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Excursions along the banks of the Rhine

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Letter I.

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Page
n . 274
-
278
. 282
. 283
g
. 292
295
a
. 298
. 301
e 307
. 313
. 317
. 321
e
. 325
n
. 327
330
334
336
338
352
370
387

A STEAM VOYAGE.

LETTER I.

LA FERTE-SOUS-JOVARRE.

July, 1833.

THE day before yesterday, at about eleven o'clock, I quitted Paris, and took the road to Meaux, leaving to my left St. Denis, Montmorency, and the chain of hills at the extremity of which lies St. Pierre; where, my dear friend, in contemplating that distant speck, I recalled you to my affectionate remembrance, till a sudden turn of the road concealed from my view the spot so dear to us both.

You know my taste for long journeys in easy stages, unencumbered with baggage, but accompanied by my friends Virgil and Tacitus; and will, therefore, readily understand my projects on the present occasion.

I took the Chalons road (being well acquainted with that of Soissons, which I travelled some years ago) and found that, thanks to the progress and activity of modern demolition, my new route retains little to interest the tourist. Nanteuil le Haudoin no longer boasts its castle, built

under Francis I. Villers-Cotterets has converted the magnificent manor-house of the Dukes of Valois into a House of Industry ; from whence, as from other interesting spots, the sculptures and paintings characteristic of the middle ages, as well as the curious ornaments of the sixteenth century, have disappeared under the innovations of bricklayers and plasterers. The grand tower of Dammartin, from the top of which Montmartre, though nine leagues off, was distinctly visible, has been pulled down. A fissure in the side of this turret gave rise to the well-known proverb (which I never exactly comprehended), "Such-a-one resembles the tower of Dammartin, which split its sides with laughing !"

Deprived of its ancient bastille, in which the Bishops of Meaux, when at variance with the Counts of Champagne, had a right to take refuge with seven of their dependants, Dammartin has ceased to be the origin of proverbs ; but it gives rise to literary notices, such as the following, which I copy, word for word, from a little book I found on the table at the inn :—

"DAMMARTIN (Seine et Oise), a small town situated on a hill, contains a manufacture of lace. *Principal hotel*, the Ste. Anne.—*Curiosities*, the parish church, market-place, and a population of 1600 souls."

The quarter of an hour conceded for dinner by that despot of the road, the conductor of the diligence, did not enable me to ascertain how far

the sixteen hundred inhabitants were entitled to be called "curiosities;" and in journeying on to Meaux, before I reached Claye, my vehicle broke down.

You are aware that I am fond of pushing forwards on my road; and, as the cabriolet chose to be stationary, I hastened to esconce myself in a diligence which luckily came up at the moment with a place vacant. I resumed my journey, perched upon the roof, betwixt a little hunchback and a gendarme.

Here I am, therefore, at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre; a charming little town, which I hailed with pleasure, with its three bridges, its pleasant islands, and an old mill placed midway in the river, and connected with the bank by an arched way. The beautiful pavilion of La Ferté, of the time of Louis XIII., said to have formerly belonged to the Duke of St. Simon, though defaced by the bad taste of a grocer, its present proprietor, is deserving attention.

If the Duke of St. Simon ever did possess this ancient structure, I doubt whether his paternal manor-house of La Ferté-Vidame exhibited a more severely feudal aspect, or offered a fitter frame for the setting off of his aristocratically ducal face, than the charming and secluded little Château of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre.

This is the very moment for travelling! The fields are alive with the business of the harvest-home. Here and there are rising immense

stacks, resembling in construction the half-ruined pyramids so often found in Syria; while the ridges of cut corn lying on the sides of the hills resemble the back of a zebra.

