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A steam voyage up the Rhine

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Letter IV.

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LETTER IV.

FROM VILLERS-COTTERET TO THE FRONTIERS.

Givet, July 29.

I HAVE been travelling more rapidly, my dear friend, and write to you from the little town in which Louis XVIII. gave his last order of the day, in his flight from France, and made his last pun : "St. Denis, *Givet*." (*J'y vais*). I arrived here at four o'clock, pummelled to death by the ingenious machine which the people persist in calling a diligence. Having slept in my clothes for a couple of hours, and the day having broken, I rise to write to you.

On opening my window to enjoy the view, I discerned the angle of a whitewashed wall, a moss-choked gutter, and an old cart-wheel reclining against the wall. As to my room, it is a vast ward, furnished with four huge beds. The yawning chimney is surmounted with a wretched glass ; while on the hearth lies a fagot, equally diminutive, a hearth-broom, and a ferocious looking bootjack, the aperture of which rivals the sinuosities of the Meuse, and woe betide the wretch who puts his foot into it—for once inserted, let him extricate it if he can. Others, like myself,

have probably limped about the house with the bootjack affixed to their heel, crying aloud for help. To do justice to the view I just now maligned, let me admit that on leaning from my window I discovered a beautiful mallow in full bloom, standing on a plank, supported by two pipkins, and giving itself all the airs of a choice rose-tree.

Since my last letter a trifling incident, not worth relating, forced me to retrace my steps from Varennes to Villers-Cotterets; and the day before yesterday, dismissing my vehicle, I took the diligence to Soissons, which being empty, I was able to unfold my Cassini maps on the opposite seat.

Evening was closing as I approached Soissons; and the smoke-dispensing hand of night nearly concealed the beautiful valley in which is sunk the village of La Folie. The tower of the cathedral and the double spire of St. John of the Vineyards were also nearly effaced.

Through the vapours pervading the country, however, the mass of walls, roofs, and edifices, called Soissons, half surrounded by the steel crescent of the Aisne, like a sheaf to which the sickle is applied, was partly visible. I paused on the summit of the hill, to enjoy this beautiful scene. Crickets were chirping in the adjoining field; the trees murmured softly, and were trembling with the parting sighs of the evening breeze, as I gazed attentively, with the eyes of

my mind, upon the profound calm of the mighty plain which had witnessed a victory of Cæsar, the rule of Clovis, and the wavering of Napoleon. Mankind—even Cæsar, Clovis, and Napoleon—are but passing shadows. Even war is a shade that passes in their train; while the Almighty, and the works of his hand, and the peace of nature by which they are overspread, abide in unchanged sublimity for ever and ever.

Intending to take the mail to Sédan, which arrives at Soissons at midnight, I allowed the diligence to proceed without me to the town—the distance being a pleasant walk. When near my journey's close, I rested myself beside a neat-looking house, upon which was reflected the glare of a blacksmith's shop from the opposite side of the way; and there religiously contemplated the serenity of the heavens. The only three planets visible were in the south-east, in a confined space, as if in the same quarter of the heavens. The ever-resplendent Jupiter, whose movements of late have formed a somewhat complicated knot, appeared on a right line with two radiant stars. More to the east, the red and fiery Mars scintillated with a ferocious kind of light; while a little above, calmly shone, like a pale and peaceful influence, that monster planet, the mysterious and awful world which we call Saturn. On the other side, in the far part of the landscape, what appeared to be a magnificent revolving beacon of scarlet, white, and blue seemed to shed its

brilliant hues upon the gloomy hills that separate Noyon from the Soissonais. Just as I was considering what could be the origin of this beacon presiding over solitary plains, it appeared to desert the hills, and ascend slowly from the violet haze of the horizon towards the zenith ; for this supposed beacon was neither more nor less than Aldebaran, that tricoloured sun, that enormous star of purple, silver, and turquoise, rising majestically through the vague and sinister mysteries of twilight.

