

# 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. VI.

All commercial travellers on their return from the other side of the Rhine gave us information that at Worms, Mayence, Coblenz more than fifteen thousand gentlemen were ready to lead the armies of Leopold and Frederick William into Lorraine when the time should come. It was absolutely necessary to take steps accordingly.

The Assembly passed a decree, November 9th, 1791, that the French collected on the right bank of the Rhine were suspected of conspiracy; that if they remained so assembled up to January 1st, they would be proceeded against as though guilty, and punished by death, and that their revenues would be confiscated to the profit of the nation.

Then we saw women quit their husbands, children abandon their fathers, and the greater part of the peasantry of these provinces renounce the service of the National Guard. It was about the time when Jean Chouan began to move in Lower Marne, like Schinderhannes and his band in our country; they began in a small way by robbing stables and farmyards; but at the end of two or three years they became notorious, especially Jean Chouan, who was recognised by the nobility and clergy as a staunch supporter of the altar and the throne, and who gave his name to the armies in La Vendée.

The Legislative Assembly wished to put a stop to these disorders, and decreed that the priests who had not taken the oath should be deprived of their pension, that they could no longer do duty, not even in private houses, and that if religious troubles arose in their commune, the department would compel them to reside elsewhere. Well, the king vetoed this decree also. Letters which he wrote about that time to the King of Prussia, begging him to use despatch, have since been discovered; it has been proved that he had an understanding with our enemies, and that he only thought about himself and his privileged orders. If the greatest misfortunes occurred afterwards, are we to be blamed for it? Were we to allow ourselves to be robbed by persons who had done so from father to son for ages and ages, and who called us a conquered race?

The Legislative Assembly, in which Brissot, Vergniaud, Gaudet, Mathieu Dumas, Bizire, Merlin (de Thionville), &c., could agree together on no other topic, were yet united in opinion that Louis XVI. did not deserve our confidence, and Queen Marie-Antoinette still less. The whole nation thought as they did. We were excessively uneasy, and during the winter of '91, '92, which was very severe at the foot of our mountains, people used to sit round their fires and say—

"We shall never see next year's crops! We shall have war in the spring; we cannot go on so; we had better be massacred at once than live as we do, and the sooner the better."

Ah! the king and queen, the fine court ladies the great lords, and refractory nobles, whom the world has not ceased to pity for the last seventy years, and consider as martyrs, might have come to us and seen the huts of our woodcutters and lumberers, to learn to think themselves happy in having millions yearly to spend, while honest hardworking people had not sufficient potatoes to live upon. They might have thought that in endeavouring to recover what they formerly unjustly held, in writing to our enemies, in exciting civil war in the kingdom, in opposing decrees for the establishment of order, and in deceiving and lying every day, in calumniating the patriots, in looking on their fellow-creatures as beasts of the field, and trying to keep them under their feet, in the name of Him who sacrificed Himself to save them—these people might have reflected they were no models of virtue, and that God Himself would punish them terribly in time.

Sometimes, when bad news got abroad, either at market or in the villages, a feeling of rage took possession of the crowd; patriots grew pale as they looked at one another; and then all grew calm again. It was one drop more in the vessel of wrath, which was filling gently, and would one day run over.

I remember one circumstance with pleasure, and that was the marriage of Christine Letumier and Claude Bonhomme, the son of the Mittelbronn wheelwright at Baraques. Letumier, who was called the rich Letumier, since his fortunate investment in national property, had invited several of his relations from the Messin country. They did not all come, but his cousin Maurice Brunet, president of the Courcelles Club, and his cousin Suzanne Chassin, daughter of a gunsmith of the same place, arrived.

Poor Christine, with no ill-will to me because I loved another, had chosen me to be Margaret's valentine. What a good girl! I could almost have loved her for it. When she took me by the hand and said to me, "Here is your valentine," my eyes filled with tears, my heart was full as I looked at her; she smiled at me with rather a sad air, and said—

"Are you pleased, Michel?"

"Yes, indeed," said I; "be happy, Christine; may all the world's happiness attend you!"

