

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.

When I left our hut after eight I used to run to the club in town, and wrangle with our old échevins and syndics, whom we called aristocrats; my voice was heard above all the rest; my eyes flashed with anger if any one contradicted me; and by the end of winter I had already ventured to propose such resolutions as "Long live the friends of the constitution!" or, "Down with sham patriots!" That gave me weight at the Baraques. When we went home by moonlight, we used to sing "Ca Ira." I sang like a blackbird, and Maître Jean would lay his hand on my shoulder, and laugh and say—

"Michel is one of the right sort; we must pull together."

See what youthful exaltation is! The thought of Chauvel and Margaret redoubled my patriotic sentiments, and love filled my heart to overflowing.

This year passed quickly; the winter was mild, the snow melted as it fell; by the end of February there was none to be seen in the lowlands.

During the months of March, April, and May, 1790, the citizen guards began to act in concert; villages would unite together and fraternise, instead of fighting with sticks and stones as hitherto; the elders made speeches, and they all embraced one another, crying—

"Freedom or death!"

Women and children came to these fêtes, but took no part in them; the fashion of graces and goddesses had not yet come.

Complaints of the insubordination of the troops, and the relaxation in discipline, reached the National Assembly through partisan journals in all directions. To please the noble officers the Assembly was expected to shoot the soldiers because the soldiers refused to overturn the Assembly. Nothing was ever seen like it; it was like flies in autumn, which become more unbearable when they are nearly at an end.

Yet the revolution progressed notwithstanding the people still had faith in it. The abolition of royal rights, and of those of the seigneurs and bishops, gave pleasure to every one. On Sundays the peasants went out shooting in the fields and the heather; it was a pleasure to hear the shots, and to see a hare roasting in the hut of some poor creature who laughed at the keepers, and said to his children—

"We eat the beggars which lived upon us now we are our own masters."

You may believe no officers of the garrison came to Tivoli now; the time for minuets and entrechats was gone. Now we only saw sergeants under the great oak, with their old white coats and their large worn-out hats, drinking drams and talking to themselves about settling accounts. We did not know what they meant by accounts, but looking at their faces while they disputed in whispers, leaning across the tables to hear one another better, made us think it was something serious.

The Count Boyer, colonel of the La Fère regiment, the Chevalier Boiran, of the Chef-du-Bois, the Count de Divonne, and the gentlemen cadets of the Clairambault, Lagarde, Danglemont, Kméneau, and Anzers regiments, which we often heard mentioned, used to meet at the Café de la Régence on the Place d'Armes. No doubt they had accounts to settle also! The formation of the citizen militia, by bringing us in contact with troops, did not seem to give them any great satisfaction. They passed by the elm-trees often, and watched from a distance what soldiers stopped to hold any conversation with the citizens.

Thus the time passed till the month of August. I wrote down daily the course of events with us, and at the end of every month I had a letter of six pages ready, which I sent to Paris, Rue du Bouloi, No. 11, where Chauvel lived. He replied to us regularly, and sent us the papers; and Margaret sometimes added a word or two. In the evening I passed hours among their books, reading the four lines she had written, and I found something new in them every time.

It was my delight to send her news of her little garden, where there were quantities of flowers, and the cherry-trees were bent with their innumerable blossoms. I wished I could take her a basket of cherries or a bouquet of roses, fresh in the morning dew. She would have enjoyed seeing and smelling them. I was quite melancholy at being all alone in this fragrant little spot, shaded by the old cottage and the trees.

So I passed my life, in the midst of this great external agitation, and of these discussions and dangers which were perceptibly on the increase.

There was a report that the Austrians were entering France by Stenay, and that General Bouillé, who was in command in the Ardennes, had withdrawn his troops from Charleville to give them a free passage.

It was a terrible business. More than thirty thousand National Guards took up arms; the mountain population, who had no muskets yet, came down to have their scythes set straight,

to serve as lances, at our forge. Drums were beating, a cry "To arms" was raised, and we were on the point of setting out with the Phalsbourg detachment when couriers brought us the news that the king had allowed the Austrians to cross the Ardennes to stifle the Belgian revolution.

