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.

II

But as half our people were still behind, the commandant let us fall out while waiting for them, and we had time to drink a glass of wine under the linen awnings in front of the wine shops. The bell-towers were filled with curious people with spy-glasses, and those who came down called out as they passed.—

"The fighting is at the Faubourg Saint-Pierre," or, "The smoke comes from the Porte Stainville," and so on.

In about half-an-hour all our stragglers had come up, and we set out for Nancy; we soon heard the firing; about six it was very hot. The noise of the cannon had ceased. We began to make out the town, and at the same time the first runaways came near us. They were wretches indeed, nearly all in blouses, barefooted with neither hats or caps—in fact it was misery, the great misery of the towns in those days; entire troops of these poor creatures were running away; farther on we met three or four wounded sitting by the side of the road, some with their heads, some with their legs covered with blood; they looked hard at us, but said nothing. I thought perhaps they did not see us, or took us for enemies.

But as we met these poor people the firing which we had at first heard on the right spread all over the town; and then it was, as we heard afterwards, that the soldiers of Château-Vieux and the people fell back; and the massacre began. As we came into a long street of lofty houses, all closed from top to bottom, we saw a number of people retreating towards us before five or six hussars, who were cutting them down without mercy; horses reared, sabres flashed, and screams resounded, screams which made your flesh creep. It was horrible!

These people had only to turn round and fall on the brigands who pursued them; they might have taken them by the leg and unhorsed them easily, instead of which they allowed themselves to be cut down. Fear makes ones stupid. Our commandant ordered us to keep to the left, close to the houses, to allow these people to pass, and to halt. Maitre Jean, Letumier, and the other officers drew their swords, and ordered us to load. Every one of us then bit his first cartridge. The crowd came up to us, and passed like a flock of sheep pursued by wolves; when the hussars saw our bayonets they turned their horses' heads round; they must have expected our fire, for at the first turning they disappeared; in an instant the street was empty, and the flyers had hidden themselves; some remained lying with their faces to the ground. The din in the town broke out again and the firing, and we heard the tinkling of a little bell in the midst of the slaughter. What dismal thoughts occur to you when you recall these horrors, and how you pity the poor, who are sure to be the sufferers, even when only asking for justice! When the confusion was over our commandant ordered us to march, and we advanced to the grey square gate of Saint-Nicholas, when the cry of "Ver da?" warned us that the Germans were masters of Nancy.

M. de Bouillé had only brought these fellows with him; Frenchmen would have stopped short of his aim; he wanted to make a frightful example.

Then the grey moustache of the commandant curled as he advanced alone and answered, "France! citizen guard of Phalsbourg." Some moments later a picket of these Germans in blue coats, like our invalids now, came out accompanied by an officer to reconnoitre us; they evidently distrusted us, for we had a long time to wait with grounded arms before receiving orders from head-quarters, for the fatigue of the two forced marches had exhausted us, and it was only about nine that a lieutenant ordered us to relieve the Germans on guard at the gate. There were about fifteen of them in the guard-house; the beggars were glad to be relieved, to be able to go and plunder like their comrades.

We passed the night under the Porte Saint-Nicholas, stretched on the ground, with our heads on our knapsacks, along the walls. We slept by the side of one another. Two guns and some baggage-waggons blocked up the gate, and the pavement had been taken up; the sentries who were relieved every hour, had their beat towards the town and the faubourg; that is all I can recollect, for luckily it was not my turn for duty before morning.

I was awoke two or three times by cries and disputes; it was our patrols bringing in their prisoners; they were thrust into the guard-house and the door closed, in spite of the cries of the poor creatures inside, who could hardly breathe. I recollect that as I should a dream.

When sleep has once possession of a man he hears and sees nothing. I know that night hundreds of wretches were massacred, and the brutality of the nobles showed itself in all its rage against the people: but I saw nothing of it myself.

The next day, September 1, it was something else!

I was early on my legs, and what I saw that day, notwithstanding the years which have gone, remains to this moment as if painted before my eyes.

