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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter III.

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LETTER III.

CHALONS—SAINTÉ MÈNEHOULD—VARENNES.

July 25.

YESTERDAY, towards the evening, I was journeying on beyond Ste. Ménéhould, having just read those admirable lines—

“Mugitusque boum mollesque sub arbore somni.

* * * * *

Speluncæ vivique lacus”—

and was leaning upon the eternal pages of the old poet, rumpling them with my elbow—my soul full of the vague ideas, at once sad and welcome, which sunset often awakens in the mind—when I was roused by a jolt upon the pavement. We were entering a town.

“What is the name of this town?” I inquired. To which the coachman replied, “Varennés.” The carriage proceeded down a street of gloomy aspect, in which the grass is growing, and the shutters of the houses are closed. After passing a gateway of the time of Louis XIII., of blackened stones, beside which was an antiquated well, we reached a triangular space hemmed in with white stuccoed dwelling-houses, in an angle of which was a door guarded by two stunted trees. On one side of this triangle stands an old

belfry; close to which Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette were arrested in their flight, the 21st of June, 1791, by Drouet, the postmaster of Ste. Ménéhould (there being no posting-house at Varennes in those days).

The king's carriage followed the *hypothénuse* of the triangle forming the Place; which I now took in my turn. Leaving my vehicle, I stood and gazed upon this insignificant space, which in so short a space of time was fated to become the fountain-head of the Revolution.

The version of the arrest related by the inhabitants is, that the king stoutly denied his identity (which, by the way, Charles I. would never have done), and they were on the point of liberating him, when suddenly there came up a M. d'Ethé, who had some feeling of malice against the court. This M. d'Ethé—I know not whether I write his name correctly (but I am not particular about the orthography of the names of traitors)—this man, I say, advanced towards the king, with Judas-like cunning, accosting him with "Good day, SIRE." This was enough! The king was denounced and arrested. There were five royal personages in the carriage, all lost by this single word. And "*Good day, SIRE,*" was the death-warrant of Louis XVI., Marie Antoinette, and Madame Elizabeth, besides a dungeon and early death to the Dauphin, and to Madame Royale long exile and the extinction of her race. To

the observant man, Varennes has a mysterious aspect; to the reflective man, a sinister one!

I have already noticed to you, I think, that material nature often exhibits singular portraits. Louis was darting, at the moment of his arrest, down a rapid and dangerous descent, where my own horse was nearly falling. The quarry-ground strewed with huge millstones, which the other day appeared to me like a draught-board, was the site of the action of Montmirail!—while the triangular Place of Varennes exactly represents the shape of the knife of the guillotine!

The man who aided Drouet in the capture of the king was named *Billaud*: why not *Billot*?

Varennes is only fifteen leagues from Rheims, the coronation city of the ancient kings of France. But then, the Place de la Révolution, on which was acted the fatal tragedy of the 21st of January, is close to the palace of the Tuileries. How these approximations must have tortured the poor fallen king! Between Rheims and Varennes, between the coronation and the forfeiture of the throne, my coachman finds only fifteen leagues distance; but for the mind, there is the vast abyss produced by the Revolution.

I put up at an old established inn, the *Grand Monarque*, having for its sign the head of Louis-Philippe, which has probably succeeded to those of Louis XV., Bonaparte, and Charles X. It is exactly forty-eight years ago since the progress of

the royal carriage was intercepted in this town, at which period the head suspended from that old twisted branch of iron was doubtless that of Louis XVI., who may have possibly put up at the *Grand Monarque*, and seen his own effigies suspended over the door. So goes the world!

This morning I strolled about the town of Varennes, which is charmingly situated on the banks of the river, the antiquated houses of the high town forming a picturesque amphitheatre on the right bank. The church, in the low town, is insignificant. The steeple bears the date 1776; it was consequently two years older than Madame Royale.

The royal disaster has left ineffaceable traces here—a rare instance in France. The innkeeper informed me that a gentleman of the town had written a comedy upon the subject; which reminds me that when they were disguising the Dauphin as a girl, in order to aid his escape, he inquired of Madame Royale if it “were to act a play?”

I have just visited the church, to which I owe an apology; for the portal to the right is pretty enough. If my architectural descriptions do not weary you, allow me to confess that I was disappointed with the Cathedral of Châlons. Neither is the road so interesting as I expected. One obtains an occasional glimpse of the Marne, on the banks of which there are two or three pointed steeples, in the style of Fécamp; but the country

consists of a succession of plains alive with flocks and shepherds; excellent features in a landscape—but one may have too much of a good thing.

