

ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN

**THE PLÉBISCITE; OR, A
MILLER'S STORY OF
THE WAR**

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Содержание

INTRODUCTORY NOTE	5
CHAPTER I	6
CHAPTER II	12
CHAPTER III	21
CHAPTER IV	27
CHAPTER V	33
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	36

Émile Erckmann, Alexandre Chatrian The Plébiscite; or, A Miller's Story of the War / By One of the 7,500,000 Who Voted «Yes»

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The present volume serves to emphasize the important connection, so generally now lost sight of, between the *plébiscite* of 1870 in France and the war with Prussia which so speedily followed. Under the administration of Ollivier, which promised an attractive extension of popular liberties, it will be remembered, the *plebiscitum* of the Roman Constitution was borrowed, to give an air of popular approval to the strongly attacked Imperial régime by taking the sense of the people through universal suffrage as to the continuance of the Imperial authority on its then existing basis. Of the web of chicane and corruption by which the election was brought out an overwhelming triumph for Imperialism, MM. Erckmann-Chatrion give a clearer and more impressive notion in this book than could be obtained from entire volumes of parliamentary reports and whole files of newspapers. But they make it especially clear how the people were persuaded to return a majority of "yeses" so enormous as to make it impossible to account for it on the theory of mere corruption and chicane. It is evident from this narrative that the people were made to believe that the Empire meant peace abroad and freedom from foreign complications then threatening, as well as tranquillity at home, and that therefore one of the profoundest instincts of twenty millions of peasantry was utilized in order to be subsequently betrayed.

No authors could have been so happily chosen to write the story of the struggle which followed. Alsace and Lorraine, at once the scene of the earliest campaign of the war and the victims of its result, furnish the most appropriate background of such a picture. In reading these adventures, sufferings, meditations, and discussions of the simple yet shrewd Alsatian miller and his neighbors, the reader will take in almost at a glance the causes, incidents, and consequences of one of the greatest of modern wars. The corruption of the office-holding classes, the ignorance of the army officers whose ranks had been filled by favoritism, the bravery of the private soldier ill-equipped, ill-fed, and disastrously led, the contrasting system and discipline of the Prussians, the awakening by Gambetta of the national enthusiasm, and the determined and dogged fighting under Chanzy, Faidherbe, and Bourbaki, how the peasants fared at the hands of the enemy, and how the enemy conducted themselves during the brief campaign are all unfolded before the reader with a combined fulness and incisiveness difficult to encounter elsewhere in narratives of this momentous conflict.

CHAPTER I

I am writing this history for sensible people. It is my own story during the calamitous war we have just gone through. I write it to show those who shall come after us how many evil-minded people there are in the world, and how little we ought to trust fair words; for we have been deceived in this village of ours after a most abominable fashion; we have been deceived by all sorts of people – by the sous-préfets, by the préfets, and by the Ministers; by the curés, by the official gazettes; in a word, by each and all.

Could any one have imagined that there are so many deceivers in this world? No, indeed; it requires to be seen with one's own eyes to be believed.

In the end we have had to pay dearly. We have given up our hay, our straw, our corn, our flour, our cattle; and that was not enough. Finally, they gave up *us*, our own selves. They said to us: "You are no longer Frenchmen; you are Prussians! We have taken your young men to fight in the war; they are dead, they are prisoners: now settle with Bismarck any way you like; your business is none of ours!"

But these things must be told plainly: so I will begin at the beginning, without getting angry.

You must know, in the first place, that I am a miller in the village of Rothalp, in the valley of Metting, at Dosenheim, between Lorraine and Alsace. It is a large and fine village of 130 houses, possessing its curé Daniel, its school-master Adam Fix, and principal inhabitants of every kind – wheelwrights, blacksmiths, shoemakers, tailors, publicans, brewers, dealers in eggs, butter, and poultry; we even have two Jews, Solomon Kaan, a pedler, and David Hertz, cattle-dealer.

This will show you what was our state of prosperity before this war; for the wealthier a village is, the more strangers it draws: every man finds a livelihood there, and works at his trade.

We had not even occasion to fetch our butcher's-meat from town. David killed a cow now and then, and retailed all we wanted for Sundays and holidays.

I, Christian Weber, have never been farther than thirty leagues from this commune. I inherited my mill from my grandfather, Marcel Desjardins, a Frenchman from the neighborhood of Metz, who had built it in the time of the Swedish war, when our village was but a miserable hamlet. Twenty-six years ago I married Catherine Amos, daughter of the old forest-ranger. She brought me a hundred louis for her dowry. We have two children – a daughter, Grédel, and a son, Jacob, who are still with us at home.

I have besides a cousin, George Weber, who went off more than thirty years ago to serve in the Marines in Guadeloupe. He has even been on active service there. It was he who beat the drum on the forecastle of the ship *Boussole*, as he has told me a hundred times, whilst the fleet was bombarding St. John d'Ulloa. Afterward he was promoted to be sergeant; then he sailed to North America, for the cod fisheries; and again into the Baltic, on board a small Danish vessel engaged in the coal-trade. George was always intent upon making a fortune. About 1850 he returned to Paris, and established a manufactory of matches in the Rue Mouffetard in Paris; and as he is really a very handsome tall man, with a dark complexion, bold looking, and with a quick eye, he at last married a rich widow without children, Madame Marie Anne Finck, who was keeping an inn in that neighborhood. They grew rich. They bought land in our part of the country through the agency of Monsieur Fingado, the solicitor, to whom he sent regularly the price of every piece of land. At last, on the death of the old carpenter, Joseph Briou, he became the purchaser of his house, to live there with his wife, and to keep a public-house on the road to Metting.

This took place last year, during the time of the Plébiscite, and Cousin George came to inspect his house before taking his wife, Marie Anne, to it.

I was mayor; I had received orders from M. le Sous-préfet to give public notice of the Plébiscite, and to request all well-disposed persons to vote "*Yes*," *if they desired to preserve peace*; because all the ruffians in the country were going to vote *No*, to have war.

This is exactly what I did, by making everybody promise to come without fail, and sending the *bangard*¹ Martin Kapp to carry the voting tickets to the very farthest cottages up the mountains.

Cousin George arrived the evening before the Plébiscite. I received him very kindly, as one ought to receive a rich relation who has no children. He seemed quite pleased to see us, and dined with us in the best of tempers. He carried with him in a small leathern trunk clothes, shoes, shirts – everything that he required. He was short of nothing. That day everything went on well; but the next day, hearing the notices cried by the rural policeman, he went off to Reibell's brewery, which was full of people, and began to preach against the Plébiscite.

I was just then at the mayoralty house wearing my official scarf receiving the tickets, when suddenly my deputy Placiard came to tell me, in high indignation, that certain miserable wretches were attacking the rider; that one of them was at the "Cruchon d'Or," and that half the village were very nearly murdering him.

Immediately I went down and ran to the public-house, where my cousin was calling them all asses, affirming that the Plébiscite was for war; that the Emperor, the Ministers, the prefects, the generals, and the bishops were deceiving the people; that all those men were acting a part to get our money from us, and much besides to the same purpose.

I, from the passage, could hear him shouting these things in a terrible voice, and I said to myself, "The poor fellow has been drinking."

If George had not been my cousin; if he had not been quite capable some day of disinheriting my children, I should certainly have arrested him at once, and had him conveyed under safe keeping to Sarrebourg; but, on giving due weight to these considerations, I resolved to put an end to this awkward business, and I cried to the people who were crowding the passage, "Make room, you fellows, make room!"

Those enraged creatures, seeing the scarf, gave way in all directions; and then discovering my cousin, seated at a table in the right-hand corner, I said: "Cousin! what are you thinking of, to create such a scandal?"

He, too, was abashed at the sight of the scarf, having served in the navy, and knowing that there is no man who claims more respect than a mayor; that he has a right to lay hands upon you, and send you to the lock-up, and, if you resist, to send you as far as Sarrebourg and Nancy. Reflecting upon this, he calmed down in a moment, for he had not been drinking at all, as I supposed at first, and he was saying these things without bitterness, without anger, conscientiously, and out of regard for his fellow-citizens.

Therefore, he replied to me, quietly: "Mr. Mayor, look after your elections! See that certain rogues up there – as there are rogues everywhere – don't stuff into the ballot-box handfuls of *Yeses* instead of *Noes* while your back is turned. This has often happened! And then pray don't trouble yourself about me. In the Government Gazette, it is declared that every man shall be free to maintain his own opinions, and to vote as he pleases; if my mouth is stopped, I shall protest in the newspapers."

Hearing that he would protest, to avoid a worse scandal I answered him: "Say what you please; no one shall declare that we have put any constraint upon the elections; but, you men, you know what you have to do."

"Yes, yes," shouted all the people in the room and down the passage, lifting their hats. "Yes, Monsieur le Maire; we will listen to nothing at all. Whether they talk all day or say nothing, it is all the same to us."

And they all went off to vote, leaving George alone.

M. le Curé Daniel, seeing them coming out, came from his parsonage to place himself at their head. He had preached in the morning in favor of the Plébiscite, and there was not a single *No* in the box.

¹ An old word, probably from *ban garde*; now *garde champêtre*, a kind of rural policeman.

If my cousin had not had the large meadow above the mill, and the finest acres in the country, he would have been an object of contempt for the rest of his days; but a rich man, who has just bought a house, an orchard, a garden, and has paid ready money for everything, may say whatever he pleases: especially when he is not listened to, and the people go and do the very opposite of what he has been advising them.

Well, this is the way with the elections for the Plébiscite with us, and just the same thing went on throughout our canton: at Phalsbourg – which had been abundantly placarded against the Plébiscite, and where they carried their audacity even to watching the mayor and the ballot-box – out of fifteen hundred electors, military and civil, there were only thirty-two *Noes*.

It is quite clear that things were making favorable progress, and that M. le Sous-préfet could not be otherwise than perfectly satisfied with our behavior.

I must also mention that we were in want of a parish road to Hangeviller; that we had been promised a pair of church-bells, and the *Glandée*, or right of feeding our hogs upon the acorns in autumn; and that we were aware that all the villages which voted the wrong way got nothing, whilst the others – in consideration of the good councillors they had sent up, either to the arrondissement or the department – might always reckon upon a little money from the tax-collector for the necessities of their parish. Monsieur le Sous-préfet had pointed out these advantages to me; and naturally a good mayor will inform his subordinates. I did so. Our deputies, our councillors-general, our councillors of the arrondissement, were all on the right side! By these means we have already gained the right to the dead leaves and our great wash-houses. We only sought our own good, and we much preferred seeing other villages pay the ministers, the senators, the marshals, the bishops, and the princes, to paying them ourselves. So that all that Cousin George could say to us about the interest of all, and the welfare of the nation, made not the least impression upon us.

I remember that that very day of the Plébiscite, when it was already known that we had all voted right, and that we should get our two bells with the parish road – I remember that my cousin and I had, after supper, a great quarrel, and that I should certainly have put him out, if it had not been he.

We were taking our *petit verre* of *kirsch*, smoking our pipes, with our elbows on the table; my wife and Grédel had already gone to bed, when all at once he said to me: "Listen to me, Christian. Save the respect I owe you as mayor, you are all a set of geese in this village, and it is a very fortunate thing that I am come here, that you may have, at least, one sensible man among you."