Chauvel, Maitre Jean in his uniform of lieutenant of the citizen guard, Cochart Hure, Raphael Manque, our former president, and many others were at the wedding. The mayor's office swarmed with patriots; and when Joseph Bolleau, his sash round his stomach, pronounced with a majestic air the words of the constitution, "The law unites you," a cry of "Vive la nation!" made all the windows shake in the hall, and was heard on the Place d'Armes.

It was a different thing to a simple entry in a curé's register, the leaves of which were often lost, so that people were sometimes ignorant of their birth and wedding days. I have known several in this position; and when the old papers of the parish church were arranged in order to be copied into a register by civil authority, the work was entrusted to Freylich, the secretary of our commune. This new ceremony pleased every one; and Jean Kat, with his hat adorned with tricolour ribbons, played the clarionette before us back to Baraques.

Once outside in the fields we were obliged to run to keep ourselves warm. Margaret was on my arm. Christine, before us, seemed quite consoled with Claude Bonhomme, and the old people behind us chattered as they hurried along. Chauvel was as gay as a bird; Letumier, with one hand on his hat to prevent its being blown away cried—

"We must remember it was January 3, 1792, and that it was not warm."

To tell the truth we all cried with the cold when we reached the Three Pigeons. What pleasure it was to enter the large room which was well warmed, where the table was already spread for the wedding which was to be celebrated at the Three Pigeons; Mother Letumier never had done anything but cook her dinner on Sundays. What a feast! I will not trouble you with a description of the dinner, nor with the feelings of Mother Letumier, nor the appetite of the guests; Chauvel talked about the new patriotic ceremonies which were soon to replace the customs of savage Gaul; jokes were cracked of all sorts, especially the coarser witticisms of the older men, which the young people had sense enough not to notice. What a time! how it all fades away and disappears!

Margaret sat by my side; we laughed and talked; I looked in her black eyes, and offered her everything.

What happiness it was to be able to talk to her without constraint, to call her my valentine, and to see she looked pleased at me, and paid attention to no one else!

In the evening the house was filled with boys and girls from Baraques, who came there to dance, for in my time no wedding took place without a dance. Jean Kat began to play the Esterhazy Hound waltz in the great room looking on to the garden. I took Margaret by the arm, and said—

"Come, my valentine, there is Jean Kat's clarionette."

Margaret was quite surprised; she asked me where we were going.

"Why, we are going to dance."

"But I don't know how to dance!"

"Nonsense! all girls can dance."

Many others were already dancing gaily, and I tried to get Margaret along in the whirl, but she could not dance at all. Her feet could not keep the step. I could hardly believe it.

"Come," said I, "let us try again; it is not at all difficult."

And I showed her the steps in a corner. We tried again, but she really could not. I was so disappointed. Some of them came around us and laughed; Margaret was disgusted, and said in a tone of displeasure—

"I can't do it—you see I cannot; go and dance, and I will help Dame Catherine."

And off she went. Many a girl looked at me, as much as to say, "I know how to dance; come, Michel, come."

But I would not have any one else. I went out into the passage. Margaret went into the kitchen, were Nother Letumier, Nicole, Dame Catherine, and Suzanne Chassin were getting very angry, and crying out—

"It is disgraceful—singing songs against the queen; men must have lost their senses."

And so on. In the great room I heard the patriots laughing like mad, and singing a song about "Madame Vêto." Cousin Maurice was singing it, and the others followed with the chorus.

Of course I went to see what it was about. When I opened the door, I saw a most extraordinary spectacle. Cousin Maurice, in his sky-blue coat, with very large lapels and collar, his two watches, with their chains and trinkets on his yellow breeches, his great shirtfrill, his tricolour cravat, and his three-cornered cocked hat on his head, was dancing a most grotesque dance, one foot in the air, his knee close to his chin; he cut all sorts of capers, singing the song of Madame Vêto all the time—a song full of horrors against the queen; and all the patriots round the table, with red noses and inflamed eyes, laughed till they fell over their chairs. Cousin Maurice kept on dancing all the time, holding down his head, throwing his legs in the air, and singing—

"Madame Vêto a fait ceci!—  
Madame Vêto a fait cela!"