The Cathedral is an imposing structure, and possesses some beautiful stained glass. In a beautiful little chapel I detected the F and salamander of Francis I. Externally there is a Roman tower in the severest style, and an exquisite portal of the fourteenth century. But all is dreadfully dilapidated. The church is dirty; and the statue of Francis I. and the groinings of the roof are daubed with paint. The portal is a vile imitation of St. Gervais in Paris; and as to the open worked steeples I was promised, there is nothing of the kind. Those I saw had heavy pointed caps of stone, with volutes intermingled with the spires. I was greatly disappointed.

In compensation for not seeing all I expected, I met with what I did not expect at Châlons, *viz.*, a splendid Lady-chapel. What have the antiquarians been about? They talk of St. Stephen's, but do not mention the Lady-chapel, which, with its lofty steeple, constructed of wood and covered with lead, is of the fourteenth century. This lofty shaft, the lead of which has a scale-like surface, resembling a serpent's skin, has an ornamented skylight, with diminutive gables half-way up, into which I ascended. The view of the city and the river, seen from thence, delighted me.

The traveller has also to admire the rich windows and front entrance, built in the thir-

teenth century. In 1793 the people of the country demolished the statues and broke down the various ornamental sculptures throughout the edifice. Previous to this there were also four minarets, of which three were destroyed. Nowhere has the idiotic frenzy of the Revolution left more disagreeable traces than here. The revolution of Paris was terrible; that of Champagne simply ridiculous.

On the lead of the little lantern, to which I ascended, I found an inscription in the handwriting of the sixteenth century, to the following effect: "The 28th of August, 1580, Peace was proclaimed at Châlons."

This inscription, half effaced, is all that remains to record that important political event, the peace concluded between Henri III. and the Huguenots, through the influence of the Duke of Anjou, formerly Duke of Alençon; which duke, brother of the king, had views upon the Low Countries, and even aspired to the hand of Elizabeth of England. The religious feuds of France interfered with his projects; and hence the origin of that great event, the peace proclaimed at Châlons in 1580, and all but forgotten in 1839.

The man who helped me to scale the lantern is called the watchman of the tower; and from this eminence, exposed to all the winds of heaven, he surveys his universe, and constitutes the eye of the town, bedless and ever wide awake. To make sure of not being overtaken by sleep, he is

compelled to repeat the hour every time it is struck by the clock, and make a pause between the last and preceding stroke. To be always awake would be impossible; and the assistance of his wife is accordingly permitted. At midnight she takes her post, and her husband goes to bed, returning at mid-day, when she retires again. These two human beings are devoted to this strange diurnal rotation, meeting only for a minute, once at mid-day, and once at midnight; and an imp, which they are pleased to consider a child, is the result of their strangely disunited union.

Châlons possesses three churches—St. Alpin, St. John, and St. Loup. The first has some beautiful stained windows. As to the town-hall, it possesses nothing remarkable, but four enormous dogs in granite, squatted before the façade.

About two leagues from Châlons upon the road to Ste. Ménéhould, where the eye encounters little besides boundless stubble-fields and lines of dusty trees, a magnificent object suddenly strikes you—the abbey of “Our Lady of the Thorn.” It has a steeple of the fifteenth century, as light and open as lace; though coupled with a telegraph, which, like a fine lady, it seems to look down upon with supreme contempt. It is startling to come upon such a magnificent structure in such a wilderness. I passed two hours in this church, and wandered around it, in spite of a hurricane which shook the bells to vibration. From time to time a stone fell from the steeple, close at my

feet. The water-spouts are most fantastically contrived; chiefly of a monster bearing another upon its shoulders. Those of the apsis seem to represent the Seven Deadly Sins. A voluptuous figure of Wantonness must have rather scandalized the monks.

So few are the dwellings in the neighbourhood, that it seems difficult to account for the origin of a cathedral without town or even village. In the chapel, however, carefully padlocked, there is a miraculous well, plain and simple, as all miraculous objects ought to be. It is doubtless from this supernatural origin that the church sprung up, like a tulip from its bulb.

I journeyed on, till I reached a village which was celebrating its annual festival with most discordant music; on leaving which, I discovered a mean-looking building upon an eminence, crowned by an object resembling some monstrous insect. It turned out to be a telegraph, conversing in signs with its corresponding neighbour at Nôtre Dame de l'Epine.

Evening approached, and the sunset was magnificent. I contemplated the distant hills from a plain or heath, purple with bloom as a bishop's robing. On a sudden I saw a road-mender raise his barrow, as if to shelter himself under the side, and inferred that rain was about to fall.

