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John Cam Hobhouse

Excerpt

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ITALY

REMARKS MADE IN SEVERAL VISITS

FROM THE YEAR 1816 TO 1854.

CHAPTER I.

Switzerland — Chamouni — Byron — Shelley — Madame de Staël — Schlegel — Bonstetten, his account of Voltaire — Departure for Italy — La Ripaille — General Duppa — Meillerie — Lago Maggiore — Isola Bella.

IN the summer of 1816 I visited Switzerland for the first time, and remained there until early in the following October. I passed those happy days with Lord Byron, chiefly at the villa Diodati, on the Savoy side of the lake of Geneva, but, occasionally, in short journeys to some of the spots usually visited by strangers. One was to Chamouni, another to the Grindelwald. Of the latter Lord Byron recorded short notices in a journal which he sent to his sister, and which Mr. Moore published in his *Life*. It was on our visit to Chamouni that a circumstance occurred which has been so entirely distorted, and represented directly contrary to the fact, that I feel bound to mention it. At an inn on the road the travellers' book was put before us, and Lord Byron, having written his name, pointed out to me the name of Mr.

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Shelley, with the words *atheist* and *philanthropist* written in Greek opposite to it; and observing "Do you not think I shall do Shelley a service by scratching this out?" he defaced the words with great care. This was the fact—the fiction afterwards printed and published was, that Lord Byron wrote the word "*atheist*" after his own name in that book; and Mr. Southey, although he does not repeat that absurd story, nevertheless endeavours to make Lord Byron answerable for Mr. Shelley's inscription.

During my residence at Diodati I had the satisfaction of renewing my acquaintance with Madame de Staël, and seeing her where she was best seen—at home. I have elsewhere (in page 271 of this volume) attempted to show her in the light in which she appeared at Coppet. There, indeed, she gave full play to a disposition most engaging and unaffected. In the artificial existence of Paris and London some foibles were forced into life which were dormant in her native Switzerland. In the society of cities she was not always satisfied with waiting for the approaches of the "little people called the great," but was impatient and rather too persevering in her advances. Not so at Coppet—there she was impartially attentive to all, or, if her civilities were directed to one more than to another, they were pointed to the guest whose inferior pretensions made them the more acceptable to him. In the exercise of her polite hospitalities, she forgot former injuries; and one of the company whom we met at her

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CHAP. I. MADAME DE STAEL—SCHLEGEL. 3

table was the wife of a French marshal, who, in the days of Napoleon, would not willingly be seen in the same room with Madame de Staël. In contrast, somewhat, with this behaviour, was her reception of another guest, a serene highness, to whom she was sufficiently polite, as others thought, but not submissive enough to suit the taste and habits of a German friend, who thus reproved her indifference: "Ne connoissez-vous pas, madame," said he, "que c'est un Prince de Mecklenburgh Schwerin?" Those who remember the most learned and very eccentric person who gave her this admonition will admit that Mr. Schlegel afforded her many opportunities for the exercise of her social qualities. With him she was engaged in a perpetual controversy, playful and good-humoured on her side, but conducted by him in terms which gave very little grace to opinions in themselves far from popular. According to him, Canova knew nothing of sculpture, and had no merit of any kind as an artist. "Have you seen his group of Filial Piety?" asked Lodovico di Breme. "Have you seen my bust by Tieck?" was the reply. He contended that the Italian was a dialect of the German language; and, on another occasion, having asserted that Locke was unsatisfactory because he did not account for the phenomena of the human mind, and a person present having remarked "that Locke had accounted for the phenomena as well as human reason would allow," Mr. Schlegel exclaimed, "La raison! je me moque de la raison." Yet, in spite of these extrava-

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gances, Mr. Schlegel was long a much-cherished guest at Coppet; and Madame de Staël, who respected his vast erudition, had too much good sense and good feeling, whilst availing herself of the learning of the scholar, to sport with the infirmities of the friend.

At Coppet we saw Mr. de Bonstetten, famous for his friendships with remarkable men, and valuable on his own account. The associate of Gray, and Müller, and Voltaire, had much to tell, and told it with the vivacity of youth rather than the garrulity of old age. One evening, returning with us from Coppet to Genthod, he gave us a short account of his first introduction to Gray. They met by accident at a London assembly, and after a good deal of conversation the poet said to him, "I see you can do better than be a man of fashion—come to Cambridge;" an invitation which Bonstetten accepted, and accompanied his new friend the next day to the University. In answer to a question from Lord Byron, Bonstetten told us that Gray was not esteemed as a poet so much at that time as afterwards, but was treated with much personal deference. He had the "*esprit gai*" and the "*humeur triste*,"—a lively wit, but a melancholy turn of mind. He used to talk of his intended lectures on history; but when asked why he did not do something more than he had done, he answered only with a sigh.