Explain to me, my dear friend, what unaccountable influence is attached to these orbs of night, which every poet since the first creation of poets, every profound thinker, and every vague dreamer of dreams, has by turns contemplated, studied, worshipped ; some, like Zoroaster, with confiding wonder ; others, like Pythagoras, with trembling awe. Seth assigned names to the stars, as Adam did to the animals of the earth. The Chaldeans, and the Genethliacans, Esdras and Zorobabel, Orpheus, Homer and Hesiod, Cadmus, Pherecydes, Xenophon, Hecatæus, Herodotus and Thucydides—those venerated eyes of the ancient world, long closed in extinction—have gazed from age to age upon the more immortal eyes of the heavens, still bright and sparkling as ever. The very planets and stars which we gaze upon were watched by all the sages of antiquity. Job speaks of Orion and the Pleiades. Plato affects to have heard distinctly the vague music of the

spheres. Pliny conceived the sun to be God himself; and attributed the spots of the moon to the vapours of the earth. The Tartar poets call the North Pole *Senesticol*, which means an iron nail. Men have been found presumptuous enough to be pleasant at the expense of the constellations. "The lion," said Rocoles, "might just as well have been called a monkey." Pacuvius, though with flattering self-possession, pretended to arraign the authority of astrologers; protesting that, if real, it would rival that of Jupiter:

" Nam si qui, quæ eventura sunt prævideant,
Æquiparent Jovi."

Favorinus proposes this startling question: "Are not all human events the work of the stars?—*Si vitæ mortisque hominum rerumque, humanarum omnium et ratio et causa in cælo et apud stellas foret?*" He supposes the flies and worms, "*muscis aut vermiculis*," to be submitted to sidereal influence,—even to the very hedgehogs, "*aut echinis*."

Aulus Gellius, on setting sail from Egina to the Piræus, upon a calm sea, sat during the night on the poop of the vessel, contemplating the stars. "*Nox fuit, et clemens mare, et anni æstas, cælumque liquide serenum; sedebamus ergo in puppi simul universi, et lucentia sidera considerabamus.*" Horace, that practical philosopher, the Voltaire of the Augustan age, though a far greater poet, it is true, than the Voltaire of Louis XV.—Horace

himself trembled while gazing at the stars. A strange anxiety overcame his heart, as he indited the following all but terrible verses:—

“Hunc solem, et stellas, et decedentia certis
Tempora momentis, sunt qui formidine nulla,
Imbuti spectant.”

For myself, I do not *fear* the stars, because I *love* them. Still, I never reflect without a certain depression of spirits, that the normal state of the heavens is night. What we call day, is the mere result of our vicinity to a star! It is painful to dwell too long upon infinite space. The immensity of the universe is overwhelming! Ecstasy is as much a portion of religion as prayer; but the one solaces, while the other fatigues the soul.

From the firmament, my eyes now descended to the cottage wall, against which I rested. Here again was food for reflection. In this wall, the peasant had inserted an ancient stone upon which were carved two indistinct letters, which the vibration of the forge did not permit me precisely to distinguish. I could make out only J. C.; the rest seemed defaced by the lapse of centuries. Now, was this inscription of ancient or modern Rome?—of Rome certainly; but was it the sacred or profane—the city of arts and arms, or the city of faith?

I know not whether it was the contemplation of the stars which had begotten my mood of

philosophy, but these mysterious letters appeared to stand out in supernatural splendour. "J. C.:" initials, which in one instance depressed mankind to the earth; in the other, raised him to the skies. "Julius Cæsar:" "Jesus Christ." What greater names have been bequeathed us? Under an inspiration similar to the idea which now engrossed me, did Dante unite together in the lowest abyss of hell, to be devoured by the fearful gorge of Satan, the greatest traitor of mankind, and the greatest assassin—Judas and Brutus.

Three cities preceded Soissons on the same site: the Noviodunum of the Gauls; the *Augusta Suessonomum* of the Romans; the old Soissons of Clovis, Charles the Simple, and the Duke of Mayenne. There remains nothing of the *Noviodunum* which checked the progress of Cæsar. "Suessones," says the Commentaries, "*celeritate Romanorum permoti legatos ad Cæsarem de deditioe mittunt.*" A few fragments only are left of Suessonium; among which is the ancient temple, converted during the middle ages into the chapel of St. Peter. Old Soissons is far better worthy of notice, possessing the church of St. John of the Vines, besides its ancient castle, and the cathedral in which Pepin was crowned, in 752. I could trace no vestige of the fortifications of the Duke de Mayenne, nor ascertain whether those which remained produced the remark of the emperor in 1814 (upon certain fossil remains in the wall), that those of St. Jean d'Acre were built of exactly the same materials;

a curious observation, considering how it was made, by whom, and at what a moment.

The night was too dark when I entered Soissons to admit of searching after Noviodunum or Suessionum; so I supped, while waiting for the mail, after passing some time before the vast front of St. John of the Vines, whose outlines were sharply defined against the sky, like a scene on the stage. While wandering up and down, I turned to see the stars flitting to and fro through the crevices of the gloomy edifice, as if it contained spirits, running, rising, and descending in all directions, with tapers in their hands.