I was going to get angry, but he said:

"Just let me finish; if you had but spent a couple of years at Paris, you would see things a little plainer; but at this moment, you are like a nest of hungry jays, blind and unfeathered; they open their bills, and they cry 'Jaques,' to call down food from heaven. Those who hear them climb up the tree, twist their necks, put them into the pot and laugh. That is your position. You have confidence in your enemies, and you give them power to pluck you just as they please. If you appointed upright men in your districts as deputies, councillors-general, instead of taking whoever the préfecture recommends, would not the Emperor and the other honorable men above be obliged then to leave you the money which the tax-collector makes you pay in excess? Could all those people then enrich themselves at your expense, and amass immense fortunes in a few years? Would you then see old baskets with their bottoms out, fellows whom you would not have trusted with a halfpenny before the *coup-d'état* – would you see them become millionnaires, rolling in gold, gliding along in carriages with their wives, their children, their servants, and their ballet-dancers? The préfets, the sous-préfets say to you: 'Go on voting right, and you shall have this, you shall have that' – things which you have a right to demand in virtue of the taxes you pay, but which are granted to you as favors – roads, wash-houses, schools, etc. Would you not be having them in your own right, if the money which is taken from you were left in the commune? What does the Emperor do for you? He plunders you – that is all. Your money, he shows it to you before each election, as they show a child a stick of sugar-candy to make it laugh; and when the election is over he puts it back into his pocket. The trick is played."

"How can he put that money into his pocket?" I asked, full of indignation. "Are not the accounts presented every year in the Chambers?"

Upon this he shrugged his shoulders and answered: "You are not sharp, Christian; it is not so difficult to present accounts to the Chambers. So many chassépots – which have no existence! So much munition of war, of which no one knows anything. So much for retiring pensions; so much for the substitutes' fund; so much for changes of uniform. The uniforms are changed every year; that is good for business. Do the deputies inquire into these matters? Who checks the Ministers' budgets? And the deputies whom the Minister of the Interior has recommended to you, whom you have appointed like fools, and whom the Emperor would throw up at the very first election, if those gentlemen breathed a syllable about visiting the arsenals and examining into the accounts – what a farce it is! Why, yesterday, passing through Phalsbourg, I got upon the ramparts, and I saw there guns of the time of Herod, upon gun-carriages eaten up by worms and painted over to conceal the rottenness. These very guns, I do believe, are recast every third or fourth year – upon paper – with your money. Ah, my poor Christian, you are not very sharp, nor the other people in our village either. But the men you send as deputies to Paris – they *are* sharp, too sharp."

He broke out into a laugh, and I could have sent him back to Paris.

"Do you know what you want?" said he then, filling his pipe and lighting it, for I made no reply, being too much annoyed; "what you want is not good sense, it is not honesty. All of us peasants, we still possess some good sense and honesty. And we believe, moreover, in the honesty of others, which proves that we ourselves have a little left! No, what you want is education; you have asked for bells, and bells you will get; but all the school you have is a miserable shed, and your only school-master is old Adam Fix, who can teach his children nothing because he knows nothing himself. Well now, if you were to ask for a really good school, there would be no money in the public funds. There is money enough for bells, but for a good school-master, for a large, well-ventilated room, for deal benches and tables, for pictures, slates, maps, and books, there is nothing; for if you had good schools, your children could read, write, keep accounts; they would soon be able to look into the Ministers' budgets, and that is exactly what his Majesty wishes to avoid. You understand now, cousin; this is the reason why you have no school and you have bells."

Then he looked knowingly at me:

"And, do you know," said he, after a few moments' thought, "do you know how much all the schools in France cost? I am not referring to the great schools of medicine, and law, and chemistry, the colleges, and the lyceums, which are schools for wealthy young men, able to keep themselves in large cities, and to pay for their own maintenance. I am speaking of schools for the people, elementary schools, where reading and writing are taught: the two first things which a man must know, and which distinguish him from the savages who roam naked in the American forests? Well, the deputies whom the people themselves send to protect their interests in Paris, and whose first thought, if they are not altogether thieves, ought to be to discharge their duty toward their constituencies – these deputies have never voted for the schools of the people a larger sum than seventy-five millions. The state contributes ten millions as its share; the commune, the departments, the fathers and mothers do the rest. Seventy-five millions to educate the people in a great country like ours! it is a disgrace. The United States spends six times the amount. But on the other hand, for the war budget we pay five hundred millions; even that would not be too much if we had five hundred thousand men under arms, according to the calculation which has been made of what it costs per diem for each man; but for an army of two hundred and fifty thousand men, it is too much by half. What becomes of the other three hundred millions? If they were made available to build schools, to pay able masters, to furnish retreats for workmen in their declining days, I should have nothing to say against it; but to jingle in the pockets of MM. the senators and to ring the bells of MM. the curés, I consider that too dear."

As Cousin George bothered my mind with all his arguments, I felt a wish to go to bed, and I said to him:

"All that, cousin, is very fine, but it is getting late: and besides it has nothing to do with the Plébiscite."

I had risen; but he laid his hand upon my arm and said: "Let us talk a little longer – let me finish my pipe. You say that this has nothing to do with the Plébiscite; but that Plébiscite is for all this nice arrangement of things to go on. If the nation believes that all is right, that enough money is left to it, and that it can even spare a little more; that the ministers, the senators, and the princes are not yet sufficiently fat and flourishing; that the Emperor has not bought enough in foreign countries; well, it will say with this Plébiscite, 'Go on, pray go on – we are quite satisfied.' Does that suit your ideas?"

"Yes. I had rather that than war," said I, in a very bad temper. "The Empire is peace; I vote for peace."

Then George himself rose up, emptying his pipe on the edge of the table, and said: "Christian, you are right. Let us go to bed. I repent having bought old Briou's house; decidedly the people in these parts are too stupid. You quite grieve me."

"Oh, I don't want to grieve you," said I, angrily; "I have quite as much sense as you."

"What!" said he, "you the mayor of Rothalp, in daily communication with the sous-préfet, you believe that the object of this Plébiscite is to confirm peace?"

"Yes, I do."

"What, you believe that? Come now. Have we not peace at the present moment? Do we want a Plébiscite to preserve it? Do you suppose that the Germans are taken in by it? Our peasants, to be sure, are misled; they are indoctrinated at the curé's house, at the mayoralty-house, at the sous-préfecture; but not a single workman in Paris is a dupe of this pernicious scheming. They all know that the Emperor and the Ministers want war; that the generals and the superior officers demand it. Peace is a good thing for tradesmen, for artisans, for peasants; but the officers are tired of being cramped up in the same rank perpetually without a rise. Already the inferior officers have been disgusted with the profession through the crowds of nobles, Jesuits, and canting hypocrites of all sorts who are thrust into the army. The troops are not animated with a good spirit; they want promotion, or they will end by rousing themselves into a passion: especially when they see the Prussians under our noses helping themselves to everything they please without asking our leave. You don't understand that! There," said he, "I am sleepy. Let us go to bed."

Then I began to understand that my cousin had learned many things in Paris, and that he knew more of politics than I did. But that did not prevent me from being in a great rage with him, for the whole of that day he had done nothing but cause trouble; and I said to myself that it was impossible to live with such a brute.

My wife, at the top of the landing, had heard us disputing; but as we were going upstairs, she came all smiles to meet us, holding the candle, and saying: "Oh, you have had a great deal to tell each other this evening! You must have had enough. Come, cousin, let me take you to your room; there it is. From your window you may see the woods in the moonlight; and here is your bed, the best in the house. You will find your cotton nightcap under the pillow."

"Very nice, Catherine, thank you," said George.

"And I hope you will sleep comfortably," said she, returning to me.

This wise woman, full of excellent good sense, then said to me, while I was undressing: "Christian! what were you thinking of, to contradict your cousin? Such a rich man, and who can do us so much good by and by! What does the Plébiscite signify? What can that bring us in? Whatever your cousin says to you, say 'Amen' after it. Remember that his wife has relations, and she will want to get everything on her side. Mind you don't quarrel with George. A fine meadow below the mill, and an orchard on the hill-side, are not found every day in the way of a cow."

I saw at once that she was right, and I inwardly resolved never to contradict George again: he might himself alone be worth to us far more than the Emperor, the Ministers, the senators, and all the establishment together; for everyone of those people thought of his own interests alone, without ever

casting a thought upon us. Of course we ought to do the same as they did, since they had succeeded so well in sewing gold lace upon all their seams, fattening and living in abundance in this world; not to mention the promises that the bishops made to them for the next.

Thinking upon these things, I lay calmly down, and soon fell asleep.

CHAPTER II

The next day early, Cousin George, my son Jacob, and myself, after having eaten a crust of bread and taken a glass of wine standing, harnessed our horses, and put them into our two carts to go and fetch my cousin's wife and furniture at the Lützelbourg station.

Before coming into our country, George had ordered his house to be whitewashed and painted from top to bottom; he had laid new floors, and replaced the old shingle roof with tiles. Now the paint was dry, the doors and windows stood open day and night; the house could not be robbed, for there was nothing in it. My cousin, seeing that all was right, had just written to his wife that she might bring their goods and chattels with her.

So we started about six in the morning; upon the road the people of Hangeviller, of Metting, and Véchem, and those who were going to market in the town, were singing and shouting "Vive l'Empereur!"

Everywhere they had voted "Yes," for peace. It was the greatest fraud that had ever been perpetrated: by the way in which the Ministers, the prefects, and the Government newspapers had explained the Plébiscite, everybody had imagined that he had really voted peace.

Cousin George hearing this, said, "Oh, you poor country folks, how I pity you for being such imbeciles! How I pity you for believing what these pickpockets tell you!"

That was how he styled the Emperor's government, and naturally I felt my indignation rise; but Catherine's sound advice came back into my mind, and I thought, "Hold your tongue, Christian; don't say a word – that's your best plan."

All along the road we saw the same spectacle; the soldiers of the 84th, garrisoned at Phalsbourg, looked as pleased as men who have won the first prize in a lottery; the colonel declared that the men who did not vote "Yes" would be unworthy of being called Frenchmen. Every man had voted "Yes;" for a good soldier knows nothing but his orders.

So having passed before the gate of France, we came down to the Baraques, and then reached Lützelbourg. The train from Paris had passed a few minutes before; the whistle could yet be heard under the Saverne tunnel.

My cousin's wife, with whom I was not yet acquainted, was standing by her luggage on the platform; and seeing George coming up, she joyfully cried, "Ah! is that you? and here is cousin."

She kissed us both heartily, gazing at us, however, with some surprise, perhaps on account of our blouses and our great wide-brimmed black hats. But no! it could not be that; for Marie Anne Finck was a native of Wasselonne, in Alsace, and the Alsacians have always worn the blouse and wide-brimmed hat as long as I can remember. But this tall, thin woman, with her large brown eyes, as bustling, quick, and active as gunpowder, after having passed thirty years at Paris, having first been cook at Krantheimer's, at a place called the Barrière de Montmartre, and then in five or six other inns in that great city, might well be somewhat astonished at seeing such simple people as we were; and no doubt it also gave her pleasure.