A heavy black cloud had overspread us; the wind was impetuous, and the hemlock, in full bloom, drooped its head. The trees seemed

trembling with horror, while thistledown flew along the road swifter than the carriage. Threatening clouds rolled over our heads, till suddenly the storm burst forth with singular beauty; for a vast arch of light still occupied the western sky, so that the dark shadows of the storm were intermingled with the golden hues of sunset. Neither man nor brute was visible. The thunder roared, and vivid flames of lightning served to reveal the features of the surrounding plains. The branches of the trees writhed under the tyranny of the whirlwind. All this lasted a quarter of an hour, when an awful gust of wind dispersing the concentrated clouds, the summits of the eastern hills peeped out, and the heavens became restored to peace and serenity.

Meanwhile twilight had come on; and the sun was dissolving in the west into streaks of red, which the approaching night gradually extinguished in the horizon.

It was starlight when I reached Ste. Ménéhould, which is rather a picturesque town, lying upon the declivity of a green hill, crested by a line of lofty trees. The kitchen of the Hôtel de Metz is a kitchen worth speaking of; being an immense hall, one side of which is decorated with rows of saucepans, the other with crockery. In the centre, opposite the windows, is the fireplace, a vast cavern, containing a splendid fire. The ceiling is traversed by blackened beams, from which are suspended the different household

implements; while in the centre is an ample rack, stored with hams and huge flitches of bacon. Under the chimney is a bright confusion of fire-irons and other household utensils; and the flaming hearth seemed to shoot its rays into every corner, and defining broad shadows on the ceiling, cast a roseate hue upon the crockery, and metamorphosed the display of copper into a brazen wall. Were I a Homer or a Rabelais, I should say that such a kitchen was a world, of which the fire was the sun; but if not a world, it is decidedly a republic of men, women, and animals. Stable-boys, chambermaids, scullions, stoves, spits, the bubbling of saucepans, the hissing of frying-pans, pipes, cards, dogs and cats; all inspected by the vigilant eye of the host: "*Mens agitat molem.*"

A grave-looking clock, placed in a remote corner, authoritatively warns the busy hive of the passing hour.

Among the endless articles hanging from the ceiling, a birdcage especially attracted my attention. This diminutive creature appeared to me the very type of domestic confidence. This den, this laboratory of indigestions, is full of discordant sounds both day and night, and yet the little creature sleeps quietly as in its nest. Vainly do the men swear, the women brawl, the children cry, the dogs bark, the cats mew, the clocks strike, the choppers clatter, the frying-pans sputter. The fountain may run, the jack may

squeak, the wind howl, the diligences thunder under the archway;—yet still this little ball of feathers sleeps with its head under its wing. God is great; inspiring even a bird with faith.

I must here remark that the world in general is unjust with regard to inns. I, for one, have often spoken harshly of them. An inn is an indispensable thing, which we should consider ourselves only too lucky to find when wanted; and which, generally speaking, contains a most meritorious woman in the shape of the hostess! Of the landlord let travellers say their worst. Mine host is generally as great a brute as the hostess is good-humoured. Poor woman! often old and infirm, or young and a mother, or there-
anent, she goes, comes, sees to everything, completes everything, scolds where scolding is wanted, wipes the children's noses, whips the dogs, carries favour with the travellers, cajoles the head cook, smiles at one person, frowns at another, keeps an eye upon the stores, welcomes the newly-arrived guests, and bids farewell to the departing ones: her whole soul and senses ever on the alert! The hostess is the soul of that huge body called an inn; the host a mere cipher—a pot-companion for carters. Thanks to the hostess, we overlook the penalty of inn-hospitality. Her well-timed assiduities serve as a veil to the impositions of her bill and the venality of her welcome.

The hostess of the "City of Metz," at Ste. Méné-

hould, is a young girl of fifteen or sixteen, who manages the establishment to perfection, though a performer on the piano. Her father, the host, appears to be a worthy man, and the inn is excellent.

Yesterday I quitted Ste. Ménéhould for Clermont; the road to which is beautiful, being a continuous orchard. The villages have an aspect partly Swiss, partly German; the houses being built in the style of chalets. Already you foresee your approach to the mountains. The Ardennes are in fact at hand.

Before arriving at Clermont you pass through a beautiful valley, uniting the boundaries of the Marne and Meuse. The descent into this valley is enchanting. The road precipitates itself between two high hills; while above is a dense mass of foliage, overhanging the winding road, till, on a sudden turn, the valley presents itself.

