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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter XI.

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LETTER XI.

Andernach.

As regards the men and things of the day, my dear friend, the *things* may know what they are about, but the *men* I am pretty sure would be puzzled to give an account of themselves. In contrasting the mysteries of history with those of nature; in the midst of the eternal comparisons which I cannot choose but make between the events in which God conceals his purposes, and the works of creation in which they are clearly manifested; I have often experienced a sudden pang, in picturing to myself that the forests, lakes, and mountains, the deep thunder of the clouds, or the flower which nods its little head at us as we pass, the star that twinkles in the vapours of the horizon, the ocean that groans and murmurs as for an omen of warning to some listening ear, may be imbued with terrible intelligence —endowed with knowledge and science, and view with pity the ignorant son of clay who gropes his way among them, through the darkness of his intellectual night; that they may despise our impotent pride, and the vanity whose eyes are blindfolded by ignorance. It goes against the impulses of my self-love that the tree should be certain of the fruit it is destined to bear, while man is unable to surmise his own future destiny or opinions.

The life and intelligence of man lie at the mercy of a divine influence, which the Christian calls providence, the freethinker chance; which mixes, combines, and organizes all things; concealing its machinery in the shadow of night, and setting forth its work in the light of day. While intending to do one thing, we are often betrayed into the contrary. "*Urceus exit.*"

History teems with examples of this. When the husband of Catherine de Medicis and lover of Diane de Poitiers allowed himself to be allured by the mysterious charms of Philippe Duc, the beautiful Piedmontese, he was fated to engender, not only Diane d'Angoulême, to become the wife of Farnese, but the reconciliation at a future time between his son, afterwards Henri III., with his cousin, afterwards Henri IV.

When the Duke de Nemours galloped down the steps of the Holy Chapel, mounted upon his famous palfrey, "the Royal," he not only introduced the fashion of such dangerous amusements, but prepared the way for the disastrous death of the King of France. On the 10th of July, 1559, in the lists of St. Antoine, Montgomery, his face streaming under the red plumes of his casque, with his chivalrous exertions, fixing his lance into his rest, rushed on a royal knight, bearing the device of the fleur-de-lis, and applauded by every lady present,—little surmising the importance of the event reserved for his hands! Never did the wand of fairy possess the power of that disastrous lance! With a single thrust, it sealed the fate of Henry II., demolished the palace of the Tournelles, constructed the Place

Royale, and in short suppressed the leading personage of the drama on the stage, changed its whole scenery and decorations, and overturned the system of social life.

When, after the battle of Worcester, Charles II. concealed himself in the oak, he intended only to secure a hiding-place; instead of which, he conferred a name upon a constellation, "the Royal Oak," and afforded to Halley the means of thwarting the wishes of Tycho Brahe. The second husband of Madame de Maintenon in revoking the Edict of Nantes, and the parliament of 1688 in dethroning James II., were working a way for that curious battle of Almanza, which beheld a French army commanded by an Englishman, Marshal Berwick, and an English army commanded by a Frenchman, Ruvigny, Lord Galloway. Had not Louis XIII. died on the 14th of May, 1643, the old Count Fontana would never have thought of attacking Rocroy five days afterwards; nor an heroic prince, twenty-two years of age, have enjoyed the brilliant opportunity of the 19th of May, which raised the Duke d'Enghien into the "Great Condé!"

In the midst of the crowd of historical facts with which chronology abounds, what singular echoes, what wonderful parallels, what unexpected results! In 1664, after the insult offered at Rome to his ambassador the Duke de Crequy, Louis XIV. caused the Corsicans to be expelled from the Holy City; and one hundred and forty years afterwards, an obscure Corsican, grown into the Emperor Napoleon, exiles the Bourbons from France! What mysterious shadows, and what flashes of light, then

darkness! When, about 1612, the youthful Henri de Montmorency observed at his father's, among the gentlemen attached to his establishment, a pale-faced looking page engaged in menial occupation, Laubespine de Châteauneuf by name, how was he to suppose that the youth then so submissive and respectful would progress into a Keeper of the Seals, and eventually preside by commission at the parliament of Toulouse, and furtively procure a dispensation from the pope in order to proceed to the decapitation of his former master Henri II., Duke of Montmorency, field-marshal of France by the chances of the sword, and by the grace of God a peer of the realm?

When the President De Thou polished, retouched, and revised so minutely in his book the edict of Louis XI. of the 22nd December, 1477, who could have foretold that this same edict, with Laubarde-mont for a handle of the same, would serve as an axe for Richelieu to decapitate his son?