That is my idea.

"The carts are there, wife," cried George, in high spirits. "We will load the biggest with as much furniture as we can, and put the rest upon the smaller one. You will sit in front. There – look up there – that's the Castle of Lützelbourg, and that pretty little wooden house close by, covered all over with vine, that is a châlet, Father Hoffman-Forty's châlet, the distiller of cordials, you know the cordial of Phalsbourg."

He showed her everything.

Then we began to load; that big Yéri, who takes the tickets at the gate and who carries the parcels to Monsieur André's omnibus, comes to lend us a hand. The two carts being loaded about twelve o'clock, and my cousin's wife seated in front of the foremost one upon a truss of straw, we

started at a quiet pace for the village, where we arrived about three o'clock. But I remember one thing, which I will not omit to mention. As we were coming out of Lützelbourg, a heavy wagon-load of coal was coming down the hill, a lad of sixteen or seventeen leading the horse by the bridle; at the door of the last house, a little child of five years old, sitting on the ground, was looking at our carts passing by; he was out of the road, he could not be in any one's way, and was sitting there perfectly quiet, when the boy, without any reason, gave him a lash with his whip, which made the child cry aloud.

My cousin's wife saw that.

"Why did that boy strike the child?" she inquired.

"That's a coal-heaver," George answered. "He comes from Sarrebrück. He is a Prussian. He struck the child because he is a French child."

Then my cousin's wife wanted to get down to fall upon the Prussian; she cried to him, "You great coward, you lazy dog, you wicked wretch, come and hit me." And the boy would have come to settle her, if we had not been there to receive him; but he would not trust himself to us, and lashed his horses to get out of our reach, making all haste to pass the bridge, and turning his head round toward us, for fear of being followed.

I thought at the time that Cousin George was wrong in saying this boy had a spite against the French because he was a Prussian; but I learned afterward that he was right, and that the Germans have borne ill-will against us for years without letting us see it – like a set of sulky fellows waiting for a good opportunity to make us feel it.

"It is our *good man* that we have to thank for this," said George. "The Germans fancy that we have named him Emperor to begin his uncle's tricks again; and now they look upon our Plébiscite as a declaration of war. The joy of our sous-préfets, our mayors, and our curés, and of all those excellent people who only prosper upon the miseries of mankind, proves that they are not very far out."

"Yes, indeed," cried his wife; "but to beat a child, that is cowardly."

"Bah! don't let us think about it," said George. "We shall see much worse things than this; and we shall have deserved it, through our own folly. God grant that I may be mistaken!"

Talking so, we arrived home.

My wife had prepared dinner; there was kissing all round, the acquaintance was made; we all sat round the table, and dined with excellent appetites. Marie Anne was gay; she had already seen their house on her way, and the garden behind it with its rows of gooseberry bushes and the plum-trees full of blossom. The two carts, the horses having been taken out, were standing before their door; and from our windows might be seen the village people examining the furniture with great interest, hovering round and gazing with curiosity upon the great heavy boxes, feeling the bedding, and talking together about this great quantity of goods, just as if it was their own business.

They were remarking no doubt that our cousin George Weber and his wife were rich people, who deserved the respectful consideration of the whole country round; and I myself, before seeing these great chests, should never have dreamed that they could have so much belonging entirely to themselves.

This proved to me that my wife was perfectly right in continuing to pay every respect to my cousin; she had also cautioned our daughter Grédel: as for Jacob, he is a most sensible lad, who thinks of everything and needs not to be told what to do.

But what astonished us a great deal more, was to see arriving about half-past three two other large wagons from the direction of Wéchem, and hearing my cousin cry, "Here comes my wine from Barr!"

Before coming to Rothalp he had himself gone to Barr, in Alsace, to taste the wine and to make his own bargains.

"Come, Christian," said he, rising, "we have no time to lose if we mean to unload before nightfall. Take your pincers and your mallet; you will also fetch ropes and a ladder to let the casks down into the cellar."

Jacob ran to fetch what was wanted, and we all came out together – my wife, my daughter, cousin, and everybody. My man Frantz remained alone at the mill, and immediately they began to undo the boxes, to carry the furniture into the house: chests of drawers, wardrobes, bedsteads, and quantities of plates, dishes, soup-tureens, etc., which were carried straight into the kitchen.

My cousin gave his orders: "Put this down in a corner; set that in another corner."

The neighbors helped us too, out of curiosity. Everything went on admirably.

And then arrived the wagons from Barr; but they were obliged to be kept waiting till seven o'clock. Our wives had already set up the beds and put away the linen in the wardrobes.

About seven o'clock everything was in order in the house. We now thought of resting till tomorrow, when George said to us, turning up his sleeves, "Now, my friend, here comes the biggest part of the work. I always strike the iron while it's hot. Let all the men who are willing help me to unload the casks, for the drivers want to get back to town, and I believe they are right."

Immediately the cellar was opened, the ladder set up against the first wagon, the lanterns lighted, the planks set leaning in their places, and until eleven o'clock we did nothing but unload wine, roll down casks, let them down with my ropes, and put them in their places.

Never had I worked as I did on that day!

Not before eleven o'clock did Cousin George, seeing everything settled to his satisfaction, seem pleased; he tapped the first cask, filled a jug with wine, and said, "Now, mates, come up; we will have a good draught, and then we will get to bed."

The cellar was shut up, so we drank in the large parlor, and then all, one after another, went home to bed, upon the stroke of midnight.

All the villagers were astonished to see how these Parisians worked: they were all the talk. At one time it was how cousin had bought up all the manure at the gendarmerie; then how he had made a contract to have all his land drained in the autumn; and then how he was going to build a stable and a laundry at the back of his house, and a distillery at the end of his yard: he was enlarging his cellars, already the finest in the country. What a quantity of money he must have!

If he had not paid his architect, the carpenters, and the masons cash down, it would have been declared that he was ruining himself. But he never wanted a penny; and his solicitor always addressed him with a smiling face, raising his hat from afar off, and calling him "my dear Monsieur Weber."

One single thing vexed George: he had requested at the préfecture, as soon as he arrived, a license to open his public-house at the sign of "The Pineapple." He had even written three letters to Sarrebourg, but had received no answer. Morning and evening, seeing me pass by with my carts of grain and flour, he called to me through the window, "Hallo, Christian, this way just a minute!"

He never talked of anything else; he even came to tease me at the mayoralty-house, to indorse and seal his letters with attestations as to his good life and character; and yet no answer came.

One evening, as I was busy signing the registration of the reports drawn up in the week by the school-master, he came in and said, "Nothing yet?"

"Cousin, I don't know the meaning of it."

"Very well," said he, sitting before my desk. "Give me some paper. Let me write for once, and then we will see."

He was pale with excitement, and began to write, reading it as he went on:

"MONSIEUR LE SOUS-PRÉFET, – I have requested of you a license to open a public-house at Rothalp. I have even had the honor of writing you three letters upon the subject, and you have given me no answer. Answer me – yes or no! When people are paid, and well paid, they ought to fulfil their duty.

"Monsieur le Sous-préfet, I have the honor to salute you.

"GEORGE WEBER,

"*Late Sergeant of Marines.*"

Hearing this letter, my hair positively stood on end.

"Cousin, don't send that," said I; "the sous-préfet would very likely put you under arrest."

"Pooh!" said he, "you country people, you seem to look upon these folks as if they were demi-gods; yet they live upon our money. It is we who pay them: they are for our service, and nothing more. Here, Christian, will you put your seal to that?"

Then, in spite of all that my wife might say, I replied, "George, for the love of Heaven, don't ask me that. I should most assuredly lose my place."

"What place? Your place as mayor," said he, "in which you receive the commands of the sous-préfet, who receives the commands of the préfet, who receives the orders of a Minister, who does everything that our *honest man* bids him. I had rather be a ragman than fill such a place."

The school-master, who happened to be there, seemed as if he had suddenly dropped from the clouds; his arms hung down the sides of his chair, and he gazed at my cousin with big eyes, just as a man stares at a dangerous lunatic.

I, too, was sitting upon thorns on hearing such words as these in the mayoralty-house; but at last I told him I had rather go myself to Sarrebourg and ask for the permission than seal that letter.

"Then we will go together," said he.

But I felt sure that if he spoke after this fashion to Monsieur le Sous-préfet, he would lay hands upon both of us; and I said that I should go alone, because his presence would put a constraint upon me.

"Very well," he said; "but you will tell me everything that the sous-préfet has been saying to you."

He tore up his letter, and we went out together.

I don't remember that I ever passed a worse night than that. My wife kept repeating to me that our Cousin George had the precedence over the sous-préfet, who only laughed at us; that the Emperor, too, had cousins, who wanted to inherit everything from him, and that everybody ought to stick to their own belongings.

Next day, when I left for Sarrebourg, my head was in a whirl of confusion, and I thought that my cousin and his wife would have done well to have stayed in Paris rather than come and trouble us when we were at peace, when every man paid his own rates and taxes, when everybody voted as they liked at the préfecture. I could say that never was a loud word spoken at the public-house; that people attended with regularity both mass and vespers; that the gendarmes never visited our village more than once a week to preserve order; and that I myself was treated with consideration and respect: when I spoke but a word, honest men said, "That's the truth; that's the opinion of Monsieur le Maire!"

Yes, all these things and many more passed through my mind, and I should have liked to see Cousin George at Jericho.

This is just how we were in our village, and I don't know even yet by what means other people had made such fools of us. In the end, we have had to pay dearly for it; and our children ought to learn wisdom by it.

At Sarrebourg, I had to wait two hours before I could see Monsieur le Sous-préfet, who was breakfasting with messieurs the councillors of the arrondissement, in honor of the Plébiscite. Five or six mayors of the neighborhood were waiting like myself; we saw filing down the passage great dishes of fish and game, notwithstanding that the fishing and shooting seasons were over; and then baskets of wine; and we could hear our councillors laughing, "Ha! ha! ha!" They were enjoying themselves mightily.

At last Monsieur le Sous-préfet came out; he had had an excellent breakfast.

"Ha! is that you, gentlemen?" said he; "come in, come into the office."

And for another quarter of an hour we were left standing in the office. Then came Monsieur le Sous-préfet to get rid of the mayors, who wanted different things for their villages. He looked delighted, and granted everything. At last, having despatched the rest, he said to me, "Oh! Monsieur le Maire, I know the object of your coming. You are come to ask, for the person called George Weber,

authorization to open a public-house at Rothalp. Well, it's out of the question. That George Weber is a Republican; he has already offered opposition to the Plébiscite. You ought to have notified this to me: you have screened him because he is your cousin. Authorizations to keep public-houses are granted to steady men, devoted to his Majesty the Emperor, and who keep a watch over their customers; but they are never granted to men who require watching themselves. You should be aware of that."

Then I perceived that my rascally deputy, that miserable Placiard, had denounced us. That old dry-bones did nothing but draw up perpetual petitions, begging for places, pensions, tobacco excise offices, decorations for himself and his honorable family; speaking incessantly of his services, his devotion to the dynasty, and his claims. His claims were the denunciations, the informations which he laid before the sous-préfecture; and, to tell the truth, in those days these were the most valid claims of all.

