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## **Excursions along the banks of the Rhine**

**Hugo, Victor**

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Letter II.

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## LETTER II.

MONTMIRAIL—MONTFORT—EPERNAY.

AT La Ferté-sous-Jouarre I hired the first vehicle I could procure, making only two inquiries—"Does it ride steady?"—and "Are the wheels good?"—which being satisfactorily answered, away I went to Montmirail. There is nothing remarkable about this little town, but a fresh landscape at the entrance, and two fine avenues. With the exception of the Castle, it consists of a collection of hovels.

At five in the afternoon I quitted Montmirail, taking the road from Sézanne to Epernay. In an hour I reached Vaux-Champs, traversing the field of battle. A moment before, I came up with a cart drawn by a horse and an ass, and laden with saucepans, coppers, old boxes, straw chairs, and other dilapidated furniture; on the fore-part of the vehicle, was a basket containing three half-naked children, and in the rear another basket full of poultry. The carter, dressed in a smock-frock, carried an infant on his back; while a woman, trudging by his side, seemed likely to furnish another. They were proceeding towards Montmirail. "Just such objects must this spot have presented five and twenty years

ago," was my reflection. On inquiry I found it was not an ordinary move, but an expatriation, the family being on their way to America; not flying from a field of battle, but from the pursuit of want: or, in plain words, a poor family of Alsatian peasants, to whom a grant of land has been accorded in Ohio; and who quit their native country, little thinking that Virgil wrote beautiful verses about them two thousand years ago.

These poor people seemed little concerned as to their fate. The man was quietly attaching a thong to his whip, the woman humming a tune, while the children were amusing themselves with play. The furniture was painful to look at. The fowls alone appeared depressed by their journey.

This indifference astonished me, for I believed the love of country to be more deeply rooted in the heart of man. After all, these people abandon with indifference the trees under which they grew to maturity. I followed them some time with my eyes, wondering which road the wretched group would take; but, by the winding of the road, they suddenly disappeared. For some time afterwards I heard the smack of the man's whip and the hum of the woman's song, and all was over.

Soon afterwards I found myself upon the plains rendered glorious by Napoleon. The sun was sinking, the trees shot forth their shadows, so that the furrows were slightly defined here and

there. A grey mist was rising from the ravines, and the fields were deserted, so that nothing was to be seen but an occasional plough. To my left was a stone-quarry, where the newly rounded millstones were strewed upon the ground, like the men upon an immense draught-board, of which giants had been playing the game.

As I much wished to see the Château of Montmort, about four leagues from Montmirail, at Armentières, I turned abruptly to the left, and took the road to Epernay, at the point where sixteen huge elms, bending over the road, exhibit their wild profiles and dishevelled wigs. I delight in the elm. All other trees are monotonous and unmeaning. The elm seems imbued with a malicious spirit, and disposed to make game of its neighbours, and assume fantastic shapes to puzzle the evening traveller. The foliage of young elms expands in all directions, like the explosion of a firework. From La Ferté to the spot where stand the sixteen elms the road is lined only with poplars, interspersed with a few aspens and walnut-trees, which had disturbed my peace of mind.

The country is flat, and apparently boundless. But on suddenly emerging from a clump of trees, the traveller detects to the right, as if starting from the earth, a confused multitude of turrets, weathercocks, chimneys, and skylights, belonging to the Castle of Montmort.

I quitted the carriage at the entrance of the castle, which is a beautiful specimen of the castellated style of the sixteenth century, built of brick, and having a slated roof with ornamental weathercocks. It is moated, and flanked with a double wall, besides three arched bridges communicating with the drawbridge. All this is situated in a beautiful landscape, commanding seven leagues of horizon; and, on the whole, the edifice is in good preservation. The principal tower contains a winding staircase, as well as a slope for horses. There is a curious old iron door from the staircase, and in the embrasures are four little iron implements of the fifteenth century.

The garrison of the castle consisted of an old housekeeper, named Mademoiselle Jeanette, who received me graciously. Of the old apartments, there remain only the kitchen, which is spacious and vaulted; the old drawing-room, turned into a billiard-room; and a charming little boudoir, with gilt mouldings, and a beautifully designed rosette as the centre-piece of the ceiling. The old drawing-room is unique; the cross-beams of the ceiling painted, gilt, and carved, still existing in a perfect state. The spacious chimney-piece, adorned with two noble statues, is in the grand style of Henri III. The walls were formerly hung with tapestry, representing family portraits; but during the Revolution the people of the village tore them down and burnt them—a worthy

war to wage against feudality. The present proprietor has pasted up in their stead some old engravings of views in Rome and the wars of Condé, in honour of which magnificence I bestowed a sum of thirty sous on Mademoiselle Jeanette.

After a glance at the ducks swimming in the fosse, I went my way.

Having quitted Montmort by an execrable road, I met the mail which was to convey you my former letter, and I forwarded by it a thousand good wishes to my dearest friend.

The road now lay through a wood. Night was coming on, and nothing was to be seen but the hut of the charcoal-burners, smoking through the trees. The flames from an occasional furnace were at times visible through the dusk; the wind agitated the trees; and in the heavens the splendid chariot proceeded majestically above, escorted by myriads of stars, while my humble vehicle was jolting along solitarily below.

Epernay is the City of sparkling *Champagne*, and neither more nor less. It has three churches: the first, of Roman architecture, built in 1037, by Thibaut, first Count of Champagne, son of Eudes II; the second, a church of the middle ages, was built in 1540, by Pierre Strozzi, Field-Marshal of France and Lord of Epernay, who was killed at the siege of Thionville, in 1558; the third, the church for divine service, appears to me to have been constructed upon the designs of

the estimable grocer whose shop seems to form part of the building. The three names annexed to their history may suffice to describe them, *viz.*: Thibaut, Count of Champagne; Pierre Strozzi, Marshal of France; Poterlet Galichet, grocer;— and I need scarcely inform you that this last is a disgraceful heap of lath and plaster. Of the first little remains; and of the second, a beautiful porch, and some stained glass, part of which represents the history of Noah, depicted in the most diverting manner. Both the porch and windows are half-buried in this disgusting plaster, which reminded me of Odry, the actor, with his blue stockings and high shirt-collar, attired in the helmet and cuirass of Francis I.

I was advised to visit a cellar containing fifteen hundred thousand bottles of wine; but on my road I chanced upon a field so beautifully bespangled with wild flowers, and so bright with sunshine, that I could not tear myself away to proceed to a cellar.

The pomatum for regenerating the hair, which at La Ferté is called *Pilogène*, is called at Epernay *Phythrax*, being a Greek importation. At the hotel at Montmirail, I had to pay forty sous for four fresh eggs; which, for the country, struck me as somewhat high.

I forgot to mention that Thibaut lies buried in his own church, and Strozzi in his; and I am inclined to exact a sepulture in the other for my friend the grocer. Strozzi was a fine fellow.

Brisguet, the court jester of Henri II., affected one day to amuse the court by smearing his new velvet mantle with grease. The Countess laughed, but Strozzi exacted bitter tears by his vengeance on the unfortunate fool. For my part I should neither have laughed nor revenged myself; and I have always been inclined to hold cheap this sorry jest of the *Renaissance*.

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