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A steam voyage up the Rhine

Hugo, Victor

London, 1843

Editor's preface

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EDITOR'S PREFACE.

THE tardy justice of the Quarterly Review has at length directed public attention towards the following interesting and important work, by an announcement that "it has created a great sensation in Germany." In justice let us add that it has attracted considerable notice in France, where eight large editions have been already exhausted; and we doubt whether any living writer, with the exception of Victor Hugo, could have extracted all this interest out of a subject so effete, and ground so over-travelled, as the banks of the Rhine.

"His descriptions," says the Quarterly Review, "are wonderfully spirited; full of *verve* in their language, and picturesque truth in detail; and the species of grotesque romance with which he invests the middle ages gives an interest to his scenes, persuading even the most plodding antiquary to pardon the occasionally fantastic heightening received by the picture from the warm fancy of the artist."

The reader will find this favourable verdict more than borne out by the collection of letters now placed before him in an English form.

That the author of "Hernani," "Notre Dame de Paris," and the striking and vivid "Letters from the Rhine," is really a man of genius, no one, we apprehend, will deny. The Quarterly Review has, however, somewhat sweepingly denounced his "works, as not to be perused without leaving a taint upon the mind, and producing an excitement which, without being evil, decidedly prepares the way for *all* evil;" against which sentence of condemnation we object, that, however exceptionable the morality of his great work (an historical novel, secondary in truth and vigour only to those of Scott), and one or two of his dramas, the whole range of French poetry does not contain effusions of a purer or holier strain of feeling than may be found in the volumes entitled "Les Voix Intérieures," "Les Rayons et les Ombres," "Les Chants du Crépuscule," and "Les Feuilles d'Automne;" many of the lyrics in which are comparable in grace and tenderness with those of Mrs. Hemans.

In his own country, on the other hand, Victor Hugo labours, as unfairly, under the disrepute of having founded the romantic school, which had clearly its origin, twenty years before his time, in the "Atala" and "Réné" of Chateaubriand. In these two remarkable productions of the author of "Le Génie du Christianisme" and "Les Martyrs," we find all the offences against taste resented by the classicists of France, combined with the moral flagrancys pointed out by the Quarterly Review.

Nevertheless, as the ostensible head and front of the offending of l'Ecole Romantique, from the moment the publication of his "Dernier Jour d'un Condamné," and splendid "Ode à la Colonne," raised him to pre-eminence, every successive work of Victor Hugo has been made a point of contest for the struggle of contending literary factions.

On the first nights of performance of his dramas, the audience usually presents as curious a dramatic spectacle as the stage itself; not alone from the singular dramatis personæ of the mystery of La Jeune France, collected to witness a further exposition of the doctrines of its apostle, but from the malignity with which the unaccountable bursts of fatuity (which, for want of a better name, we must call Hugo-isms), that disfigure even his most impressive scenes, are caught up and hailed with roars of laughter by his antagonists; soon, however, to be overpowered by the genuine enthusiasm of the mass, on hailing those pure and noble verses, of truly poetical inspiration, which have assigned his name a permanent inscription in the literature of his native country.

The Quarterly Review has roundly asserted that "his delineations of passion *are false*." It would have been wiser perhaps to say that they were *French*—essentially French. The delineations of human passion bequeathed to us by Corneille and Racine are such as few English persons admit to be true to nature; and scarcely an English scholar

but is better inclined to sympathize with the immortal heroes of Euripides and Æschylus, than with Bajazet or the Cid. It would be unfair, however, to assert that delineations of passion which have commanded and still command the sympathy of millions, are untrue to nature.

We must nevertheless confess that, hearing with English ears, and judging with an English mind, we have been too often disgusted by the gratuitous violations of historical truth, and distorted conceptions of the human character, exhibited by Victor Hugo on the stage, not to have opened with certain misgivings the book which the present observations purport to introduce to the reader. We expected to find the author of "Marie Tudor" and "Hans d'Islande" contemplating men, things, and scenery on the banks of the Rhine, as he appears to survey them in his fictions—from the aerial elevation of a balloon, looking down contemptuously upon the thrones and dominions of the earth, confounding distances, mistaking proportions, elevating an anthill to the height of the Pyramids, because affording a rare instance of instinctive wisdom; and depressing the Pyramids to the insignificance of an anthill, because the place of sepulture of a line of kings; till natural and social order becomes subverted, and all is lost in a chaos of confusion, whose assumed sublimity is the mere result of a certain shadowy indistinctness of outline.