As I was returning to the inn, midnight struck; and the whole town was dark as a cavern. Suddenly, a furious rushing from the farther extremity of a narrow street, little likely to be a scene of nocturnal disorder, proved to be the arrival of the mail, which drew up close to my inn: luckily there was a place vacant. Our new mail-coaches are certainly excellent vehicles; well cushioned, with the windows aptly placed both for air and sight.

Just as I was about to install myself upon the voluptuous cushion, a strange confusion of shrieks, wheels, and neighing of horses was audible, and from another point of the dismal little street, in defiance of the conductor, who only gave me five minutes' respite, I rushed to the scene of disorder; where, at the foot of a massive wall, which possessed the repulsive, odious character peculiar

to prisons, a low barred door with enormous bolts stood open. Close to this door was stationed an odd-looking vehicle, escorted by two gendarmes, and between this carriage and the entrance were four or five ill-looking fellows struggling with a woman, and dragging her towards the carriage waiting at hand. A dark-lantern shed its uncertain light upon this heart-rending scene. The woman, a hale peasant of about thirty years of age, vainly shrieked, fought, and attempted to bite her ruffianly guardians. The glimpse I caught of her face and disordered hair exhibited the very picture of despair.

As I approached, the men were unclasping her hand from an iron bar of the prison-door; and by a sudden jerk they forced her into the carriage. By the vivid light of the lantern, I perceived that it was made with two lateral windows, strongly barred, and the door at the back as strongly secured with powerful bolts. The man with the lantern having opened this door, the interior proved to be a kind of box without light or air, divided into two compartments by a thick transverse panel. The door was so contrived, that, when shut, it transformed the interior of the carriage into distinct chambers. No communication was possible between the two cells, only one of which was now occupied, by a being cowering like a wild beast; a kind of square-faced spectre, flat-headed, with large temples, and bristles for hair; his clothing composed of filthy rags.

The legs of this wretch were firmly secured ; one foot being inserted in a wooden shoe, while the other was partly enveloped with bloody linen, his toes apparently about to drop off from disease. He appeared insensible to all that was passing around him, even to the wretched woman who was being dragged towards him. She still, however, resisted the strength of her inexorable keepers, shrieking aloud, "Never, never: I would rather die on the spot." She had not yet seen her companion in crime.

Suddenly, in one of her convulsions, she cast her eye upon the hideous-looking prisoner, and her shrieks instantly ceased. Her knees gave way under her ; her strength failed ; and in a faint voice she murmured, with accents of anguish and despair that I can never forget, "Oh ! that man."

At that moment the man glanced towards her with a fierce and sullen air, like a tiger, and clod of the earth, as he was. I could no longer contain myself. It was clear the woman was a thief, perhaps worse, whom the gendarmes were removing from one place to another, in one of those odious vehicles styled by the populace of Paris salad-baskets, from its having but one opening. Resolved to interfere, I ventured to address the turnkeys, who paid no regard to my apostrophe. A worthy gendarme, however, who would certainly have accosted Don Quixote to ask him for his passport, instantly begged me to exhibit mine, which I had made over to the conductor of

the mail. During my explanation with the gendarme, the gaolers, with a violent effort, had thrust the wretched woman into the vehicle, slammed and bolted up the door; and, when I turned round, there was nothing more to be heard but the echoes of revolving wheels and departing trot of the escort.

Immediately afterwards I was on the road to Rheims, in a comfortable carriage, drawn by four vigorous horses; and I thought of that miserable woman till my heart was sick in comparing her position with mine.

In the midst of these reflections I fell asleep; and, on waking again at day-dawn, witnessed the gradual reanimation of the trees, meadows, and hills; and all the sleeping things, to the repose of which the progress of night-mails is so sternly inimical.

We were traversing the beautiful valley of Braine-sur-Vêslé. A fragrant breeze swept athwart the hills, and towards the east, at the northern extremity of the twilight, near the horizon, in the midst of a limpid pearly haze, and with a kind of sapphire-like hue, shone the planet Venus. Her rays, falling upon the fields and woods, as yet imperfectly defined, seemed to diffuse inexpressible grace and melancholy over the spot. It was like an eye of heaven benignly watching over the sleeping landscape.

The mail traverses Rheims, full gallop, regardless of the cathedral: one is scarcely able to

perceive, above the gable-ends of a narrow street, a few of the minarets, the escutcheon of Charles VII., and the slender spire shooting upward from the apsis.