This song began with the affair of the cardinal. It had dozens of stanzas, one worse than the other; I was ashamed of it myself; but all those who were there, and had suffered so long from court extravagance, enjoyed it and did not think it too bad.

At last Letumier himself was led to join this furious performance of cousin Maurice, then Maitre Jean, and then the ex-president Raphael.

How all things change in this world! This inn of the Three Pigeons, where the officers of the Rouergue, Schénau, and La Fère regiments—all counts, dukes, and marquises—used to come and dance their stately minuets with the town ladies, moving about gracefully to the music of their little violins, their wine cooling in the spring, and their dishes brought from town in baskets on the back of an old soldier—this inn was now spectator of a new sort of dance—the patriotic dance. It would have made the nobles open their eyes and their ears too, to see men dancing like the possessed of Saint-Guy, and to hear the song of "Madame Vêto," which was kept on always the same.

I never saw such a scandal. The women outside were perfectly right, but it had no effect on the patriots. Chauvel was not dancing, but he sat at the end of the table and looked on, pale, with satisfaction. He marked the time by tapping his knife against the table, sometimes calling out ironically—

"Courage, Letumier—that's it. En avant Maitre Jean. President Raphael, you are improving."

And now, if you want to know what that dance was and that song, brought among us for the first time by cousin Maurice, I will tell you; it was the famous "Carmagnole" of which the whole world has since heard, which the Parisians danced afterwards on the Place de la Révolution, and even when they marched against the enemy's cannon—

"Dansons la Carmagnole,  
Vive le son, vive le son,  
Dansons la Carmagnole,  
Vive le son du canon!"

The whole revolution was contained in this "Carmagnole"; a stanza was added to it every time a new event happened; the former ones were forgotten, while the new made people laugh.

It was about ten when Chauvel, seeing the patriots were exhausted, and were going to begin with hot wine, cried out—

"Citizens, you have danced and amused yourselves, and it is time to go to bed to attend to our business to-morrow."

"Bah!" said Maitre Jean; "we can wait till midnight."

"No! I have had enough," said Chauvel, reaching down his overcoat, and the town patriots followed his example.

"You must have one glass of hot wine," said Maitre Jean.

"No, thank you," said Chauvel, the best things have their limit," shaking hands with Letumier; "good night, citizen Maurice."

I put Margaret's cape and hood on for her, and told her to wrap herself up well, for it was terribly cold.

She was rather pensive, but Chauvel seemed very well satisfied, and called to Margaret to make haste.

I did not intend leaving my valentine so soon. She gave me her arm. I had drawn my otter-skin cap over my ears, and we walked on first along the path, which was covered with snow. It was a fine January night, when you can see the blue and white hills one over another for a long distance, and at intervals the village church towers, the roofs of the farmhouses, and long avenues of poplars. Such nights are the coldest in the year, and the ice is as crisp as glass under your feet. How beautiful the sky is with the stars quivering, either blue or pink, and thousands farther off and farther still, all white almost like dust; how it elevates your thoughts, and how you feel a wish to understand such boundless and infinite greatness! And when the warm hand of the girl you love rests on your arm, when you feel her heart beating close to yours, and the same thoughts of love and admiration occur to you both, what do you feel of the cold then? You never think of it, you are too happy, and you would like to sing a psalm like the old people.

Yes; the church, God's temple, is one of these beautiful winter nights. Chauvel, Raphael, Collin, and the rest of the patriots were talking behind us; just as we approached the glaciis I began to sing an old peasant's song, which I recollected from childhood; my voice sounded so far in the night and in the wintry stillness. I don't know now what it was, if it was not love; Margaret's hand rested more tenderly still on my arm; she said to me in a low voice—

"How fine and powerful your voice is, Michel! You sing so well!"

Those behind had ceased talking to listen. When we reached the glaciis Margaret said we must wait for them.