I was indignant, but I said nothing; I simply added a few words in favor of Cousin George, assuring Monsieur le Sous-préfet that lies had been told about him, that one should not believe everything, etc. He half concealed a weary yawn; and as the councillors of the arrondissement were laughing in the garden, he rose and said politely, "Monsieur le Maire, you have your answer. Besides, you already have two public-houses in your village; three would be too many."

It was useless to stay after that, so I made a bow, at which he seemed pleased, and returned quietly to Rothalp. The same evening I went to repeat to George, word for word, the answer of the sous-préfet. Instead of getting angry, as I expected, my cousin listened calmly. His wife only cried out against that bad lot – she spoke of all the sous-préfets in the most disrespectful manner. But my cousin, smoking his pipe after supper, took it all very easily.

"Just listen to me, Christian," said he. "In the first place, I am much obliged to you for the trouble you have taken. All that you tell me I knew beforehand; but I am not sorry to know it for certain. Yet I could wish that the sous-préfet had had my letter. As it is, since I am refused a license to sell a few glasses of wine retail, I will sell wine wholesale. I have already a stock of white wine, and no later than to-morrow I am off to Nancy. I buy a light cart and a good horse; thence I drive to Thiancourt, where I lay in a stock of red wine. After that I rove right and left all over the country, and I sell my wine by the cask or the quarter-cask, according to the solvency of my customers: instead of having one public-house, I will have twenty. I must keep moving. With an inn, Marie Anne would still have been obliged to cook; she has quite enough to do without that."

"Oh! yes," she said; "for thirty years I have been cooking dishes of sauerkraut and sausage at Krantheimer's, at Montmartre, and at Auber's, in the cloister St. Benoit."

"Exactly so," said George; "and now you shall cook no longer; but you shall look after the crops, the stacking of the hay, the storage of fruit and potatoes. We shall get in our dividends, and I will trot round the country with my little pony from village to village. Monsieur le Sous-préfet shall know that George Weber can live without him."

Hearing this, I learned that they had money in the funds, besides all the rest; and I reflected that my cousin was quite right to laugh at all the sous-préfets in the world.

He came with me to the door, shaking hands with me; and I said to myself that it was abominable to have refused a publican's license to respectable persons, when they gave it to such men as Nicolas Reiter and Jean Kreps, whom their own wives called their best customers because they dropped under the table every evening and had to be carried to bed.

On the other hand, I saw that it was better for me; for if my cousin had been found infringing the law, I should have had to take depositions, and there would have been a quarrel with Cousin George. So that all was for the best; the wholesale business being only the exciseman's affair.

What George had said, he did next day. At six o'clock he was already at the station, and in five or six days he had returned from Nancy upon his own char-à-banc, drawn by a strong horse, five or six years old, in its prime. The char-à-banc was a new one; a tilt could be put up in wet weather, which could be raised or lowered when necessary to deliver the wine or receive back the empty casks.

The wine from Thiancourt followed. George stored it immediately, after having paid the bill and settled with the carter. I was standing by.

As for telling you how many casks he had then in the house, that would be difficult without examining his books; but not a wine-merchant in the neighborhood, not even in town, could boast of such a vault of wine as he had, for excellence of quality, for variety in price, both red and white, of Alsace and Lorraine.

About that time, my cousin sent for me and Jacob to make a list of safe customers. He wrote on, asking us, "How much may I give to So-and-So?"

"So much."

"How much to that man?"

"So much."

In the course of a single afternoon we had passed in review all the innkeepers and publicans from Droulingen to Quatre Vents, from Quatre Vents to the Dagsberg. Jacob and I knew what they were worth to the last penny; for the man who pays readily for his flour, pays well for his wine; and those who want pulling up by the miller are in no hurry to open their purses to the others.

That was the way Cousin George conducted his business.

He took a lad from our place, the son of the cooper Gros, to drive; and he himself was salesman.

From that day he was only seen passing through Rothalp at a quick trot, his lad loading and unloading.

My cousin, also, had a notion of distilling in the winter. He bought up a quantity of old second-hand barrels to hold the fruits which he hoped to secure at a cheap rate in autumn, and laid up a great store of firewood. Our country people had nothing to do but to look at him to learn something; but the people down our way all think themselves so amazingly clever, and that does not help to make folks richer.

Well, it is plain to you that our cousin's prospects were looking very bright. Every day, returning from his journey to Saverne or to Phalsbourg, he would stop his cart before my door, and come to see me in the mill, crying out: "Hallo! good afternoon, Christian. How are you to-day?"

Then we used to step into the back parlor, on account of the noise and the dust, and we talked about the price of corn, cattle, provender, and everything that is interesting to people in our condition.

What astonished him most of all was the number of Germans to be met with in the mountains and in the plains.

"I see nobody else," said he; "wood-cutters, brewers' men, coopers, tinkers, photographers, contractors. I will lay a wager, Christian, that your young man Frantz is a German, too."

"Yes; he comes from the Grand Duchy of Baden."

"How does this happen?" asked George. "What is the meaning of it all?"

"They are good workmen," said I, "and they ask only half the wages."

"And ours – what becomes of them?"

"Ah, you see, Cousin George, that is their business."

"I understand," he said, "that we are making a great mistake. Even in Paris, this crowd of Germans – crossing-sweepers, shop and warehousemen, carters, book-keepers, professors of every kind – astonished me; and since Sadowa, there are twice as many. The more territory they annex, the farther they extend their view. Where is the advantage of our being Frenchmen – paying every year heavier taxes; sending our children to be drawn for the conscription, and paying for their exemption; bearing all the expenses of the State, all the insults of the préfets, the sous-préfets, and the police-inspectors, and the annoyances of common spies and informers, if those fellows, who have nothing at all to bear, enjoy the same advantages with ourselves, and even greater ones; since our own people are sent off to make room for these, who by their great numbers lower the price of hand-labor? This benefits the manufacturers, the contractors, the bourgeois class, but it is misery for the mass of the people. I cannot understand it at all. Our rulers, up there, must be losing their senses. If that goes on,

the working-men will cease to care for their country, since it cares so little for them; and the Germans who are favored, and who hate us, will quietly put us out of our own doors."

Thus spoke my cousin, and I knew not what answer to make.

But about this time I had a great trouble, and although this affair is my private business alone, I must tell you about it.

Since the arrival of George, my daughter Grédel, instead of looking after our business as she used to do, washing clothes, milking cows, and so on, was all the blessed day at Marie Anne's. Jacob complained, and said: "What is she about down there? By and by I shall have to prepare the clothes for the wash and hang them upon the hedges to dry, and churn butter. Cannot Grédel do her own work? Does she think we are her servants?"

He was right. But Grédel never troubled herself. She never has thought of any one besides herself. She was down there along with George's wife, who talked to her from morning till night about Paris, the grand squares, the markets, the price of eggs and of meat, what was charged at the *barrières*; of this, that, and the other: cooking, and what not.

Marie Anne wanted company. But this did not suit me at all; and the less because Grédel had had a lover in the village for some time, and when this is the case, the best thing to be done is always to keep your daughter at home and watch her closely.

It was only a common clerk at a stone-quarry in Wilsberg, a late artillery sergeant, Jean Baptiste Werner, who had taken the liberty to cast his eyes upon our daughter. We had nothing to say against this young man. He was a fine, tall man, thin, with a bold expression and brown mustaches, and who did his duty very well at the quarry by Father Heitz; but he could earn no more than his three francs a day: and any one may see that the daughter of Christian Weber was not to be thrown away upon a man who earns three francs a day. No, that would never do.

Nevertheless, I had often seen this Jean Baptiste Werner going in the morning to his work with his foot-rule under his arm, stopping at the mill-dam, as if to watch the geese and the ducks paddling about the sluice or the hens circling around the cock on the dunghill; and at the same moment Grédel would be slowly combing her hair at her window before the little looking-glass, leaning her head outside. I had also noticed that they said good-morning to each other a good way off, and that that clerk always looked excited and flurried at the sight of my daughter; and I had even been obliged to give Grédel notice to go and comb her hair somewhere else when that man passed, or to shut her window.

This is my case, simply told.

That young man worried me. My wife, too, was on her guard.

You may now understand why I should have preferred to have seen our daughter at home; but it was not so easy to forbid her to go to my cousin's. George and his wife might have been angry; and that troubled us.

Fortunately about that time the eldest son of Father Heitz,² the owner of the quarry, asked for Grédel in marriage.

For a long while, Monsieur Mathias Heitz, junior, had come every Sunday from Wilsberg to the "Cruchon d'Or," to amuse himself with Jacob, as young men do when they have intentions with regard to a family. He was a fine young man, fat, with red cheeks and ears, and always well dressed, with a flowered velvet waistcoat, and seals to his watch-chain; in a word, just such a young man as a girl with any good sense would be glad to have for a husband.

He had property too; he was the eldest of five children. I reckoned that his own share might be fifteen to twenty thousand francs after the death of his parents.

Well, this young man demanded Grédel in marriage, and at once Jacob, my wife, and myself were agreed to accept him.

² It is usual there for fathers of families to be distinguished as Father So-and-So.

Only my wife thought that we ought to consult Cousin George and Marie Anne. Grédel was just there when I went in with Catherine; but behold! on the first mention of the thing she began to melt into tears, and to say she would rather die than marry Mathias Heitz. You may imagine how angry we were. My wife was going to slap her face or box her ears; but my cousin became angry now, and told us that we ought never to oblige a girl to marry against her will, because this was the way to make miserable households. Then he led us out into the passage, telling us that he took the responsibility of this affair: that he wished to obtain information, and that we were to tell the young man that we required a month for reflection.

We could not refuse him that. Grédel would no longer come home; my cousin's wife begged us not to plague her, and we had to give way to them; but it was one of the greatest troubles of my life. And I thought: "Now you cannot give your daughter to whoever you like; is not this really abominable?"

I felt angry with myself for having listened to my cousin: but, nevertheless, Grédel stayed with them a whole week, in consequence of which we were obliged to hire a charwoman; and Jacob exclaimed that Grédel could not have offered him a worse insult than to refuse his best comrade, a rich fellow, who boldly paid down his money for ten, fifteen, and twenty bottles at the club without winking.

However, he never mentioned it to Cousin George, for whom he felt the greatest respect on account of his expectations from him, and whose strong language dismayed him.

At last my wife found that Grédel was staying too long away from home; the people of the village would talk about it; so one evening I went to see George, to ask him what he had learned about Heitz's son.

It was after supper. Grédel, seeing me come in, slipped out into the kitchen, and my cousin said to me frankly: "Listen, Christian: here is the matter in two words – Grédel loves another."

"Whom?"

"Jean Baptiste Werner."

"Father Heitz's clerk? the son of the woodward Werner, who has never had anything but potatoes to eat? Is she in love with him? Let the wretch come – let him come and ask her! I'll kick him down the stairs! And Grédel to grieve me so? Oh! I should never have believed it of her!"

I could have cried.

"Come, Christian," said my cousin, "you must be reasonable."

"Reasonable! she deserves to have her neck wrung!"