A vast circle of hills, in the midst of which is an Italian-looking flat-roofed village, and to the right and left hamlets perched upon the wooded heights, distant steeples rising here and there, immense pastures with numerous herds, and finally a lively stream, form the features of the spot. I was a full hour passing through this valley. A telegraph placed at the extremity was actively employed during my transit; while the trees rustled, the stream murmured, and the cattle lowed in the sunshine; and I occupied

myself in comparing the goodness of the Creator with that of the created.

Clermont is a beautiful village, overlooking a sea of verdure, just as Tréport appears to control the waves. Through a pleasing country of hills, plains, and streams, to the left, in two hours you reach Varennes. The unfortunate Louis XVI. followed this beautiful road to his ruin!

I must not close this letter without mention of the illustrious names belonging to Champagne: Amyot; La Fontaine; Thibaut IV., the poet prince, all but a king, who desired no better than to have been the father of St. Louis; Robert de Sorbon, the founder of the Sorbonne; Charlier de Gerson, who was Chancellor of the University of Paris; the Commander of Ville-gagnon, who nearly assigned Algiers to France in the sixteenth century; Amadis Jamyn; Colbert; Diderot; two painters, Lantara and le Valentin; two sculptors, Girardon and Bouchardon; two historians, Flodoard and Mabillon; two illustrious cardinals, Henri de Lorraine and Paul de Gondi; two eminent popes, Martin IV. and Urban IV.; to crown all, a king no less important than Philip-Augustus.

Those who hold to fitness of things, and translate Sézanne by *sexdecim asini*—as they used formerly to translate Fontanes by *faciunt asinos*—will rejoice to find that in the province of sparkling Champagne was born the author of the

' Dictionary of Rhymes,' Richelet, and Poincinet, the most mystified of an age in which Voltaire mystified the whole world. You believe in sympathies, and that the mind and works of individuals assimilate with the nature of their parent soil; regarding as inevitable that Bonaparte should have been a Corsican, Mazarin an Italian, and Henri IV. a Gascon: you will be surprised to hear that Mirabeau is almost a native of Champagne; Danton really so. What have you to say in defence of your theory? After all, why should not Danton be a Champagnese? Is not Vaugelas a native of Savoy?

The great Fabert was also of Champagnese origin; that famous marshal was the son of a bookseller, and chose never to rise too high or fall too low; a pure and meditative spirit, which kept studiously within the extreme limits of his singular fortune. Tried by the successive ordeals of prosperity and adversity, he was unchanged by the humiliations as well as by the vanities of life; neither rejecting the one from pride, nor the other from abjectness, but both from the same unflinching self-possession. He refused to be the spy of Mazarin, and to accept the blue riband from Louis XIV.: replying to the latter, "I am a soldier, not a gentleman;" to Mazarin, "I am the arm of the state, but not its eye."

In the olden time Champagne was a powerful and important province. The Count of Champagne was Lord of Brie (which Brie itself is a

little Champagne, just as Belgium is a minor France). The Count of Champagne was an hereditary prince, and bore the banner of the Lilies of Bourbon, at the coronation of the kings of Rome. He convened his own states, composed of seven peers, called the *Peers of Champagne*; viz. the Counts of Joigny, Rêthel, Braine, Roucy, Brienne, Grand Pré, and Bar-sur-Seine.

Scarcely a town in this province but has an interesting origin, or a district but is the scene of some adventure. In the cathedral of Rheims Clovis received the rites of baptism. Troyes was saved from Attila by St. Loup in 878, and was the scene of the same ceremony solemnized in Paris in 1804—a pope crowning an emperor in France, in the coronation of Louis-le-Bègue by John VIII. It was at Attigny that Pepin, Mayor of the Palace, held his high court of justice, from whence he held at bay Gaiffer, duke of Aquitaine. At Andelot the interview took place betwixt Gontran, king of Burgundy, and Childebert, king of Austrasia. Hincmar found refuge at Epernay; Abeilard, at Provins; Heloise, at Paraclete; and a Council was held at Fismes.

During the Lower Empire, Langres witnessed the triumphs of the two Gordians; and in the middle ages its inhabitants overthrew the seven formidable Castles of Changey, St. Broing, Neuilly-Coton, Cobons, Bourg, Humes, and Pailly. At Joinville, in 1584, was concluded the War of the League. Châlons afforded a refuge to