So we turned back. Father Chauvel said to me when he came up—

"I did not know you sang so well, Michel; I had never heard you. It is your father's voice, but deeper and fuller—a real peasant's voice. When the song of the rights of man is composed, you shall sing it at our club."

"Ha!" said Raphael, "I should prefer the 'Carmagnole.'"

"No," said Chauvel, who had grown serious again, "the 'Carmagnole' is a joke. It is all very well to laugh at among patriots after a glass of wine, but we want something better, something great and powerful like the people."

Then we said farewell, and they went up the narrow path of the glaciis for a short cut home. I stayed where I was; I saw Margaret move away, and my heart felt a pang. She was last of all. When they came to the turn in the path she turned round.

Here is the story of that day and that fine night; it has remained deep in my heart, and I have repeated it to you most faithfully.

## VII

About this time ideas of war prevailed again, for our enemies' boldness increased daily. The recruiting sergeants, who were old excise-men, toll-collectors, and other revenue servants, distributed money everywhere to kidnap the rascals of the country round.

This was going on openly; but at last our indignation broke out. First Chauvel, and then La lemand of Lixheim, and all the chiefs of the clubs connected with the Jacobins, denounced the infamous proceedings; and notwithstanding the silence of the king's ministers, who closed their eyes to the émigrés' manoeuvres, Camille Desmoullins, Eréron, Brissot, cried so loudly against it that they were obliged to send orders to put a stop to it.

At Lixheim one of these recruiting officers lodged at the Grand-Cerf; every one knew he was collecting men on account of the emigration; for the nobles all wanted to have command; not one of them had the least intention of shouldering a musket; they must have the peasants even for the defence of their own cause; as for them, they were born lieutenants, captains, or colonels by the grace of God.

One morning this recruiting officer was about enrolling some lads who had been sent to him by the refractory men of the country, when suddenly the national gendarmes knocked at the door. He looked out of window and saw their cocked hats; he escaped by the back door and hid himself in a hayloft. But he had been seen; the corporal climbed up after him, and seeing nothing he trust his sword slowly into the hay, saying, "Where is the rascal? He isn't here, nor here!" when a loud shriek betrayed his hiding-place; and the corporal, drawing his bloody sword out of the hay, said—

"I was wrong; I think he is there under the straw."

They took the poor wretch out; his name was Passavert; he had but one eye; the sword had gone through his body, so that he died the same evening, and very fortunately too, for they found in his room letters from nobles, giving him sums of money to be employed in exciting civil war, and other letters from refractory men in Alsace and Lorraine who sent him lads to enlist; he ought to have been hanged without mercy.

So he was buried, and all that month numerous arrests were made—recruiting agents, refractory men, and all sorts of vagabonds. Father Eleonore disappeared for a time; my mother was in despair, not knowing where to go to perform her religious duties.

All these wretches cared for was to stir up troubles among us, and many of those who were massacred later in the prison of the Abbaye were of this description, lawless and faithless and capable of selling their country to the foreigners for money and privileges.

We knew there were three assemblages of troops on the Rhine—that of Mirabeau Tonneau, near Ittenheim; of Condé, near Worms; and the most considerable at Coblenz, where our seigneurs, the Count d'Artois and the Count de Provence, were.

Only one prince of the blood, the Duke of Orleans, who afterwards called himself Louis Egalité, remained in France; his son, colonel of the Chartres dragoons, was with the army of the north. Figure to yourself the uneasiness of our country; all these émigrés might by a forced march be upon us in one night. You must not think they frightened us; had they been alone we should have laughed at them; but the King of Prussia and the Emperor of Austria supported them; and then they had disorganised our army when they deserted their colours. However, we saw all their strength came from our enemies; and we saw all the more how stupid we had been to give up our money to them for so many years when they could have done nothing against us without assistance.

I remember the 6th of December, Saint-Nicolas' Day, our club was very much amused. Apropos of these émigrés, Joseph Gossard, a wine-merchant in the neighbourhood of Toul, tall and thin, with a red face and curly hair, a true Lorrainer, gave us an account of the round he had been making at Coblenz, with his samples in his trunk.

(To be continued.)