I was in a fury; I wanted to lay hold on her. Happily, she had gone into the garden, and George held me back. He obliged me to sit down again, and said: "What is Mathias Heitz? a fat fool who knows nothing but how to play at cards and drink. He was put to college at Phalsbourg, at M. Verrot's, like all the other respectable young men in the district; but he now drives about in a char-à-banc in a flowered waistcoat, with jingling seals: he could not possibly earn a couple of pence – and the old man would like to be rid of him by marrying him. I have obtained information about him. He may come in for from fifteen to twenty thousand francs some day; but what are fifteen thousand francs for an ass? He will eat them, he will drink them – perhaps he has already swallowed half – and if there is a family, what are fifteen or even twenty thousand francs between five or six children? Formerly, when girls used to have an outfit for a marriage portion, and the eldest son succeeded his father, things went on pretty well. It did not want much talent to carry on a well-established business, or to follow up a trade from father to son. But at the present day, mother-wit and good sense stand in the foremost rank. Grandfather Heitz was an industrious man; he made money; but Father Mathias has never added a sou to his property, and the son has not a grain of good sense."

"But the other fellow – why he has nothing at all."

"The other, Jean Baptiste Werner, is a good man, who has done his duty by Father Heitz; he knows everything, manages everything, takes in orders, makes all the arrangements for the carriage

of stone by carts or by railway. Heitz puts the money into his pocket, and Werner has all the work, for want of a little capital to set himself up in business. He has seen foreign service. I have seen his certificates of character in Africa, in Mexico: they are excellent. If I were in your place, I would give Grédel to him."

"Never!" cried I, thumping upon the table; "I had rather drown her."

Half the wine-glasses were shattered on the floor; but my cousin was not angry.

"Well, Christian," said he, "you are wrong. Think it over. Grédel will remain here. I will answer for her. You must not take her away at present. You would be very likely to ill-treat her, and then you would repent of it."

"Let her stay as long as you like!" said I, taking up my hat; "let her never darken my doors again." And I rushed out.

Never in my life had I been so angry and so grieved. At home I did not even dare to say what I had learned; but Jacob suspected it, and one day, as Werner was stopping in front of the mill, he shook his pitchfork at him, shouting: "Come on!" But Werner pretended not to hear him, and went on his way.

I was at last, however, obliged to tell my wife the whole matter. At first she was near fainting; but she soon recovered, and said to me: "Well, if Grédel won't have young Mathias, we shall keep our hundred louis, and we shall have no need to hire a new servant. I should prefer that, for one cannot trust strange servants in a house."

"Yes; but how can we declare to Mathias Heitz that Grédel refuses his son?"

"Oh, don't trouble yourself, Christian," said she; "leave me alone, and don't let us quarrel with Cousin George: that's the principal thing. I will say that Grédel is too young to be married; that is the proper thing to say, and nobody can answer that."

Catherine quieted me in this way. But this business was still racking my brain, when extraordinary things came to pass, which we were far from expecting, and which were to turn our hair gray, and that of many others with us.

CHAPTER III

One morning the secretary of the sous-préfet wrote to me to come to Sarrebourg. From time to time we used to receive orders, as magistrates, to go and give an account at the sous-préfecture of what was going on in our district.

I said to myself, immediately on receiving this letter from Secretary Gérard, that it was something about our Agricultural Society, which had not yet delivered the prizes gained by the ducks and the geese a few weeks before.

It was true that the Paris newspapers had for three days past been discussing a Prince of Hohenzollern, who had just been named King of Spain; but what could that signify to us at Rothalp, Illingen, Droulingen, and Henridorf, whether the King of Spain was called Hohenzollern or by any other name?

In my opinion, it could not be about that affair that Monsieur le Sous-préfet wanted to talk to us, but about the old or a new Agricultural Society, or something at least which concerned us in particular. The idea of the parish road and the bells came also into my mind; perhaps that was the object we were sent for.

At last I took up my staff and started for Sarrebourg.

Arriving there, I found the whole length of the principal street crowded with mayors, police-inspectors, and *juges-de-paix*.³ Mother Adler's inn and all the little public-houses were so full that they could not have held another customer.

Then I said to myself, no doubt something quite new is in the wind: as, for instance; a fête like that when her Majesty the Empress and the Prince Imperial, three years before, passed through Nancy to celebrate the union of Lorraine with France. Thereupon I went to the sous-préfecture, where I found already several mayors of the neighborhood talking at the door. They were discussing the price of corn, the high price of cattle food; they were called in one after another.

In half an hour my turn came; Monsieur Christian Weber's name was called, and I entered with my hat in my hand.

Monsieur le Sous-préfet with his secretary Gerard, with his pen stuck behind his ear, were seated there: the secretary began to mend his pen; and Monsieur le Sous-préfet asked me what was going on in my part of the country?

"In our country, Monsieur le Sous-préfet? why, nothing at all. There is a great drought; no rain has fallen for six weeks; the potatoes are very small, and..."

"I don't mean that, Monsieur le Maire: what do they think of the Prince Hohenzollern and the Crown of Spain?"

On hearing this I scratched my head, saying to myself, "What will you answer to that now? What must you say?"

Then Monsieur le Sous-préfet asked: "What is the spirit of your population?"

The spirit of our population? How could I get out of that?

"You see, Monsieur le Sous-préfet, in our villages the people are no scholars; they don't read the papers."

"But tell me, what do they think of the war?"

"What war?"

"If, now, we should have war with Germany, would those people be satisfied?"

Then I began to catch a glimpse of his meaning, and I said: "You know, Monsieur le Sous-préfet, that we have voted in the Plébiscite to have peace, because everybody likes trade and business and quietness at home; we only want to have work and..."

³ Magistrates.

"Of course, of course, that is plain enough; we all want peace: his Majesty the Emperor, and her Majesty the Empress, and everybody love peace! But if we are attacked: if Count Bismarck and the King of Prussia attack us?"

"Then, Monsieur le Sous-préfet, we shall be obliged to defend ourselves in the best way we can; by all sorts of means, with pitchforks, with sticks..."

"Put that down, Monsieur Gérard, write down those words. You are right, Monsieur le Maire: I felt sure of you beforehand," said Monsieur le Sous-préfet, shaking hands with me: "You are a worthy man."

Tears came into my eyes. He came with me to the door, saying: "The determination of your people is admirable; tell them so: tell them that we wish for peace; that our only thought is for peace; that his Majesty and their excellencies the Ministers want nothing but peace; but that France cannot endure the insults of an ambitious power. Communicate your own ardor to the village of Rothalp. Good, very good. *Au revoir*, Monsieur le Maire, farewell."

Then I went out, much astonished; another mayor took my place, and I thought, "What! does that Bismarck mean to attack us! Oh, the villain!"

But as yet I could tell neither why nor how.

I repaired to Mother Adler's, where I ordered bread and cheese and a bottle of white wine, according to custom, before returning home; and there I heard all those gentlemen, the Government officials, the controllers, the tax-collectors, the judges, the receivers, etc., assembled in the public room, telling one another that the Prussians were going to invade us; that they had already taken half of Germany, and that they were wanting now to lay the Spaniards upon our back in order to take the rest: just as they had put Italy upon the back of the Austrians, before Sadowa.

All the mayors present were of the same opinion; they all answered that they would defend themselves, if we were attacked; for the Lorrainers and the Alsacians have never been behindhand in defending themselves: all the world knows that.

I went on listening; at last, having paid my bill, I started to return home.

I went out of Sarrebourg, and had walked for half an hour in the dust, reflecting upon what had just taken place, when I heard a conveyance coming at a rapid rate behind me. I turned round. It was Cousin George upon his char-à-banc, at which I was much pleased.

"Is that you, cousin?" said he, pulling up.

"Yes; I am just come from Sarrebourg, and I am not sorry to meet with you, for it is terribly warm."

"Well, up with you," said he. "You have had a great gathering to-day; I saw all the public-houses full."

I was up, I took my seat, and the conveyance went off again at a trot.

"Yes," said I; "it is a strange business; you would never guess why we have been sent for to the sous-préfecture."

"What for?"

Then I told him all about it; being much excited against the villain Bismarck, who wanted to invade us, and had just invented this Hohenzollern pretext to drive us to extremities.

George listened. At last he said: "My poor Christian! the sous-préfet was quite right in calling you a worthy fellow; and all those other mayors that I saw down there, with their red noses, are worthy men; but do you know my opinion upon all those matters?"

"What do you think, George?"

"Well, my belief is, that they are leading you like a string of asses by the bridle. That sous-préfet will present his report to the préfet, the préfet to the Minister of the Interior, Monsieur Chevandier de Valdrôme, – the organizer of the Plébiscite – he who told you to vote 'Yes' to have peace – and that Minister will present his report to the Emperor. They all know that the Emperor desires war, because he needs it for his dynasty."

"What! he wants war?"

"No doubt he does. In spite of all, forty-five thousand soldiers have voted against the Plébiscite. The army is turning round against the dynasty. There is no more promotion: medals, crosses, promotions were distributed in profusion at first, now all that has stopped; the inferior officers have no more hope of passing into the higher ranks, because the army is filled with nobles, with Jesuits from the schools of the Sacred College: in the Court calendars nothing is seen but *de's*. The soldiers, who spring from the people, begin to discern that they are being gradually extinguished: they are not in a pleasant temper. But war may put everything straight again: a few battles are wanted to throw light upon the malcontents; there must be a victory to crush the Republicans, for the Republicans are gaining confidence: they are lifting up their heads. After a victory, a few thousand of them can be sent to Lambessa and to Cayenne, just as after the Second of December. At the same time, the Jesuits will be placed at the head of the schools, as they were under Charles X., the Pope will be restored, Italy and Germany will be dismembered, and the dynasty will be placed on a strong foundation for twenty years. Every twenty years they will begin again, and the dynasty will strike deep root. But war there must be."

"But what do you mean? It is Bismarck who is beginning it," said I: "it is he who is picking a German quarrel."

"Bismarck," replied my cousin, "is well acquainted with everything that is going on, and so are the very lowest workmen in Paris; but you, you know nothing at all. Your only talk is about potatoes and cabbages: your thoughts never go beyond this. You are kept in ignorance. You are, as it were, the dung of the Empire – the manure to fatten the dynasty. Bismarck is aware that our *honest man* wants war, to temper his army afresh, and shut the mouths of those whose talk is of economy, liberty, honor, and justice; he knows that never will Prussia be so strong again as she is now – she already covers three-fourths of Germany; all the Germans will march at her side to fight against France: they can put more than a million of men in the field in fifteen days, and they will be three or four against one; with such odds there is no need of genius, the war will go forward of itself – they are sure of crushing the enemy."

"But the Emperor must know that as well as you, George," said I; "therefore he will be for peace."

"No, he is relying upon his mitrailleuses: and then he wants to strengthen his dynasty – what does the rest matter to him? To establish his dynasty he took an oath before God and man to the Republic, and then he trampled upon his oath and the Republic; he brought destruction upon thousands of good men, who were defending the laws against him; he has enriched thousands of thieves who uphold him; he has corrupted our youth by the evil example of the prosperity of brigands, and the misfortunes of the well-disposed; he has brought low everything that was worthy of respect, he has exalted everything which excites disgust and contempt. All the men who have approached this pestilence have been contaminated, to the very marrow of their bones. You, Christian, evidently cannot comprehend these abominable things; but the worst rogues in this country, the wildest vagabonds among your peasants, could never form an opinion of the villany of this *honest man*: they are saints compared with him; at the very sight of him the heart of every true Frenchman rises up against him: for the sake of his dynasty he would sell and sacrifice us all to the last man."