A decree of the National Assembly was requisite to allow these foreigners a passage. We then saw what would have occurred if the citizens had not risen en masse, and Maître Jean himself was not so fond of his good king as he had been. This permission to the Austrians to go and destroy a revolution, the offspring of our own, seemed to him and to every one very suspicious. Ministers declared it was in accordance with a secret treaty, and the National Assembly forbore to inquire further into it, lest they might discover too much.

We were then at the beginning of the month of August, 1790, and things were going from bad to worse for the nobles, for the greatest disgrace which ever happened in France was that the soldiers arrested their own officers as robbers. The regiments of Poltou, Forez, Beaune, Normandie, and many others put sentries at their officers' doors and insisted on accounts.

What an abomination! These poor wretches plundered by this rich and proud set of nobles, who already exclusively enjoyed rank, honours, pensions, and privileges; who could credit anything so shameful? It was, however, a sad truth; restitution had begun. Beaune claimed 240,727 livres, Normandy and the sailors at Brest two millions, and the chief capitulated and came to terms! At Strasbourg seven regiments broke out in the mutiny; at Bitch the soldiers turned their officers out of doors. The National Assembly entreated the king "to appoint special inspectors from among the generals to inspect the accounts of every regiment for the last six years in the presence of the officers commanding each corps, of the second captain, senior lieutenant, senior sous-lieutenant, and senior and junior sergeants-major, of cavalry sergeants, senior and junior corporals or brigadiers (cavalry corporals), and of four privates."

And thus, in consequence of this inquiry, the different regimental staffs were compelled to disgorge two or three thousand livres which had been embezzled out of the soup and vegetables supplied to the soldiers. This affair was so disgusting that people said—

"It was indeed time the revolution took place."

The rage of the officers against the poor devils who claimed their own is not to be described. Just then the emigration of many regimental staffs occurred; they went over to the Austrians arms and baggage. All did not go; there were still some honest men among the nobles who were indignant; but I could name several others, for I still have the gazettes full of those descriptions by me; all Alsace and Lorraine spoke of them with horror. And we shall soon see the cruelty of these men taken with their hands in their men's pockets, who, instead of confessing their fault and asking pardon on their knees, only thought of revenging themselves.

Towards the 15th August a hawk from near Luneville who exchanged earthenware goods for old linen, cinders, and broken glass, Father Soudeur, passed by the Baraques with his old horse and cart; he stopped at Maître Jean's to see if Dame Catherine had anything to dispose of, and to have a pint of wine as usual. He was an old man, grey, and marked with the small-pox, and a great man for news, like all travelling dealers. In the neighbourhood he was called the "frog-beater," because the people of his village had formerly been compelled to beat the water in the pond at Lindre during the night to prevent the frogs from keeping the seigneurs awake.

Maître Jean asked if he had any news, and he told us that there was a great disturbance in the environs of Nancy, that the three regiments in garrison there, Maître-de-Champ, cavalry, the King's Regiment, and Château-Vieux, a Swiss regiment, had risen on their officers; but that the great quarrel was between the officers and men of one of the Château-Vieux corps.

Father Soudeur winked his eye while he related these things. Soon after, Nicole, who was spinning by the stove, having gone out, he told us that the anger of the officers was caused by the soldiers insisting on having accounts; that they had already been compelled to restore the King's Regiment 150,000 livres in silver crowns, to the Maître-de-Champ 27,962 livres, and that Château-Vieux claimed 220,208; that the soldiers who had been deputed to the officers had been flogged, as it was much easier to beat them than to account to them; but that this had caused troubles in the town; that the National Guard sided with the troops; that the fencing-masters of the regiments, at the instigation of the officers, picked quarrels with the citizens in order to despatch them in a duel, and that things were looking very black indeed.