In this expectation, we were agreeably disap-

pointed. Victor Hugo's impressions of the Rhine are conceived by the mind, and conveyed to the reader by the hand, of a man of genius—vivid, graphic, and original. He has viewed the venerable stream in a new and striking light. Nothing can be more picturesque than his landscapes—nothing more startling than his antiquarian hypotheses. After perusing descriptions, such as could have been produced only by a man of highly cultivated mind and highly poetical temperament, we learn to prize his new pictures of a familiar scene, as

“ Nature to advantage dress'd ;
What oft was seen, but ne'er so well express'd.”

On the other hand, the truly Parisian prejudices of our traveller afford a most amusing appendix to his loftier aspirings. On turning from one of his gorgeous historical sketches—such for instance as that of Charlemagne and Aix-la-Chapelle, (though savouring somewhat too much of the scene-shifter and call-boy,) or from one of his graceful pictures, such as the interpretation of the bas-relief of the Stadt-haus at Cologne,—to sarcastic diatribes against English travellers, or the Congress of Vienna, we could fancy Pausanias or Virgil travestied for the carnival, by the assumption of the full-bottomed wig, velvet coat, and withering sneers of Voltaire.

The pretended cosmopolitanism of Hugo is, in fact, as ill assorted to the nature of his work as the disproportionate portico of the Chambre des Dé-

putés to the narrow structure of which it stands forth as the façade. While affecting, for instance, to give an accurate account of the banks of the Rhine, he has not strength of mind to enter the town of Coblentz, replete with associations and monuments mortifying to the vanity of the French; and in a work professing to describe the Rhenish provinces, scrupulously avoids such scenes as the beautiful lake and ruined monastery of Laach*, or those where the name of France remains branded in letters of blood and flame upon the still defeated bosom of the unfortunate Palatinate. Clever, moreover, as are the anecdotes of his personal adventures, and the legend of Le Beau Pecopin (which almost rivals the fantastic creations of Beckford), we should have preferred, in a work upon the Rhine from the vigorous pen of Victor Hugo, life-like sketches of the rocky heights of the Sieben Gebürge, or the striking scenery of Nassau and the Murgthal, to the egotism of the one or the inappropriateness of the other.

* What does the critic in the Quarterly mean by describing this noble church as "first discovered by the Master of Trinity?"

"Honour to whom honour is due!" sings the Chorus of the Walpurgis Nacht. In all the German and English guide-books published on the opening of the Continent in 1814, the Abbey Church of Laach was described in glowing colours; and when we visited the spot in 1818, it was frequented by all English travellers, desecrated by perpetual pic-nics, and the scene of various English sketches and works of fiction.

Let us, however, be thankful for the many novel pictures of familiar objects with which he has enriched us; and in consideration of the pleasantness and vitality of his descriptions, the earnestness of his nationality, and above all the manly and fervent spirit in which he embraces the calling of a man of letters, and upholds its dignity of independence, we hail him in the present work with feelings of cordiality, inclining us to overlook with a smile the rabid indications of his jealous Anglophobia.

To such of our readers as are making in the following pages their first acquaintance with Victor Hugo, it may be interesting to learn that howbeit, while apparently vacillating between the embroidered uniform and the ambition of reigning as the demigod of the *cabinet de lecture*, he is, in private life, a man of high integrity and domestic worth. Though the son of a general of Napoleon, and pensioned by Louis XVIII., Victor Hugo is supposed to be on the eve of elevation to the peerage—a distinction to which the success of his work upon the Rhine has not a little contributed.

Though of an age to have united his daughter with an eminent merchant of Havre, Hugo is still in the full force and vigour of manhood; and while we recognise the tribute he has paid to English excellence, by borrowing largely in "Notre Dame de Paris" from the "Quentin Durward" of Scott, and in the letters before us from the Journal and "Sardanapalus" of Byron, it is easy to forgive his

uneasy discontents at the preponderance of British influence in the scale of modern Europe, and to part from him with feelings of sincere gratitude for having repoeticized, by force of genius, a tour which was becoming, by force of steam, prosaic and vulgar as a trip to Margate or Gravesend.

The translation here given to the public is from the pen of a gentleman, who, familiar alike with the scenes described and the language of the tourist, has accomplished his task with accuracy and spirit ; and, but that Hugo is an indifferent English scholar, and little apt to discern, or rather to acknowledge, merit in any production of the country to which was intrusted the guardianship of his great and captive Emperor, he would admit that he has found an able interpreter.

Paris to
Changing
Moux .

Pesants en

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Arrest of
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Soissons-
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