George, in uttering these words, was trembling with excitement: I saw that he was convinced to the bottom of his heart of what he said. Fortunately we were alone on the road, far from any village; no one could hear us.

"But that Hohenzollern," I said, after a few minutes' silence, "that Leopold Hohenzollern – is not he the cause of all that is going on?"

"No," said George; "if misfortunes come upon us, the *honest man* alone will be the cause of it. If you did but read a newspaper, you would see that the Spaniards wanted for their king, Montpensier, a son of Louis Philippe; that could only have turned out to our good: Montpensier would naturally have

become the ally of France. But that was against the interests of the Napoleon dynasty; so the *honest man* threatened Spain; then the Spaniards nominated this Prussian prince in the place of Montpensier; a prince who could not stand alone, but whom a million of Germans would support if necessary. They fixed upon him to annoy our gentleman; of course they had no need to ask for his advice. Did France consult any one? did she trouble herself about England, Spain, or Germany, when she proclaimed the Republic, or when she proclaimed Louis Bonaparte Emperor? Has he then a right to thrust his nose into their affairs? No; it is unpleasant for us; but the Spaniards were right; there was no need for them to put themselves out to please our *worthy man* and his fine family. And now – happen what may – I look no longer for peace; the Germans are withdrawing from our country in all directions – they are joining their regiments; the order has been given, and they obey; it is a bad sign. In all the villages that I have been passing through, and upon every road, I have seen these fine fellows, their bundles over their shoulders – they are off home!"

Thus spoke Cousin George to me. I thought this was a little too bad; but, on arriving home, the first thing my wife said to me was, "Do you know that Frantz is going?"

"Our young man?"

"Yes, he wants his wages."

"Ah, indeed. Let him come here at the back, and we will have a talk."

I was much surprised, and I made him come into my room at the bottom of the mill, where I keep my papers and my books. His cow-skin pack was already fastened upon his shoulder.

"Are you going away, Frantz? Have you anything to complain of?"

"No, nothing at all, Monsieur Weber. But I am obliged to go; for I have received orders to join my regiment."

"Are you a soldier, then?"

"Yes, in the Landwehr. We are all soldiers in Germany."

"But if you liked to stay here, who would come and fetch you?"

"That is an impossibility, M. Weber. I should be declared a deserter. I could never return home again. They would take away all my property, present and to come; my brothers and sisters would come in for it."

"Ah, that is a different thing! Now I understand. There – there's your certificate of character."

I had written a good certificate for him, for he was a good workman. I paid him what I owed him to the last farthing, and wished him a prosperous journey.

Cousin George was right; those Germans were all moving homeward. You would never have thought there were so many in the country; some had passed themselves off for Swiss, some for Luxemburgers; others had quite settled down, and no one would ever have suspected that they owed two or three more years' service to their country. This gave rise to disputes. Those whose situations they had taken, and who bore ill-will against them, fell upon them; the *gendarmérie* beat up the mountains; things were taking an ugly turn.

It was in vain that I affirmed at the mayoralty-house that the Emperor breathed only peace; for the Gazettes of the préfecture talked of nothing but the insults we had had to endure, the ambition of Prussia, revenge for Sadowa, the Catholic nations who were going to declare *en masse* in our favor, and all the powers which affirmed the justice of our cause: the enthusiasm for war grew higher and higher day by day; especially that of the pedlers, the tinkers, the small dealers, and all those good fellows who come out of the prisons, and who are continually seeking for work without finding any; though they do find walls to get over, doors to break in, cupboards to plunder. All these excellent people declared that it was for the honor of France to make war upon Germany.

And then the Paris newspapers in the pay of the Government, as we have more recently learned, continued arriving and were circulated gratis, saying that our ambassador Benedetti had gone to see Frederick William at the waters of Ems, to entreat him not to precipitate us into the horrors of war; that the King had answered that all that was nothing to him, for his Cousin Leopold of Hohenzollern

had only consulted him out of respect, as head of the family; that he was too good a relation to advise him not to accept so good a windfall, which was coming down to him out of the clouds.

Then, indeed, did the indignation of the Gazettes burst upon the Germans: they must, by all means, be brought to their senses. Now, fancy the position of a mayor, who only two months before had made all his village vote in the Plébiscite, promising them peace, and who saw clearly at last how they had only made use of him as a tool to dupe his people! I dared no longer look my cousin in the face, for he had warned me of the thing; and now I knew what to think of the honorable members of the Government.

Affairs were going on so badly that war seemed imminent, when one fine morning we learned that Hohenzollern had waived his right to be King of Spain. Ah! now we were out of the mess: now we could breathe more freely. That day my cousin himself was smiling; he came to the mill and said to me: "The Emperor and his Ministers, his préfets and sous-préfets, have not such long noses after all! How well things were going on too! And now they will be obliged to wait for another opportunity to begin. How they must feel sold!"

We both laughed with delight.

More than twenty-five of the principal inhabitants came that day to shake hands with me at the mayoralty-house. It was concluded that his excellency, Monsieur Emile Ollivier, would never be able to tinker this war again, and that peace would be preserved in spite of him: in spite of the Emperor, in spite of Marshal Leboeuf, who had declared to the Senate *that we were ready – five times ready, and that during the whole campaign we should never be short of so much as a gaiter button.*

Hohenzollern was praised up to the skies for having shown such good sense; and as the reserves had been called out, many young men were glad to be able to remain in the bosom of their families.

In a word, it was concluded that the whole affair was at an end; when our *good man* and his honorable Minister informed us that we had begun to rejoice too soon. All at once, the report ran that Frederick William had shown our ambassador the door, saying something so terribly strong against the honor of his Majesty Napoleon III., that nobody dared repeat it. It appeared that his Majesty the Emperor, seeing that the King of Prussia had withdrawn his authorization from the Prince of Hohenzollern to accept the Crown of Spain, had not been satisfied with that; and that he had given orders to his ambassador to demand, furthermore, his renunciation of any crown, whatever that the Spaniards might offer him in all time to come – for himself or his family; and that this King, who does not enjoy at all times the best of tempers, had said something very strong touching *our honest man.*

That day I was at the mayoralty-house about eleven o'clock. I had just celebrated the marriage of André Fix with Kaan's daughter, and the wedding-party had started for church, when the postman Michel comes in and throws down the little *Moniteur* upon the table. Then I sat down to read about the great battle in the Legislative Chambers, fought by Thiers, Gambetta, Jules Favre, Glais-Bizoin and others, against the Ministers, in defence of peace.

It was magnificent. But this had not prevented the majority, appointed to do everything, from declaring war against the Germans, on account of what the King of Prussia had said.

What could he then have said? His excellency Emile Ollivier has never dared to repeat it! My Cousin George declared that he had said something that was right, and naturally very unpleasant: but it is known now, by the reports of our ambassador, that the King of Prussia had said *nothing at all*, and that the indignation of M. Ollivier was nothing but a disgraceful sham to deceive the Chambers, and make them vote for war.

Well, this was the commencement of our calamities; and; for my part, I find that this did not present a cheerful prospect. No! After having endured such miseries, it is not pleasant to remember that we owe them all to M. Emile Ollivier, to Monsieur Leboeuf, to Monsieur Bonaparte, and to other men of that stamp, who are living at this moment comfortably in their country-houses in Italy, in Switzerland, in England; whilst so many unhappy creatures have had their lives sacrificed, or have

been utterly ruined; have lost father, children, and friends: but we Alsacians and Lorrainers have lost more than all – our own mother-country.

CHAPTER IV

The day following this declaration, Cousin George, who could never look upon anything cheerfully, started for Belfort. He had ordered some wine at Dijon, and he wished to stop it from coming. It was the 22d July. George only returned five days later, on the 27th, having had the greatest difficulty in getting there in time.

During these five days I had a hard time. Orders were coming every hour to hurry on the reserves and the Gardes Mobiles, and to cancel renewable furloughs; the gendarmerie had no rest. The Government gazette was telling us of the enthusiasm of the nation for the war. It was pitiable; can you imagine young men sitting quietly at home, thinking: "In five or six months I shall be exempt from service, I may marry, settle, earn money," all at once, without either rhyme or reason, becoming enthusiastic to go and knock over men they know nothing of, and to risk their own bones against them. Is there a shadow of good sense in such notions?

And the Germans! Will any one persuade us that they were coming for their own pleasure – all these thousands of workmen, tradesmen, manufacturers, good citizens, who were living in peace in their towns and their villages? Will any one maintain that they came and drew up in lines facing our guns for their private satisfaction, with an officer behind them, pistol in hand, to shoot them in the back if they gave way? Do you suppose they found any amusement in that? Come now, was not his excellency Monsieur Ollivier the only man who went into war, as he himself said, "with a light heart?" He was safe to come back, he was: he had not much to fear; he is quite well; he made a fortune in a very short time! But the lads of our neighborhood, Mathias Heitz, Jean Baptiste Werner, my son Jacob, and hundreds of others, were in no such hurry: they would much rather have stayed in their villages.

Later on it was another matter, when you were fighting for your country; then, of course, many went off as a matter of duty, without being summoned, whilst Monsieur Ollivier and his friends were hiding, God knows where! But at that particular moment when all our misfortunes might have been averted, it is a falsehood to say that we went enthusiastically to have ourselves cut to pieces for a pack of intriguers and stage-players, whom we were just beginning to find out.

When we saw our son Jacob, in his blouse, his bundle under his arm, come into the mill, saying, "Now, father, I am going; you must not forget to pull up the dam in half an hour, for the water will be up: " when he said this to me, I tell you my heart trembled; the cries of his mother in the room behind made my hair stand on end. I could have wished to say a few words, to cheer up the lad, but my tongue refused to move; and if I had held his excellency, M. Ollivier, or his respected master, by the throat in a corner, they would have made a queer figure: I should have strangled them in a moment! At last Jacob went.

All the young men of Sarrebourg, of Château Salins, and our neighborhood, fifteen or sixteen hundred in number, were at Phalsbourg to relieve the 84th, who at any moment might expect to be called away, and who were complaining of their colonel for not claiming the foremost rank for his regiment. The officers were afraid of arriving too late; they wanted promotion, crosses, medals: fighting was their trade.

What I have said about enthusiasm is true; it is equally true of the Germans and the French; they had no desire to exterminate one another. Bismarck and our *honest man* alone are responsible: at their door lies all the blood that has been shed.

Cousin George returned from Belfort on the 27th, in the evening. I fancy I still see him entering our room at nightfall; Grédel had returned to us the day before, and we were at supper, with the tin lamp upon the table; from my place, on the right, near the window, I was able to watch the mill-dam. George arrived.

"Ah! cousin, here you are back again! Did you get on all right?"