In the midst of the chaos of events, order prevails. The confusion exists but in appearance; all is submitted to the laws of the Almighty. After a long lapse of time, the startling facts which astounded the senses of our fathers, return like comets, from the darkest abyss of history. The same treasons recur—the same treachery, the same disasters, the same wrecks. The names alone are changed; the facts are identical. A few days before the fatal treaty of 1814, Napoleon could have said to his thirteen marshals, "*Amen dico vobis quia unus vestrum me traditurus est.*"

Brutus continues to be adopted by Cæsar, a

Charles to prevent a Cromwell from proceeding to Jamaica, and a Louis XVI. to forbid a Mirabeau embarking for India. From age to age despotic queens are punished by refractory sons, and ungrateful queens by ungrateful sons. An Agrippina brings forth the Nero who is to put her to death; a Marie de Medicis, the Louis XIII. who is to drive her into exile. Admire, I beg of you, the strange combination of ideas, by which I have arrived almost unintentionally at two queens, two Italians, two crowned shadows of the past: Agrippina and Marie de Medicis; spectres who still haunt the romantic precincts of Cologne, the names of despairing queen-mothers. At sixteen hundred years distance of time, the daughter of Germanicus, who was mother of Nero, and the wife of Henri IV., who was the mother of Louis XIII., stamped their names indelibly in the annals of Cologne.

Of these two widows—for an orphan is the widow of her father—rendered so, the one by poison, the second by the poniard—one of them, Marie de Medicis, there breathed her last; the other, Agrippina, was born there, and brought prosperity to the resting-place of her cradle. At Cologne I visited the house in which Marie de France expired; the house of one Iabach or Jabach; and instead of telling you what I saw there, I shall tell you what I thought. Pardon me, my friend, if I do not give you all the minute details in which I usually indulge, and which in my opinion serve to point and define the character of a man through that of the objects with which he surrounds himself. In the present instance I spare you.

The unfortunate Marie de Medicis died the 3rd July, 1642, at the age of sixty-eight, after an exile of eleven years. She had wandered about in various directions—in Flanders—in England—unwelcome everywhere, as is usually the case with the unfortunate. In London, Charles I. treated her nobly, and she remained there three years, receiving from the royal bounty £100 per diem. At a later period—I say it with regret—Paris repaid to the queen of England in a singular manner the hospitality manifested in London to a queen of France. Henrietta Maria, the daughter of Henri IV., and widow of Charles I., was lodged in the Louvre, in I know not what wretched garret, where she was forced to remain in bed during the cold weather, for want of fire, waiting the few louis promised her by the Coadjutor, then in power. Her mother, the widow of Henri IV., ended her days at Cologne, in a similar condition and the most abject want. At the request of the cardinal minister, Charles I. sent her away from England. I am sorry to say it of the royal and melancholy author of the *Eikon Basilike*, and can ill understand how he who stood firm before Cromwell, trembled before Richelieu.

To follow the train of these details fraught with ominous instruction, Marie de Medicis was shortly followed to the grave by her persecutors; by Richelieu, who died in the same year, and by Louis XIII., who died the year following. To what end then all these ferocious animosities between one human being and another? Of what use their intrigues, their persecutions, their quarrels, and perfidy, when all these were to sink into the grave to-

gether? The Almighty, whose purposes are inscrutable, alone can answer.

An awful suspicion rests on the memory of Marie de Medicis. The shade of Ravailac appears always to lay his grisly finger on the sweeping folds of her royal robe. I was always panic-struck by the terrible words of the President Hénault, which were perhaps unintentionally written: "*The queen was not sufficiently surprised at the death of Henri IV.*"

I confess that these mysteries greatly enhance in my estimation the pompous and unreserved epoch of Louis XIV. The shadows and obscurities which tarnish the beginning of his century serve only to impart greater lustre to the splendours of its later years. It exhibits the power of Richelieu ennobled by the majesty of the throne—the greatness of Cromwell united with the serenity of the right divine. The grandeur of Louis XIV. is reflected from the greatness of all around him, which, while it diminished the glory of the sovereign, augments a thousand-fold the glories of the reign.

As for me, who like to find things in a state of fitness and completion, without having indulgence to show or allowances to concede, I have ever entertained deep sympathy with that grave and magnificent prince, so well-born, so well-bred, so well-surrounded; every inch a king, from the cradle to the tomb; a monarch in the highest acceptation of the word; the sovereign centre of civilization, the central point of Europe, round which revolved and disappeared eight popes, two kings of Spain, five sultans, three kings of Portugal, four kings and

one queen of England, three kings of Denmark, one queen and two kings of Sweden, four kings of Poland, and four czars of Muscovy; the polar star of a whole century, which for seventy-two years witnessed from its supreme elevation the mysterious phenomena of the European spheres.