The beat of the drum woke us at four; raising myself on my elbow, still half asleep, I saw in the dawn, at ten paces from me, a German officer with the commandant Gerard talking together; behind them was a civil officer with a sash round his waist, and his hand in his large white waistcoat; they looked towards the dark gate, where we were getting up one after the other, shaking the dust from our clothes, picking up our muskets, and buckling on our knapsacks.

After the rappel came the roll-call; many of our comrades had come in during the night; we were about a hundred and twenty or thirty strong without the sentries and patrols.

Roll-call over, the commandant said—

"Comrades, you have to escort the prisoners to the town prisons."

Three waggons with straw in them drew up at the same time, and they began by letting out the poor creatures who had been thrust into them the evening before. They came out; it would hardly be credited; women, soldiers, populace, citizens, the street was crowded with them! so pale, in such disorder, it made you sick; many of them, covered with blood, were unable to walk; they had to be supported under the arms. When they came out into the air they struggled and gasped as if they were choking, and called for water, which was given them in a can, and then they were put into the waggons.

This took up twenty minutes, and then we marched them off; the carts with the wounded in front, the prisoners in the rear, two by two, between us. I have seen these convoys since—yes, indeed, I have seen them, and, much more considerable, thirty and forty carts one after the other. But this was the first, and the horror it inspired me with was most lasting; one need be buried to forget such dreadful sights. Later it was the wounded who were conveyed to the ambulances the evening after some great battle or aristocrats to the guillotine; this time it was the populace and soldiers who were to the gallows, for not satisfied with having exterminated three thousand poor wretches, four hundred of whom were women and children, that very day Bouillé hanged twenty-eight soldiers of the Château-Vieux, condemned by a court martial; one was broken alive on the wheel, notwithstanding the abolition of torture decreed by the National Assembly, and forty-one were sent to the king's galleys. We were already on our march to Phalsbourg when we heard the news of these abominations. People have cried out with reason against the September massacres, and the convoys of victims of '93; they were indeed most unnatural. But the nobles had set the example. It is a great misfortune! when you ask for pity on yourself and your people. you should have had been cruel in the hour of victory.

Well, the line of prisoners advanced between our two files of bayonets. We marched in the greatest silence, for all the houses were closed like prisons except those that had been pillaged, the doors and shutters of which were lying about in splinters. Maitre Jean commanded us; two or three times he looked at me, and I saw in his eyes how he pitied them; but what was to be done? Bouillé was master, and must be obeyed.

The wretches we were escorting—some coatless, some shirtless, their arms in slings, or their heads bandaged—looked straight before them; their eyes were dim, and we could hear occasionally their sighs, caused by dread at being taken; to know there is no hope, and that one has left behind an old mother, or a wife and children, to perish of want—that is what causes sighs like these, gently and in jerks, and shuddering internally. Those who hear you understand you, and, if they could, would willingly let you escape.

Every one must see that I did not pay much attention to the streets, the less so that we often met soldiers and other wretches, men and women, lying in pools of blood. We had to march over them—it made us all shiver—some of our prisoners, the bravest, looked round as they went by with their eyes half shut, to recognise and salute a friend or a comrade.

In one little place we saw horses with their bridles off, eating hay, and some of Lauzun's hussars sleeping on straw by them. That is all I recollect of the route, except, however, the great town-hall; the early morning making the panes of glass in the windows glitter, officers going and coming under a magnificent gateway, and estafettes below, waiting for orders. Two battalions of Liégeois were bivouacked on the place—the sky was clear and the stars still bright.

At the moment we passed under a sort of triumphal arch, we heard—

"Ver da?"