"Yes, I have nothing to complain of," said he, taking a chair. "I arrived just in time to countermand my order; but it was only by good luck. What confusion all the way from Belfort to Strasbourg! the troops, the recruits, the guns, the horses, the munitions of war, the barrels of biscuits, all are arriving at the railway in heaps. You would not know the country. Orders are asked for everywhere. The telegraph-wires are no longer for private use. The commissaries don't know where to find their stores, colonels are looking for their regiments, generals for their brigades and divisions. They are seeking for salt, sugar, coffee, bacon, meat, saddles and bridles – and they are getting charts of the Baltic for a campaign in the Vosges! Oh!" cried my cousin, uplifting his hands, "is it possible? Have we come to that – we! we! Now it will be seen how expensive a thing is a government of thieves! I warn you, Christian, it will be a failure! Perhaps there will not even be found rifles in the arsenals, after the hundreds of millions voted to get rifles. You will see; you will see!"

He had begun to stride to and fro excitedly, and we, sitting on our chairs, were looking at him open-mouthed, staring first right and then left. His anger rose higher and higher, and he said, "Such is the genius of our honest man, he conducts everything: he is our commander-in-chief! A retired artillery captain, with whom I travelled from Schlestadt to Strasbourg, told me that in consequence of the bad organization of our forces, we should be unable to place more than two hundred and fifty thousand men in line along our frontier from Luxembourg to Switzerland; and that the Germans, with their superior and long-prepared organization, could oppose to us, in eight days, a force of five to six hundred thousand men; so that they will be more than two to one at the outset, and they will crush us in spite of the valor of our soldiers. This old officer, full of good sense, and who has travelled in Germany, told me, besides, that the artillery of the Prussians carries farther and is worked more rapidly than ours; which would enable the Germans to dismount our batteries and our mitrailleuses without getting any harm themselves. It seems that our great man never thought of that."

Then George began to laugh, and, as we said nothing, he went on: "And the enemy – the Prussians, Bavarians, Badenians, Wurtembergers, the *Courrier du Bas-Rhin* declares that they are coming by regiments and divisions from Frankfort and Munich to Rastadt, with guns, munitions, and provisions in abundance; that all the country swarms with them, from Karlsruhe to Baden; that they have blown up the bridge of Kehl, to prevent us from outflanking them; that we have not troops enough at Wissembourg. But what is the use of complaining? Our commander-in-chief knows better than the *Courrier du Bas-Rhin*; he is an iron-clad fellow, who takes no advice: a man must have some courage to offer him advice!"

And all at once, stopping short, "Christian," he said, "I have come to give you a little advice."
"What?"

"Hide all the money you have got; for, from what I have seen down there, in a few days the enemy will be in Alsace."

Imagine my astonishment at hearing these words. George was not the man to joke about serious matters, nor was he a timid man: on the contrary, you would have to go far to find a braver man. Therefore, fancy my wife's and Grédel's alarm.

"What, George," said I, "do you think that possible?"

"Listen to me," said he. "When on the one side you see nothing but empty beings, without education, without judgment, prudence, or method; and on the other, men who for fifty years have been preparing a mortal blow – anything is possible. Yes, I believe it; in a fortnight the Germans will be in Alsace. Our mountains will check them; the fortresses of Bitche, of Petite Pierre, of Phalsbourg and Lichtenberg; the abatis, and the intrenchments which will be formed in the passes; the ambuscades of every kind which will be set, the bridges and the railway tunnels that they will blow up – all this will prevent them from going farther for three or four months until winter; but, in the meantime, they will send this way reconnoitring parties – Uhlans, hussars, brigands of every kind – who will snap up everything, pillage everywhere – wheat, flour, hay, straw, bacon, cattle, and principally money. War will be made upon our backs. We Alsacians and Lorrainers, we shall have to pay the bill. I know all

about it. I have been all over the country-side; believe me. Hide everything; that is what I mean to do; and, if anything happens, at least it will not be our fault. I would not go to bed without giving you this warning; so good-night, Christian; good-night, everybody!"

He left us, and we sat a few moments gazing stupidly at each other. My wife and Grédel wanted to hide everything that very night. Grédel, ever since she had got Jean Baptiste Werner into her head, was thinking of nothing but her marriage-portion. She knew that we had about a hundred louis in cent-sous pieces in a basket at the bottom of the cupboard; she said to herself, "That's my marriage-portion!" And this troubled her more than anything: she even grew bolder, and wanted to keep the keys herself. But her mother is not a woman to be led: every minute she cried: "Take care, Grédel! mind what you are about!"

She looked daggers at her; and I was continually obliged to come to preserve peace between them; for Catherine is not gifted with patience. And so all our troubles came together.

But, in spite of what George had just been saying, I was not afraid. The Germans were less than sixteen leagues from us, it is true, but they would have first to cross the Rhine; then we knew that at Mederbronn the people were complaining of the troops cantoned in the villages: this was a proof that there was no lack of soldiers; and then MacMahon was at Strasbourg; the Turcos, the Zouaves, and the Chasseurs d'Afrique were coming up.

So I said to my wife that there was no hurry yet; that Cousin George had long detested the Emperor; but that all that did not mean much, and it was better to see things for one's self; that I should go to Saverne market, and if things looked bad, then I would sell all our corn and flour, which would come to a hundred louis, and which we would bury directly with the rest.

My wife took courage; and if I had not had a great deal to grind for the bakers in our village, I should have gone next day to Saverne and should have seen what was going on. Unfortunately, ever since Frantz and Jacob had left, the mill was on my hands, and I scarcely had time to turn round.

Jacob was a great trouble to me besides, asking for money by the postman Michel. This man told me that the Mobiles had not yet been called out, and that they were lounging from one public-house to another in gangs to kill time; that they had received no rifles; that they were not chartered in the barracks; and that they did not get a farthing for their food.

This disorder disgusted me; and I reflected that an Emperor who sends for all the young men in harvest-time, ought at least to feed them, and not leave them to be an expense to their parents. For all that I sent money to Jacob: I could not allow him to suffer hunger. But it was a trouble to my mind to keep him down there with my money, sauntering about with his hands in his pockets, whilst I, at my age, was obliged to carry sacks up into the loft, to fetch them down again, to load the carts alone, and, besides, to watch the mill; for no one could be met with now, and the old day-laborer, Donadieu, quite a cripple, was all the help I had. After that, only imagine our anxiety, our fatigue, and our embarrassment to know what to do.

The other people in the village were in no better spirits than ourselves. The old men and women thought of their sons shut up in the town, and the great drought continuing: we could rely upon nothing. The smallpox had broken out, too. Nothing would sell, nothing could be sent by railway: planks, beams, felled timber, building-stone, all lay at the saw-pits or the stone-quarry. The sous-préfet kept on troubling me to search and find out three or four scamps who had not reported themselves, and the consequence of all this was that I did not get to Saverne that week.

Then it was announced that at last the Emperor had just quitted Paris, to place himself at the head of his armies; and five or six days after came the news of his great victory at Sarrebrück, where the mitrailleuses had mown down the Prussians; where the little Prince had picked up bullets, "which made old soldiers shed tears of emotion."

On learning this the people became crazy with joy. On all sides were heard cries of "Vive l'Empereur!" and Monsieur le Curé preached the extermination of the heretic Prussians. Never had

the like been seen. That very day, toward evening, just after stopping the mill, all at once I heard in the distance, toward the road, cries of "*Aux armes, citoyens! formez vos bataillons!*"

The dust from the road rose up into the clouds. It was the 84th departing from Phalsbourg; they were going to Metz, and the people who were working in the fields near the road, said, on returning at night, that the poor soldiers, with their knapsacks on their shoulders, could scarcely march for the heat; that the people were treating them with eau-de-vie and wine at all the doors in Metting, and they said, "Good-by! long life to you!" that the officers, too, were shaking hands with everybody, whilst the people shouted, "Vive l'Empereur!"

Yes, this victory of Sarrebrück had changed the face of things in our villages; the love of war was returning. War is always popular when it is successful, and there is a prospect of extending our own territory into other peoples' countries.

That night about nine o'clock I went to caution my cousin to hold his tongue; for after this great victory one word against the dynasty might send him a very long way off. He was alone with his wife, and said to me, "Thank you, Christian, I have seen the despatch. A few brave fellows have been killed, and they have shown the young Prince to the army. That poor little weakly creature has picked up a few bullets on the battle-field. He is the heir of his uncle, the terrible captain of Jena and Austerlitz! Only one officer has been killed; it is not much; but if the heir of the dynasty had had but a scratch, the gazettes would have shed tears, and it would have been our duty to fall fainting."

"Do try to be quiet," said I, looking to see if the windows were all close. "Do take care, George. Don't commit yourself to Placiard and the gendarmes."

"Yes," said he, "the enemies of the dynasty are at this moment in worse danger than the little Prince. If victories go on, they will run the risk of being plucked pretty bare. I am quite aware of that, my cousin; and so I thank you for having come to warn me."

This is all that he said to me, and I returned home full of thoughts.

Next day, Thursday, market-day, I drove my first two wagon-loads of flour to Saverne, and sold them at a good figure. That day I observed the tremendous movement along the railroads, of which Cousin George had spoken; the carriage of mitrailleuses, guns, chests of biscuits, and the enthusiasm of the people, who were pouring out wine for the soldiers.

It was just like a fair in the principal street, from the chateau to the station – a fair of little white loaves and sausages; but the Turcos, with their blue jackets, their linen trousers, and their scarlet caps, took the place of honor: everybody wanted to treat them.

I had never before seen any of these men; their yellow skins, their thick lips, the conspicuous whites of their eyes, surprised me; and I said to myself, seeing the long strides they took with their thin legs, that the Germans would find them unpleasant neighbors. Their officers, too, with their swords at their sides, and their pointed beards, looked splendid soldiers. At every public-house door, a few Chasseurs d'Afrique had tied their small light horses, all alike and beautifully formed like deer. No one refused them anything; and in all directions, in the inns, the talk was of ambulances and collections for the wounded. Well, seeing all this, George's ideas seemed to me more and more opposed to sound sense, and I felt sure that we were going to crush all resistance.

About two o'clock, having dined at the Boeuf, I took the way to the village through Phalsbourg, to see Jacob in passing. As I went up the hill, something glittered from time to time on the slope through the woods, when all at once hundreds of cuirassiers came out upon the road by the Alsace fountain. They were advancing at a slow pace by twos, their helmets and their cuirasses threw back flashes of light upon all the trees, and the trampling of their hoofs rolled like the rush of a mighty river.

Then I drew my wagon to one side to see all these men march past me, sitting immovable in their saddles as if they were sleeping, the head inclined forward, and the mustache hanging, riding strong, square-built horses, the canvas bag suspended from the side, and the sabre ringing against the boot. Thus they filed past me for half an hour. They extended their long lines, and stretched on yet to the Schlittenbach. I thought there would be no end to them. Yet these were only two regiments;

two others were encamped upon the glacis of Phalsbourg, where I arrived about five in the afternoon. They were driving the pickets into the turf with axes; they were lighting fires for cooking; the horses were neighing, and the townspeople – men, women, and children – were standing gazing at them.

I passed on my way, reflecting upon the strength of such an army, and pitying, by anticipation, the ill-fated Germans whom they were going to encounter. Entering through the gate of Germany, I saw the officers looking for lodgings, the Gardes Mobiles, in blouses, mounting guard. They had received their rifles that morning; and the evening before, Monsieur le Sous-préfet of Sarrebourg had come himself to appoint the officers of the National Guard. This is what I had learned at the Vacheron brewery, where I had stopped, leaving my cart outside at the corner of the "Trois Pigeons."