From Rheims to Réthel there is nothing worth notice. Champagne Pouilleuse, the golden locks of whose yellow corn-fields have just been cropped by the harvest of July, now exhibits a succession of earthy undulations, the summits of which are crested with sparce-looking briars. Here and there stands a sluggish windmill; while by the roadside a potter is drying his ware upon a plank, having at his door a few dozen flower-pots lately turned from the mould.

Réthel lies upon a hill declining towards the Aisne, whose windings intersect the town in several places. Little remains to attest that this was once the princely residence of the Counts of Champagne; the streets being mean, and the church below mediocrity.

From Réthel to Mézières, the road gradually ascends to the plain of Argonne, which thus becomes connected with the higher plain of Rocroy. The high slated roofs, whitewashed fronts, and abutting planks which preserve the houses from rain towards the north, give a peculiar character to the villages. The first summits of the Faucilles are now occasionally apparent along the horizon. There is scarcely any woodland, but a few scattered clumps of trees on the distant hills. The clearings hereabouts, a first symptom of

civilization, have left little shelter for the wild boars of the Ardennes.

On arriving at Mézières, I looked vainly for the ruined towers of the Saxon castle of Hallebarde; and found, instead, only the hard zigzags of the celebrated Vauban: but in the passes are some remains of the walls attacked by Charles V. and defended by Bayard. The church of Mézières was once renowned for its stained glass, and I profited by the half-hour accorded for breakfast, to visit it. The window must have been fine, to judge by the fragments that remain inserted in the vast windows of common glass. The church itself is interesting, of the fifteenth century, having a charming porch at the southern side. Two bas-reliefs of the time of Charles VIII. have been affixed to pillars, right and left of the choir; but they are unfortunately mutilated, and most injudiciously whitewashed. The whole church has been washed with yellow, while the groinings and keystones of the roof are picked out in colours, frightful to behold.

In strolling down the aisle, I was reminded, by an inscription, that Mézières was bombarded by the Prussians in 1815; to which is added in Latin, "*Lector, leva oculos ad fornicem et vide quasi quoddam divinæ manus indicium.*" I raised my eyes accordingly, and saw a large rent in the roof, in which is fixed a well-sized bomb, thrown by the Prussians: penetrated through the roof and timbers, it has remained ever since in its

original position. The bomb and the perforation produce a strange effect on the beholders, more particularly upon remembering that it was at Mézières that, in 1521, the first shells ever used in war were tried. On another side is inscribed the event of the marriage of Charles IX. with Elizabeth of Austria, happily solemnized, "*feliciter celebrata fuere*," in the church of Mézières, the 17th of November, 1570, *i. e.*, two years before the slaughter of the St. Bartholomew.

The principal entrance of the church is of that very period, and consequently in good taste. But the front was unfortunately not finished till the seventeenth century. The steeple, terminated in 1626, is heavy and awkward; exceeded only by those now constructing at Paris to several of the new churches.

The ramparts of Mézières are adorned with fine rows of trees. The streets are clean, but gloomy. Even on Sundays they must be cheerless; and nothing recalls to mind Hallebarde or Garinus, the founders of the city; or Count Balthazar, who sacked it; or Count Hugo, who ennobled it; or the two bishops, Fulk and Adalberon, who besieged it. The god Macer, with whom originated the name of the town, became St. Masert in the Christian chapels of the church.

I found neither monuments nor public edifices at Sedan, where I arrived at noon. Pretty women, showy dragoons, trees and meadows along the Meuse, cannon, drawbridges, and bas-

tions, constitute the delights of the town. It is one of the places where the austere look of the fortified town is fantastically combined with the joyous life of a garrison. I had wished to find traces of Turenne; but alas! I was disappointed. The house of his fathers is demolished, and there remains in its place a black marble tablet, inscribed in gilt letters—

“Ici naquit Turenne,
Le 11 Septembre, 1611.”

This date, shining upon the black surface, attracted my attention, and called up around me the events with which it is connected.