He laughed, but we thought it no laughing matter; at ten leagues from the frontier, with numbers of furloughs and discharges which were given to patriot soldiers to get rid of them, we risked invasion from one day to another; especially as Frederick William, King of Prussia, and Leopold, Emperor of Austria, had just made

peace, declaring that the friends of the French revolution were their true enemies. After talking some time, exchanging his pottery ware, and paying his reckoning, Father Soudeur went his way, and continued his road to the village, crying, "Pottery and old linen to change."

But now something very serious happened which surprised us all, showing that not only was the king in accord with the émigrés, nobles, bishops, officers, and monks, but that a great number of our deputies had an understanding with them, like thieves at a fair, to arrest the progress of the revolution, and reduce us once more to slavery.

We learned these things from a letter of Chauvel's, which I regret not to have, for it threw a light on all these events; but Maître Jean, as usual having lent it, it was passed all over the province, and no one knew what became of it. I recollect in this letter Chauvel told us that Mirabeau and several deputies of the Third Estate had sold themselves to the court party; that they had found the revolution too formidable; they were frightened at its extending everywhere; that one wanted to become minister, that others preferred property, carriages, and servants; that Lafayette and Bailly began to turn their backs on them; that they found the king too unfortunate at being compelled to surrender his rights to the people, and to be obliged to be satisfied with about forty millions a year, instead of being able to say—

"All is mine, the land, the inhabitants, and the beasts thereof."

I recollect Chauvel mentioned some new men who were rising in the clubs, and became daily more prominent: Danton, Robespierre, Legendre, Petion, Brissot, Loustalot, Desmoulins. All these people either died in poverty or brought one another to the guillotine, after having served the people. The nobility and clergy lived in great style, filled high offices, and died in their beds, surrounded by their servants.

If the Supreme Being did not exist, such examples would be discouraging, and those who sacrifice themselves for the people, which allows them to be dragged through the dirt, even after death, and to be treated as brigands by their enemies, must be considered but brutes.

Chauvel's letter surprised us much; Maître Jean was not pleased with it; he said we must not expect too much at once; I thought otherwise—I did not see that Chauvel wanted too much. I understood now Maître Jean and the rest, having got their share, wanted to breathe a little; but we men of the people had nothing as yet, and we wanted our share in the good things of the revolution.

We were still discussing this letter, and Letumier had taken it to read at the club, when on arriving at the market the evening of Thursday the 29th, after seven, we saw three large notices posted on the pillar in the middle. The four or five old Phalsbourgers of my time who are still in existence must recollect that between this massive pillar, which supported the great beams of the roof, and the old shed of the gabelle office, there used to hang a large lamp. The people of the town had unhooked the lamp and were crowding to read the notices. The Baraques who were the last comers could not get near, but Letumier, with his sharp elbows, got near at last, and began to read them in a loud tone that they could hear him under the arch of the guard-house.

"Letter of M. de Lafayette to the National Guards of the Departments of Meurthe and the Moselle."

"Paris, August 17th, 1790."

"GENTLEMEN,—The National Assembly having been made acquainted with the guilty conduct of the garrison at Nancy, and perceiving the fatal consequences of similar excesses, has taken, in order to repress them, the measures contained in the decree I have the honour to send you, to enable you to anticipate what orders you may receive. Allow, gentlemen, one of your brothers in arms, whom you have charged with the expression here of your devotion for the constitution and public order, to offer this opportunity to your zeal and firmness, as one of the most important, to consolidate that liberty which is founded on respect to the law, and to induce general tranquillity."

"LAFAYETTE."

It was terrible to hear this. Some days before we would all have marched; but after Chauvel's letter, which represented Lafayette as a weak and vain man, this man inviting us to war against patriot soldiers, filled us with indignation. The Baraques cried out—

"It is shameful! The soldiers have a right to insist on accounts. The soldiers are our brothers, our friends, our children! We side with them against the noble officers who want to rob them!"