Everybody was talking about our victory at Sarrebrück, especially those cuirassiers, who were emptying bottles by the hundred, to allay the dust of the road. They looked quite pleased, and were saying that war on a large scale was beginning again, and that the heavy cavalry would be in demand. It was quite a pleasure to look on them, with their red ears, and to hear them rejoicing at the prospect of meeting the enemy soon.

In the midst of all these swarms of people, of servants running, citizens coming and going, I could have wished to see Jacob; but where was I to look for him? At last I recognized a lad of our village – Nicolas Maisse – the son of the wood-turner, our neighbor, who immediately undertook to find him. He went out, and in a quarter of an hour Jacob appeared.

The poor fellow embraced me. The tears came into my eyes.

"Well now," said I, "sit down. Are you pretty well?"

"I had rather be at home," said he.

"Yes, but that is impossible now; you must have patience."

I also invited young Maisse to take a glass with us, and both complained bitterly that Mathias Heitz, junior, had been made a lieutenant, who knew no more of the science of war than they did, and who now had ordered of Kuhn, the tailor, an officer's uniform, gold-laced up to the shoulders. Yet Mathias was a friend of Jacob's. But justice is justice.

This piece of news filled me with indignation: what should Mathias Heitz be made an officer for? He had never learned anything at college; he would never have been able to earn a couple of *liards*– whilst our Jacob was a good miller's apprentice.

It was abominable. However, I made no remark; I only asked if Jean Baptiste Werner, who had a few days before joined the artillery of the National Guard, was an officer too?

Then they replied angrily that Jean Baptiste Werner, in spite of his African and Mexican campaigns, was only a gunner in the Mariet battery, behind the powder magazines. Those who knew nothing became officers; those who knew something of war, like Mariet and Werner, were privates, or at the most sergeants. All this showed me that Cousin George was right in saying that we should be driven like beasts, and that our chiefs were void of common-sense.

Looking at all these people coming and going, the time passed away. About eight o'clock, as we were hungry, and I wished to keep my boy with me as long as I could, I sent for a good salad and sausages, and we were eating together, with full hearts, to be sure, but with a good appetite. But a few moments after the retreat, just when the cuirassiers were going to camp out, and their officers, heavy and weary, were going to rest in their lodgings, a few bugle notes were sounded in the *place d'armes*, and we heard a cry – "To horse! to horse!"

Immediately all was excitement. A despatch had arrived; the officers put on their helmets, fastened on their swords, and came running out through the gate of Germany. Countenances changed; every one asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

At the same time the police inspector came up; he had seen my cart, and cried, "Strangers must leave the place – the gates are going to be closed."

Then I had only just time to embrace my son, to press Nicolas's hand, and to start at a sharp gallop for the gate of France. The drawbridge was just on the rise as I passed it; five minutes after I

was galloping along the white high-road by moonlight, on the way to Metting. Outside on the glacis, there was not a sound; the pickets had been drawn, and the two regiments of cavalry were on the road to Saverne.

I arrived home late: everybody was asleep in our village. Nobody suspected what was about to happen within a week.

CHAPTER V

The whole way I thought of nothing but the cuirassiers. This order to march immediately appeared to me to betoken no good: something serious must have occurred; and as, upon the stroke of eleven, I was putting my horses up, after having put my cart under its shed, the idea came into my head that it was time now to hide my money. I was bringing back from Saverne sixteen hundred livres: this heavy leathern purse in my pocket was perhaps what reminded me. I remembered what Cousin George had said about Uhlans and other scamps of that sort, and I felt a cold shiver come over me.

Having, then, gone upstairs very softly, I awoke my wife: "Get up, Catherine."

"What is the matter?"

"Get up: it is time to hide our money."

"But what is going on?"

"Nothing. Be quiet – make no noise – Grédel is asleep. You will carry the basket: put into it your ring and your ear-rings, everything that we have got. You hear me! I am going to empty the ditch, and we will bury everything at the bottom of it."

Then, without answering, she arose.

I went down to the mill, opened the back-door softly, and listened. Nothing was stirring in the village; you might have heard a cat moving. The mill had stopped, and the water was pretty high. I lifted the mill-dam, the water began to rush, boiling, down the gully; but our neighbors were used to this noise even in their sleep, so all remained quiet.

Then I went in again, and I was busy emptying into a corner the little box of oak in which I kept my tools – the pincers, the hammer, the screw-driver, and the nails, when my wife, in her slippers, came downstairs. She had the basket under her arm, and was carrying the lighted lantern. I blew it out in a moment, thinking: Never was a woman such a fool.

Downstairs I asked Catherine if everything was in the basket.

"Yes."

"Right. But I have brought from Saverne sixteen hundred francs: the wheat and the flour sold well."

I had put some bran into the box; everything was carefully laid in the bottom; and then I put on a padlock, and we went out, after having looked to see if all was quiet in the neighborhood. The sluice was already almost empty; there was only one or two feet of water. I cleared away the few stones which kept the rest of the water from running out, and went into it with my spade and pickaxe as far as just beneath the dam, where I began to make a deep hole; the water was hindering me, but it was flowing still.

Catherine, above, was keeping watch: sometimes she gave a low "Hush!"

Then we listened, but it was nothing – the mewling of a cat, the noise of the running water – and I went on digging. If anyone had had the misfortune to surprise us, I should have been capable of doing him a mischief. Happily no one came; and about two o'clock in the morning the hole was three or four feet deep. I let down the box, and laid it down level, first stamping soil down upon it with my heavy shoes, then gravel, then large stones, then sand; the mud would cover all over of itself: there is always plenty of mud in a millstream.

After this I came out again covered with mud. I shut down the dam, and the water began to rise. About three o'clock, at the dawn of day, the sluice was almost full. I could have begun grinding again; and nobody would ever have imagined that in this great whirling stream, nine feet under water and three feet under ground, lay a snug little square box of oak, clamped with iron, with a good padlock on it, and more than four thousand livres inside. I chuckled inwardly, and said: "Now let the rascals come!"

And Catherine was well pleased too. But about four, just as I was going up to bed again, comes Grédel, pale with alarm, crying: "Where is the money!"

She had seen the cupboard open and the basket empty. Never had she had such a fright in her life before. Thinking that her marriage-portion was gone, her ragged hair stood upon end; she was as pale as a sheet. "Be quiet," I said, "the money is in a safe place."

"Where?"

"It is hidden."

"Where?"

She looked as if she was going to seize me by the collar, but her mother said to her: "That is no business of yours."

Then she became furious, and said, that if we came to die, she would not know where to find her marriage-portion.

This quarrelling annoyed me, and I said to her: "We are not going to die; on the contrary, we shall live a long while yet, to prevent you and your Jean Baptiste from inheriting our goods."

And thereupon I went to bed, leaving Grédel and her mother to come to a settlement together.

All I can say is that girls, when they have got anything into their heads, become too bold with their parents, and all the excellent training they have had ends in nothing. Thank God, I had nothing to reproach myself with on that score, nor her mother either. Grédel had had four times as many blows as Jacob, because she deserved it, on account of her wanting to keep everything, putting it all into her own cupboard, and saying, "There, that's mine!"

Yes, indeed, she had had plenty of correction of that kind: but you cannot beat a girl of twenty: you cannot correct girls at that age; and that was just my misfortune: it ought to go on forever!

Well, it can't be helped.

She upset the house and rummaged the mill from top to bottom, she visited the garden, and her mother said to her, "You see, we have got it in a safe place; since you cannot find it, the Uhlans won't."

I remember that just as we were going up to sleep, that day, the 5th of August, early in the morning, Catherine and I had seen Cousin George in his char-à-banc coming down the valley of Dosenheim, and it seemed to us that he was out very early. The village was waking up; other people, too, were going to work: I lay down, and about eight o'clock my wife woke me to tell me that the postman, Michel, was there. I came down, and saw Michel standing in our parlor with his letter-bag under his arm. He was thoughtful, and told me that the worst reports were abroad; that they were speaking of the great battle near Wissembourg, where we had been defeated; that several maintained that we had lost ten thousand men, and the Germans seventeen thousand; but that there was nothing certain, because it was not known whence these rumors proceeded, only that the commanding officer of Phalsbourg, Taillant, had proclaimed that morning that the inhabitants would be obliged to lay in provisions for six weeks. Naturally, such a proclamation set people a-thinking, and they said: "Have we a siege before us? Have we gone back to the times of the great retreat and downfall of the first Emperor? Ought things forever to end in the same fashion?"

My wife, Grédel, and I, stood listening to Michel, with lips compressed, without interrupting him.

"And you, Michel," said I, when he had done, "what do you think of it all?"

"Monsieur le Maire, I am a poor postman; I want my place; and if my five hundred francs a year were taken from me, what would become of my wife and children?"

Then I saw that he considered our prospects were not good. He handed me a letter from Monsieur le Sous-préfet – it was the last – telling me to watch false reports; that false news should be severely punished, by order of our préfet, Monsieur Podevin.

We could have wished no better than that the news had been false! But at that time, everything that displeased the sous-préfets, the préfets, the Ministers, and the Emperor, was false, and everything that pleased them, everything that helped to deceive people – like that peaceful Plébiscite – was truth!

Let us change the subject: the thought of these things turns me sick!

Michel went away, and all that day might be noticed a stir of excitement in our village; men coming and going, women watching, people going into the wood, each with a bag, spade, and pickaxe; stables clearing out; a great movement, and all faces full of care: I have always thought that at that moment every one was hiding, burying anything he could hide or bury. I was sorry I had not begun to sell my corn sooner, when my cousin had cautioned me a week before; but my duties as mayor had prevented me: we must pay for our honors. I had still four cart-loads of corn in my barn – now where could I put them? And the cattle, and the furniture, the bedding, provisions of every sort? Never will our people forget those days, when every one was expecting, listening, and saying: "We are like the bird upon the twig. We have toiled, and sweated, and saved for fifty years, to get a little property of our own; to-morrow shall we have anything left? And next week, next month – shall we not be starving to death? And in those days of distress, shall we be able to borrow a couple of liards upon our land, or our house? Who will lend to us? And all this on account of whom? Scoundrels who have taken us in."

Ah! if there is any justice above, as every honest man believes, these abominable fellows will have a heavy reckoning to pay. So many miserable men, women, children await them there; they are there to demand satisfaction for all their sufferings. Yes, I believe it. But they – oh! they believe in nothing! There are, indeed, dreadful brigands in this world!

All that day was spent thus, in weariness and anxiety. Nothing was known. We questioned the people who were coming from Dosenheim, Neuviller, or from farther still, but they gave no answer but this: "Make your preparations! The enemy is advancing!"

And then my stupid fool of a deputy, Placiard, who for fifteen years did nothing but cry for tobacco licenses, stamp offices, promotion for his sons, for his son-in-law, and even for himself – a sort of beggar, who spent his life in drawing up petitions and denunciations – he came into the mill, saying, "Monsieur le Maire, everything is going on well – çamarche – the enemy are being drawn into the plain: they are coming into the net. To-morrow we shall hear that they are all exterminated, every one!"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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