It was a dragoon on guard before the prisons, which were surrounded by ditches. The major who followed with the municipal officer, immediately stepped forward, and passed us on to another place with three rows of trees in it. The waggons stopped before a sort of hospital, with bars before the windows, like the baskets men carry on their backs; and while they were passing under the archway I noticed this prison was guarded by a post of the Royal Allemand. Fancy my dismay at knowing that Nicolas was at Nancy! I recollected his letter, and the idea occurred to me that the poor devil hat cut down every one for the love of discipline, as he did at Paris. I was in hopes of not meeting him; but while we were getting out the wounded, I began to reflect he ight be wounded too; that made me feel we were still brothers, and he had always taken my part in days gone by; besides if my father and mother knew we had been so near without seeing or speaking to one another, it would sorely grieve them. So I forgot everything else, and I went up to the nearest sentry and asked him if he knew Nicolas Bastien, corporal in the 3rd squadron of the Royal Allemand. When I told this man I was his brother he said he knew him well; I need only go down a little street facing me, at the Porte Neuve, where the Royal Allemand had charged the evening before, and that any one of his troop would take me to him.

Maître Jean was not pleased that I wanted to go and see Nicolas.

"What a misfortune for us to come and mix ourselves up with these brigands!" said he. "People will begin to believe that the citizen guards have supported the Germans against the patriots; they will put it in all their gazettes; what a misfortune!"

He did not prevent my going to see Nicolas, but told me to hurry, for we should not remain long at Nancy; every one had had enough of it. I set off directly, with my musket on my shoulder, and stepped out to the Porte Neuve. Now if I tried to describe the horrors of the massacre in this quarter, you could not believe me. No, they could not have been men, only savage beasts could have perpetrated such brutalities. The populace and the Swiss must have offered a desperate resistance in these holes and corners, for everything was torn down, broken, destroyed—doors, windows, gutters, everything!

Heaps of bricks and tiles filled the street, just like after a fire; bedding which had been thrown out for the wounded trodden on and soaked in blood; some horses were lying and struggling there also. Two or three times in passing before some of the half-destroyed houses, I heard dreadful cries; they were the poor Swiss who had hidden themselves after the battle, and who were killed without mercy, for B·uillé had ordered his Germans to kill every soldier belonging to the Château-Vieux regiment.

The monsters! Cursed be they who could commit such crimes! Yes. Cursed be they! And may God avenge the unhappy victims!

I was thinking of these things, and I felt indignant.

I then came into a larger street and a mountain of paving-stones, and behind these stones was the Porte Neuve, pierced through and through by cannon-balls, with a long line of carts, where the dead were piled up like heaps of rags—men, women, and—I must say it, as it is true—poor little children! Some of the common people were moving away the paving-stones to open a road for the dead to pass out to be buried. Some hussars were directing the work, women standing by cried unceasingly; they wanted to see their relations once more; but it had been so hot the last two days that they could not delay. All along the street the Royal Allemand, quartered on the citizens, were looking out of the windows; others, below, were standing round the carts to help the hussars if necessary, for the crowd was very great. An old woman, whose neighbours were carrying her away by force, cried—

"I want to be killed too! Let these brigands kill me too! They have killed my boy, let me go! You are all brigands!"

That made me sick. I was sorry I had come, when among those standing by the carts I saw big Jerome of Quatre-Vents, with the scar on his face. He was still a sergeant, and laughed while he smoked his pipe. I knew him well, but I did not speak to him; but other Royal Allemands of whom I inquired where Corporal Bastien was quartered, pointed out the windows of the inn opposite, where I recognised Nicolas, in spite of his uniform. He, too, was smoking his pipe and looking on at the horrid spectacle; and I crossed the street all the same very well pleased to see my brother again. It is very natural after all, though I knew very well we could never agree. When I came to the door under his window and called, "Nicolas!" he flew downstairs crying out—

"What! is it you? Have you come from Phalsbourg? Well done! I am so glad!"

He looked at me. I could see he was pleased. We went upstairs, and when we got to the top he pushed open the door of a large room where five or six Royal Allemands were drinking round a table, and three or four others looking out of the windows.

"Look here," cried he, "look at this young fellow; he's my brother; look at his shoulders!"

I was very glad to see him. All these Royal Allemands had their bearskin caps and their sabres hanging against the walls. They seemed very good fellows. They gave me some wine. Nicolas kept on repeating—

"Ah, if you had been here yesterday at five to see the dance; we cut them down in style."

