of having served the court well. Our president declared that if the door was not opened, the Third Estate would retire.

"Then it was thrown wide open; we saw the hall adorned as on the first day, the benches of the nobility and the clergy occupied by the splendid deputies of these two orders, and we entered wet through. Messieurs of the nobility and some of the bishops laughed as we took our places; they seemed quite pleased at our disgrace.

"Those things cost dear.

"We sat down, and almost directly after the king entered from the other end of the hall, surrounded by the princes of the blood, the dukes and peers, the captains of his guards, and some gardes du corps. Not a single cry of 'Vive le roi!' was heard on our side. Silence was instantaneous, and the king said, 'That he believed he had done everything for the good of his people, and it seemed to him we had nothing to do but to finish his work, but that for two months we had not been able to agree

over our preliminary operations, and that he owed to himself to put a stop to these fatal dissensions. He would consequently declare his pleasure to us.'

"After this speech the king sat down, and a secretary of state read us his wishes.

"Art. 1. 'The king wills that the ancient distinction of the three orders should be preserved entire, forming three separate chambers. He declares null the deliberations taken by the deputies of the Third Estate on the 17th of this month.'

"Art. 2. 'His majesty declares the powers valid, verified or not verified, in each chamber, and commands that such a declaration be communicated to the other orders without any more hindrance.'

"Art. 3. 'The king annuls all restrictions which have been imposed on the powers of the deputies.'

"So that every one of us could do as he pleased, grant subsidies, vote taxes, alienate the nation's rights, &c., and without attention to the wishes of those who sent him.

"Art. 4 and 5. 'If deputies have taken a rash oath to remain faithful to their mission, the king allowed them to write to their respective bailiwicks to be relieved of such oath; but in the meantime they would retain their places, to give weight to the decisions of the States-General.'

"Art. 6. 'His majesty declares that for future holdings of the States-General he will allow him no instructions to be given by constituents.'

"Without doubt because the cheats who made a traffic of their votes would know one another but too well among the honest men who fulfilled their mission.

"His majesty then indicated the mode in which he desired us to conduct our proceedings. In the first place we were forbidden in future to discuss the ancient right of the three orders; the form of a constitution to be given to future States-General; seigniorial and feudal property; the rights and honorary prerogatives of the two first orders. He declared that the especial consent of the clergy was necessary for everything that referred to religion, ecclesiastical discipline, and the law of regular and secular orders.

"So that, Maitre Jean, we had only been summoned to pay the deficit and vote away the people's money; the rest was no business of ours; all was well, very well, everything would be as it was, as soon as we had found the means!

"After this had been read the king rose again to tell us that no king has done as much as he in his people's interest, and those who continue to retard his paternal intentions were unworthy to be looked upon as a Frenchmen.

"Then he sat down, and his intentions as to taxes, loans, and other financial matters were read.

"The king wished to change the name of the taxes. You understand, Maitre Jean, the name. Thus the land-tax joined to the vingtième, or replaced in some other way, became more accommodating. Instead of paying a livre we give twenty sous; instead of paying a collector we shall pay a tax-gatherer, and the nation will be eased.

"Never did a king so much for his people! He wished to abolish lettres-de-cachet, but maintains them out of regard for the honour of families evidently.

"He was desirous of the liberty of the press, at the same time carefully restricting the publication of wicked gazettes and badly-disposed books.

"He sought the consent of the States-General to raise loans, only in case of war he assumed the right of borrowing up to one hundred millions to begin—'For it is the king's formal intention never to put the welfare of his kingdom in dependence upon any one.'

"He also wished to consult us on employments and offices, which would preserve for the future the privilege of conferring or transmitting nobility.

"In fact, a great medley on all sorts of things was read to us, on which were to be consulted. But the king always reserved to himself the right of doing as he liked. Our occupation was to find the money. In that respect we always had the preference.

"His majesty began to address us once more, and said—

"Reflect, gentleman, that not none of your designs, none of your arrangements, can have the force of a law without my special approval. I am the natural security for your rights. It is I who constitute the happiness of my people, and it is perhaps seldom the ambition of a sovereign to request his subjects to agree on accepting his good offices.

"I command you, gentlemen, to separate yourselves immediately, and to repair to-morrow morning each of you to the chamber destined to your order, to recommend your sittings.'

"At last we were put in our place. We had been sent for to vote money, nothing else. If parliament had not declared that all taxes had been till then illegally levied, our good king would never have had the idea of convoking us,