Henri IV. in 1591; and at St. Dizier the Prince of Orange met with his fate. In Doulevant the Count of Moret sought refuge. Bourmont is the ancient stronghold of the Lingons; Sézanne, the military head-quarters of the Dukes of Burgundy. The Abbey of Ligny was founded by St. Bernard, in the patrimony of the Lords of Châtillon, to whom the saint promised, by an authentic deed, as many acres of land in Paradise as they granted him on earth! Manzon is the fief of the Abbey St. Hubert, bound to send an annual tribute to the Kings of France of six hounds and six hawks. Chaumont is the place where they pray to the devil on the festival of St. John, that they may be enabled to pay their debts; Château-Porcien is the town given by the Connétable de Châtillon to the Duke of Orleans. Bar-sur-Aube is the town which the king could neither sell nor alienate. Clairvaux, like Heidelberg, is famous for its tun. Anconville still possesses the cairn of the Huguenots, which every peasant passing by increases by adding a stone. The signals of Mont-aigu corresponded with those of Mont-aimé, twenty leagues off. Vassy was twice burnt—once by the Romans in 211, and in 1544 by the Imperialists; and in like manner, Langres, by the Huns in 351, and by the Vandals in 407. Vitry, too, was burnt by Louis VII. in the twelfth, and by Charles V. in the sixteenth century.

Ste. Ménéhould is that noble capital of Argonne

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which, sold by a traitor to Charles II., Duke of Lorraine, refused to surrender. Carignan is the Ivoi of the olden time; and Attila erected an altar at Pont-le-Roi. At Romilly a cenotaph was erected to Voltaire.

The local history of these places constitutes a portion of the history of France—small, it is true, but highly important.

Champagne teems with reminiscences of the sovereigns of our ancient kingdom. Their coronations took place at Rheims. It was at Attigny that Charles the Simple founded the royal fief of Bourbon. St. Louis and Louis XIV., the great saint and great monarch of the race, first trod the field of glory in Champagne: the first in 1228, at Troyes, of which he raised the siege; the second at Ste. Ménéhould, into which he entered by the breach, in 1652. By a singular coincidence, both these sovereigns were fourteen years of age at the time of the exploit.

Champagne has also some traces of Napoleon; for, alas! many towns of this province figure in the last fatal pages of his prodigious epic. Arcis-sur-Aube, Châlons, Rheims, Champaubert, Sézanne, Vèrtus, Méry, La Fère, Montmirail: as many triumphs as fields of action. Fismes, Vitry, and Doulevant had each the honour of being his head quarters; Piney Luxembourg twice, and Troyes three times. Nogent-sur-Seine beheld five victories gained by the emperor in five days, manœuvring on the banks of the Marne with a

handful of heroes. St. Dizier saw two victories in eight and forty hours. At Brienne, where he had been educated by a Benedictine, he was nearly slain by a Cossack!

The ancient annals of this portion of Belgic Gaul, which became Champagne, are not less poetical than those of more modern times. Her plains teem with memories of the past: of Meroveus and the Franks; Aetius and the Romans; Theodoric and the Visigoths. Mount Julius, the tomb of Jovinus; the Camp of Attila, near La Cheppe; the military roads of Châlons, Gruyères, and Warcq; Voromarus, Caracalla, Eponinus, and Sabinus; the Arch of the two Gordians at Langres; the gate of Mars at Rheims; all these are so many attestations of history. Antiquity still lives and breathes, and from the dust of ages cries aloud, "*Sta, viator!*" Even Celtic antiquity sends forth her confused murmurs from the darkest night. Osiris was worshipped at Troyes; the idol Borvo Tomona has left its name at Bourbonne-les-Bains; and near Vassy, under the deep shades of the forest of Der, where the *Haute Borne* grimly rises like the spectre of a Druid; and in the strange ruins of Noviomagus Vadicassium, Champagne exhibits its surviving link to the mysteries of the youth of time.

From the period of the Romans till the present, besieged in turns by the Alains, the Suevi, the Vandals, the Burgundians, and the Germans, the cities of Champagne have submitted to all ex-

tremities rather than surrender. The device of their rock-built cities is "*Donec moveantur.*" The blood of the ancient *Gallia Comata*, of the Catti, the Lingons, the Tricassii, the Catalaunians (who defeated the Vandals), and the Nervians (who conquered Siagrius), still flows in the veins of the Champagne peasantry. It was a soldier of Champagne, named Bertèche, who, single-handed, killed seven Austrian dragoons at the battle of Jemappes. In 451 the plains of Champagne were saturated with the blood of the Huns; and, had it pleased God, might have equally imbibed that of the Russians in 1814.

Let us speak, therefore, with due respect of this devoted province, which, in the last invasion of France, sacrificed half its children to the defence of our native country. The population of the department of the Marne alone, in 1813, was 311,000 souls; in 1830, it had not yet re-accomplished 309,000! Fifteen years of peace had not sufficed to repair the sacrifices of the people.