He whispered to me that the sergeant of his troop had been killed, and that Captain Mendel would allow no one but Corporal Bastien to replace him, on account of his good conduct.

Fancy how all this disgusted me after the horrors I had already seen, but before the others I had nothing to say—I affected to be pleased.

Soon after the trumpets sounded to stables, and they all got up. Nicolas was going down also, but one of his comrades told him to stay, as he would tell the officer and do his duty for him. He sat down again, and then at last, when the others were all gone, he recollected his father and mother, and said

"And the old people, are they all well?"

I told him every one was in good health—father, was now earning thirty livres a month, and that I allowed them to want for nothing. He was very pleased to hear it, and shook my hand, saying—

"Michel, you are a good fellow. You must let them want for nothing, the poor old people! I ought to have gone and seen them—yes, so I ought! But when I thought of beans and pulse, and of that nest of vermin where we endured such wretchedness, I changed my mind every time. A Royal Allemand must keep up his position. You earn more than I do, it is true, but to wear a sword by your side and to serve the king makes a great difference. One must respect oneself, and old relations with ragged gowns and breeches, you see, Michel, that will not do for a corporal!"

"Yes," said I, "I understand, but now they are not so ragged. I have paid Robin's debt, and father has no more corvées to do, and mother has two goats, which give butter and milk, and fowls which lay eggs. Mathurine does day-work at Maitre Jean's; she is housekeeper; and little Etienne knows how to read. I teach him myself in the evening. The cottage is also improved. I have had it thatched, and I have put up a wooden staircase instead of the ladder. The room above has a new floor; we have two beds with four pair of sheets, instead of our old boxes full of heather. The glazier Regal, of Phalsbourg, has put in the panes of glass which had been wanting for the last twenty years; the mason Krom has put two steps before the door."

"Ah!" said he, "since everything is in such good order, and there is something to eat, I can come, and I will come and see the poor old people. I shall ask for a week's leave; you tell them so Michel!"

He had a good heart, but not the shadow of common sense; he could only admire epaulettes, sword-cuts, and gun-shots. Now such men are few, education has spread so much among the people; but at that time they were common enough, because of the ignorance in which they had been held by the seigneurs and the nobles, to make them work and rob them at their leisure.

As I was talking to him about the massacre, and he listened while smoking his pipe, with his elbow on the table, all of a sudden he called out, puffing out great clouds of smoke—

"Ah! that's all politics. What do you Baraquins know about politics?"

"Politics!" said I; "but these poor Swiss only wanted their money!"

"Their money!" said he, shrugging his shoulders. "Look here! did not the Mestre-de-Champ regiment get theirs? did not the commune pay every man in the regiment of the king three louis to get them to go to their barracks before the fighting began? These Swiss were rascals—they sided with the patriots. We massacred them because they held the busts of their muskets in the air instead of firing on the canaille on the attack of the Bastille. Do you see that, Michel?"

And while I was quite surprised at all this, after a moment's pause he continued—

"And this is only the beginning—the king must have his rights again; the talkers of the National A:sembly will get the same. Be ea y, General Bouillé has planned it all right; one of these mornings we shall march upon Paris, and then look out!"

He laughed, and showed his teeth under his moustaches. The courage and joy of a beast of prey when about to fall on a tempting bit, and seeming to have it already it its grasp, were painted in his face. I was disgusted. I said to myself, "Is it possible such an animal as this can be your brother?" But as to talking sense to him, or trying to get one good idea into his head, what was the use? He would not understood it, and would, perhaps, have quarrelled with me, so I thought I had better go.

"Well, Nicolas," said I, "I am very glad I have seen you, but at half-past eight the detachment returns to Phalsbourg."

"Are you going?"

"Yes, Nicolas; let us shake hands."

"But I thought you were going to breakfast with me; my comrades will be back directly. I have got plenty of money. General Bouillé gave every man twelve livres bounty money."

He slapped his pocket were the money was.

"No, it is not possible; duty first. If I did not answer to the roll-call it would be a serious matter."