This was the general opinion; honest people did not approve of this method of paying debts. Letumier, lifting his hat over the crowd called out—

"Hear the rest! Silence! Listen to the decree of the National Assembly"—and notwithstanding increasing dissatisfaction, the decree was read in silence: "Ordering the assembling of a military force, drawn from the garrisons and National Guards of the Departments to act under

the orders of such general officer as his majesty should think fit to appoint, to punish the authors of the rebellion." And then this last notice of the Directory of the Meurthe at Nancy:—

"Whereas a requisition dated yesterday was addressed to the Directory of the Department of the Meurthe by M. de Bouillé, the general commanding for his majesty the troops of the late province of the Three Bishoprics, and employed by him in executing the decree of the National Assembly of the 16th of this month, the municipal officers of all places in the Department of the Meurthe, where there are armed National Guards, will require the commandants of the said National Guards to assemble the greatest possible number of volunteers, and to make a report accordingly, which will be submitted to the municipal officers. From this report the municipal officers will hand the commandants of the said volunteers subsistence money for eight days, at the rate of twenty-four sous per day. Every man will carry at least twenty cartridges; those who have none will obtain them at Nancy. There will be but one colour for each district. The National Guards will be quartered on their march in the same manner as regular troops, no citizen can refuse to lodge them. The march will be as rapid as possible," &c., &c.

The whole of the citizens listened in silence. Letumier had hardly finished reading the last notice, when the governor of the district, Mathis, of Sarrebourg, a big, plump-faced man, with a tricolour sash round his waist, climbed up on the stall of the former gabelle office, from whence he addressed the people, to induce the patriots to come forward. He repeated Lafayette's letter word by word, calling him "the friend of Washington and the saviour of Liberty!" Many cried out—"Vive le roi!" "Vive Lafayette!" And Mathis was already beginning to laugh, when Eloi Collin, from the centre of the market, told him that the National Guards were not constituted for the purpose of fighting our own soldiers, but to support them against our enemies; and that instead of attacking Maître-de-Champ and Château-Vieux, they had far better pay them what they justly claimed; that thus the revolt would easily be quieted and peace be again established; but what they wanted was to bring a contest between the army and the citizens, in order to become our masters again; he, Collin, invited every sensible man to have nothing to do with it, that the noble officers might settle their suspicious affairs, which were not the business of the nation, themselves.

Numerous cries were then raised both for and against the decree. All the buyers of national property—Maître Jean Leroux; Nicolas Roche, innkeeper; Melchior Léonard, formerly warden of a company; Louis Masson, postmaster; Raphaël Mang, commissary, who had just taken the contract for the forage of the Royal Guyenne regiment; Gerard, the commandant of the citizen guard—in fact, all the principal citizens of Phalsbourg and its environs sided with Lafayette, and they had the greater influence from the number of men they employed.

Their municipal council had already decided that the town should advance 1,000 francs for the subsistence of the volunteers; the resolution was passed in the morning, before the club met, and notwithstanding all Eloi Collin could say, they voted that a detachment of the National Guard should march the next day—that such a village should furnish so many men; the Baraques had to find fifteen volunteers, and naturally Jean Leroux, Letumier, and myself were of the number, as the best patriots.

Maître Jean thought it was quite right. I believe he was not sorry to play at soldiers a little, and show off his uniform at Nancy, for his good sense and good heart did not prevent his being very vain. Letumier, Jean Kai, and I continued disputing all the way home.

We then all went to bed, having agreed to start early, and settled to meet before the Three Pigeons.

II

At six we were mustered on the Place d'Armes, with the volunteers from the town and the environs, about one hundred and fifty men, all told. We had a glass of wine at Maître Jean's before marching. Each had a good piece of bread, and put the rest in his haversack. The other villages had done the same, and the rappel began to beat for the laggards. Five or six came up, and then the commandant reviewed us; he ordered cartridge-pouches to be served out to those who had none, and twenty-five rounds per man.

Gerard, the commandant of the citizen guard, then mounted his horse; he made a speech about the duties of the citizen soldier; then raising his sword, the drums began to beat. No other volunteers appearing, we marched out by the Porte de France to the cry of "Vive le roi! Vive la nation!" from all the windows. The children followed us towards Mittelbronn and as far as Petit-Saint-Jean; then we were left to march by ourselves in the dust.

This 20th of August, 1790, and the day following were perhaps the hottest I have ever known. The burning sun on the back of our heads