I need not remind you, my dear friend, that renovation of ideas and sensation is the object of my journey, rather than mere adventure: for which purpose a succession of new objects suffices me. I am easily contented. Provided I have vegetation around me, and air above,—a road in view, and a road in my rear,—I have nothing to complain of. If the country be flat, the broad horizon delights me; if mountainous, I rejoice in the unexpected openings of landscape; and at the summit of every hill I am sure to find an extent of prospect truly delightful. A moment ago we traversed a beautiful valley, having to the right and left a thousand pleasing features: high hills intersected by patches of cultivated ground, affording a pleasing prospect; while groups of cottages were interspersed here and there, their roofs almost level with the ground. Farther in the valley was a watercourse, defined by a long line of verdure, and crossed by a little stone moss-grown bridge, at a point meeting the high road. At the moment we arrived a waggon was crossing the bridge, so swollen with merchandize, and so tightly girded, that it resembled the bulky and cinctured body of Gargantua, dragged on four wheels by eight horses. Before us, following the undulation of the opposite hill,

the high road was perceptible, under the rays of a brilliant sunshine; but varied by the dark shadows of its avenues of trees, falling at intervals athwart the road.

This little landscape, composed of trees, waggon, the white road, the old bridge, the humble cottages, sufficed to delight my heart. Laugh, if you will; but such a valley, with the blue sky above, is an object of real enjoyment. Yet I was the only person present who enjoyed the beautiful sight. The other travellers were yawning with weariness the whole time it was in view.

In changing horses, I am sure to be amused by the operations at the door of the inn. The horses clutter up to the door like a charge of cavalry. Poultry of every colour is pecking about the yard and among the bushes; with an old broken wheel in a corner; and a tribe of dirty children playing merrily on a heap of sand above my head. Swinging from an iron gallows over our head, hangs Charles V., Joseph II., or Napoleon, mighty emperors in their day, now reduced to the ignoble duty of serving as signs to obscure inns. The house is distracted by voices giving contradictory orders; while the stable-boys and kitchen-maids are acting idylliums and pastorals at the door. The loves of the washtubs and the pitchfork are the only food for eclogues now extant. Meanwhile I profit by my elevated position upon the roof, to listen to the conversation between the hunchback and the gendarme,

as well as to admire the little oasis of dwarf-poppies in full bloom upon the roof of the house.

The gendarme and hunchback, by the way, are philosophers in their way, who give themselves no airs, but converse humanely with each other.

The hunchback, it seems, contributes six hundred francs of taxes at Jouarre (the *Jovis ara* of the ancients, as he was kind enough to inform his companion); while his father, a resident in Paris, pays nine hundred; which does not prevent him from blaspheming against government every time he pays a halfpenny toll in crossing the bridge over the Marne, betwixt Meaux and La Ferté.

The gendarme, on the other hand, has no taxes to boast of; but he gives us, instead, his autobiography. In the action of Montmirail, in 1814, he fought like a lion, though a mere recruit. In the Revolution of 1830, he ran away, merely because he was a gendarme. To him this appears more unaccountable than it does to me. As a recruit of twenty, unencumbered and without domestic cares, he fought without a drawback; as a gendarme, he possessed a wife, a child, and (as he himself added) a horse; and, with these cares on his mind, he became a coward. It was the same man under circumstances totally different.

Life is a dish that owes its charm to its sauce. There does not exist a braver man than a galley-slave. We do not estimate

ourselves by our skin, but by our garments. The man stripped to the skin may be said to care for nothing. The two periods in question were, moreover, of wholly opposite interest. The soldier, like all other men, is affected by external influences; and energies are diminished or increased by circumstances. In 1830 the storm of a Revolution was blowing; and he found himself bowed down and overwhelmed by that force of ideas which constitutes the soul of events. And then, what could be more discouraging than his duty? To fight in defence of inexplicable Orders in Council—mere shadows issuing from a disordered brain—for dream, a fantasy;—brother against brother—soldiers against mechanics—Frenchman against Frenchman!