In 1611 Sully retired from public life; Henri IV. having been assassinated the previous year. Louis XIII., fated, like his father, to die on a 14th of May, was then ten years old; Anne of Austria, his wife, was nearly of the same age, being five days younger; Richelieu, in his twenty-sixth year. A certain burgher of Rouen, called Petit Pierre, destined to become the great Corneille: Shakespere and Cervantes were then alive, as also Brantôme and Pierre Mathieu. The virgin queen of England had been dead about eight years; and seven years had elapsed since the death of Clement VIII., that peaceful pope and excellent Frenchman. In 1611 died Papirien Masson and Jean Busée; the Emperor Rodolph was declining; Gustavus Adolphus had succeeded to Charles IX. of Sweden, the dreamer;

Philip III. was expelling the Moors from Spain, in spite of the advice of the Duke d'Ossuna; and the Dutch astronomer, John Fabricius, was discovering spots in the sun. All this occurred about the time that Turenne was born.

Sédan has not been the faithful guardian of his memory. Not a trace of his house is now visible.

I had not the courage to go to Bazeilles and ascertain whether the avenue of trees he planted still exists. There is, however, a mean bronze statue of Turenne in the square. The statue is a mere tribute to his glory. The room in which he was born, the castle where he lived, the trees he planted, would have been tributes to his memory.

For still better reasons there exist no traces of Guillaume de la Marck, the undaunted predecessor of Turenne in the annals of Sédan. It may be remarked as an evidence of the natural progress of things and ideas, that when the boar of the Ardennes disappeared, Sédan produced a Turenne.

Having enjoyed an excellent breakfast at the Hotel of the Croix d'Or, I decided to return to Mézières, to make sure of a conveyance to Givet, lying at five leagues distance, and strikingly picturesque. I proceeded on foot, followed by a young and swarthy fellow, who trudged on merrily with my carpet-bag. The road lies nearly parallel with the Meuse, and about a

league from Sédan stands Donchery, with its old bridge and stately trees.

Lively villages, pleasant country-houses peeping out of thick masses of verdure, meadows grouped with thriving herds, the Meuse vanishing and then reappearing the next second, and the weather as beautiful as the scenery. Half way on my road, I became hot and thirsty, and looked out for some habitation; and lo! the first I met with had inscribed over the door, "Bernier Hannas, pork-butcher and corn-chandler." Upon a bench closely adjoining sat two persons afflicted with the goitre, a disease prevalent in the country. I nevertheless boldly entered the house, and drank the cup of the water I had asked for.

At six o'clock I reached Mézières, and at seven I started for Givet, squeezed into the coupé betwixt a fat gentleman and fatter lady, who kept saying tender things to each other across me. In going through Charleville, which is about a gun-shot distance from Mézières, I observed the central square, built in 1605, in noble style, by Charles de Gonzagues, Duke of Nevers and Mantua, the counterpart of our Place Royale at Paris, the same arcades, brick fronts, and high roofs.

Night came on, and I soon slept profoundly, though often interrupted by the yawnings and snorings of my fat companions. At last, aroused partly by the ejaculations of the postboys, partly by the unceasing endearments of my fellow travellers, I opened my eyes: when soldiers suddenly

flocked round the diligence, a gendarme imperiously demanding our passports. The rattling of chains in lowering a drawbridge, and the light of the street-lamp, which exhibited mounds of shot, and a piece of ordnance yawning at us, announced that we had reached Rocroy. The sight of two such memorable spots as Sedan and Rocroy is an interesting event; for if Sedan be the birthplace of Turenne, Rocroy may be said to be the birthplace of Condé.

While trying to turn a deaf ear to the vulgar commonplace of the fat lady and gentleman, whose incessant loquacity almost drove me out of senses, the merry, fantastic, silvery sound of chimes suddenly assured me that we were in Belgium, the genuine land of chimes. Their light and cheering harmony offered some compensation after the fatiguing gossip of my fellow-travellers.

The chimes which enlivened me sent them to sleep. I presume we were at Fumay, but the night was too dark to distinguish anything; so that I passed the fine ruins of the castle of Hierches, and the two well-known rocks called the Ladies of the Meuse, without being aware of it. Every now and then, I perceived in the hollows a whitish vapour, like smoke rising from a furnace; and this was the Meuse.

At length, the dawn of day became apparent. A drawbridge was lowered, a gate opened, and the diligence trotted through a defile, formed

on the left by a black, perpendicular rock, and to the right by a long, strange-looking edifice, having a multitude of doors and windows, which all seemed open, and in a dilapidated state; so that I saw through it, and witnessed the twilight gilding the horizon on the other side of the Meuse.

At the extremity of this mysterious edifice there was a high, closed window, feebly lighted; the diligence passed rapidly at that moment past an imposing-looking tower; we turned into a yard, where a host of chambermaids and other auxiliaries made their appearance, and I found that we were arrived at Givet.

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