In 1814, on the contrary, the recruit stood up to repel the invader, from evident and simple motives: for himself, his hearth, his family; for the plough he quitted—for the thatched cottage smoking in the distance—for the ground under his feet—the dear bleeding country of his affections. In 1830 the soldier scarcely knew for whom he fought. In 1814 there was more than knowledge—there was feeling; there was the best of lessons—experience.

At Meaux my attention was taken by three objects: first, a delicious little porch against a dismantled church, to the right in entering the town; secondly, the cathedral; and thirdly, in its

rear, an old half-fortified mansion, flanked by turrets, and a quadrangular court-yard, into which I boldly entered, undismayed by an old woman who sat knitting at the entrance, but who did not interrupt me. I was much struck with an external staircase, having stone steps, and some curious wood-work, resting upon arches, and covered in with an arcaded roof. I had not time to sketch it; which I regret, it being the only one of the kind I ever saw. I suppose it to be of the fifteenth century.

The Cathedral, begun in the fourteenth century and continued in the fifteenth, is a noble structure, but deteriorated by injudicious restoration, and still incomplete. Of the two towers projected by the architect, one only is built; the other, which was newly commenced, remains covered in with a roof of slating. The centre door, as well as that to the right, are of the fourteenth century; and that to the left, of the fifteenth. All three are beautiful, though composed of a stone honey-combed by the influence of the weather.

I tried to decipher the bas-reliefs. The key-stone of the porch on the left represents the history of St. John the Baptist; but the sun falling with dazzling force upon the front, prevented my examining it further. The interior of the church is superb. In the choir are some trilobed groinings of exquisite beauty. They are restoring, at the entrance of the choir, two altars of the most admirable wood-work, of the fifteenth century,

but they are injuring them by smearing them with a vile coat of painting in imitation of oak. Such is the taste of the natives of Meaux. To the left of the choir, close by a beautiful door, I came upon a kneeling statue of marble, a warrior of the sixteenth century; but without either escutcheon or inscription. Of the name and origin of this figure I am ignorant; though you, who know everything, would perhaps have made it out. On the opposite side is another, which fortunately bears an inscription; for you would otherwise never guess that the worn, severe face, was that of the immortal Bénigne Bossuet; to whom I fear I must attribute the destruction of the painted windows. I saw his episcopal throne, superbly carved in the style of Louis XIV.; but had not time to visit his well-known study at the palace.

It is a curious fact that Meaux possessed a theatre before Paris could boast of one; a neat theatre, built about 1547. A manuscript contained in the town library asserts that it was a circus in the style of the ancients, covered with a velarium; and so far resembling the modern theatre, that there were private boxes, of which certain of the inhabitants of Meaux possessed the keys. Mysteries were there performed, and a man named Pascalus acted the part of the devil, and retained the nickname.

In 1562 he made over the town to the Huguenots; the year following the Catholics hung him

—partly for having surrendered the town, partly because of his appellation. Now-a-days Paris has twenty theatres; Meaux boasts of having but one: which is much as if she were to exult in being a country-town instead of a metropolis.

This country abounds in remains of the age of Louis XIV. At La Ferté we find the Duke de St. Simon; at Meaux, Bossuet; at La Ferté-Milon, Racine; at Château Thierry, La Fontaine: the whole in a radius of twelve leagues. The haughty aristocrat elbows the puissant bishop; while Tragedy takes her place by the side of Fable.

On leaving the Cathedral, the sun being less powerful, I was able to contemplate the façade, of which the relief upon the central portal is the most curious. The lower compartment represents Joan, the wife of Philippe-le-Bel, to whose will this church owes its erection. The Queen of France, holding her cathedral in her hand, is represented standing at the gates of Paradise, which St. Peter throws open. Behind the queen stands the handsome monarch Philippe, in the most abject attitude. The queen, who is gracefully represented, points over her shoulder towards the poor devil of a king—as much as to say to St. Peter, “Give *him* admission into the bargain; I have paid the entrance for two.”