Mr. Bonstetten confirmed to us all the usual accounts of Voltaire. He was unlike any other human being: what he said, on whatever subject, important or trivial,

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was quite in his own way, and yet without the offensive singularity of a professed humourist. The whole country, that is, the country on the banks of the Lake of Geneva, was in a tremor of anxiety at every movement of his pen; and his theatre contributed not a little to the uneasiness of his very sensitive neighbours, for he occasionally amused himself with interpolating Molière with allusions to existing follies. He was, so at least said our informant, habitually kind and considerate in his intercourse with his dependants. The person who had been his secretary for twenty years declared that in all that time Voltaire had never used a harsh word to him, and never required duties more than ordinary without expressions of apology and regret. Bonstetten denied positively the truth of the story which originated with one of Voltaire's medical attendants, namely, that he died a death of terror and despair; and he added, that the physician himself confessed the pious imposture—and, what is more strange, excused it. Nothing is more injudicious, nothing more prejudicial to the cause of religion itself, than such inventions. The detection of the falsehood is almost inevitable; but, even supposing the story to be uncontradicted, to what does it amount? These terrors may assail the most pious and best conducted of Christians; indeed, a truly religious man, not trusting to his own merits, would be much more exposed to the horrors of the hour of death than the most confirmed unbeliever. But in most cases, as in this, we may safely conclude with the charitable curate of St.

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Sulpice, who witnessed the last moments of this wonderful person, that no importance ought to be attached to the words of the dying man—"Vous voyez bien qu'il n'a plus sa tête."

The day before we left Switzerland I met Madame de Staël in Geneva. Taking leave, she said, "God bless you! stay for me in Italy," alluding to a fanciful project of joining us on the other side of the Alps; and on the same evening I had a note from her concluding with these words: "I shall never forget the two friends."

When I revisited Geneva in 1828 I passed by Coppet, and paused a short time to gaze on the vine-covered slopes under the villa Diodati. I could discover the little pathway down which I had many a time rambled to the cove where Lord Byron's boat was anchored. The well-known scenes on either side of the lake were indeed as magnificent and lovely as ever—"but all the guests departed." It is seldom that death in so few years has dealt so many blows in a circle where old age was scarcely to be seen. Of the inmates and habitual visitors at Diodati, Lord Byron, Mr. Shelley, Mr. Lewis, Dr. Polidori were gone. Of those I saw at Coppet, Madame de Staël herself, her son, her friend Rocca, Mr. de Bonstetten, and Schlegel, all had passed away. I am speaking of the year 1828, but when I last saw the same scenes, in 1842, many other names might be added to the list.

We left the neighbourhood of Geneva for Italy on the 5th of October, 1816. From Thonon we went to La

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Ripaille, where we saw one of the living wrecks of the Revolution. The old inhabitants of this celebrated retreat, the monks, were expelled by the French, and the extensive but ruined mansion, having been thrice sold, was at last tenanted by General Duppa. The general was present when we entered the premises—a fine, tall, pleasing-looking person, dressed like a farmer. His wife was killing fowls in the courtyard. “Formerly,” said the general, “I commanded divisions, now I command nobody but my wife; I have no steward, and am my own servant.” He added that he had lost 75,000 livres of annual income by French politics, and was now on the point of losing 4000 more because he did not choose to be naturalized in France. He informed us that he had served under Louis XVI., but said nothing of his other commander-in-chief, Napoleon. An Englishman who should be equally communicative with one whom he had never seen before, and was never likely to see again, would be thought mad.

At La Ripaille the church was turned into a barn, the towers, all but two, were razed, and a garden had been planted on the embanked buttresses. Over the front gate were still seen the arms of the Prince of Savoy, surmounted by that papal crown which he resigned for this sensual seclusion. The French, by an easy conversion, had made the tiara look like a cap of liberty.

Passing the rocks of Meillerie, we could not help remarking that the bowers of Clarens are not visible from that spot, but that the view of them which

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charmed St. Preux must have been taken nearer to St. Gingough, where the precipices are higher and more immediately overhanging the lake—but Meillerie sounded well, and was preferred. The noble road which has been cut through the rocks has discontented some of the lovers of Rousseau, as having spoilt all the tender recollections connected with this region of romance. This objection was made in our hearing at Coppet, when a gentleman present, an old soldier, remarked “that the road was well worth the recollections.” Lord Byron, in a note to the third canto of *Childe Harold*, has mentioned this, but made the remark somewhat stronger by changing the “vaut bien” into “vaut mieux.”

We crossed the Simplon and stayed a day on the banks of the Lago Maggiore, to visit the Borromean islands. On the Isola Bella we were shown the large laurel-tree on which Napoleon cut the word “BATTAGLIA” a day or two before the battle of Marengo. This sort of record has one advantage over other memorials, that the incision may be deepened repeatedly, and the tradition easily kept alive without injury to the original. One of the first objects pointed out to me when I went to Westminster School were the letters “J. Dryden,” rudely cut or scratched in the bench of the lower-fifth form, and no one doubted that the first traces of the name had been made by the hand of the great poet himself.

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CHAPTER II.

Milan — Society of 1816 — De Breme — Silvio Pellico — Bosieri — De Tracy — Confalonieri — Count Luigi Porro — Anelli — Count Strasoldo — Austrian Government — The French kingdom of Italy — First appearance of Napoleon at Milan — Madame Castiglione — Prince Eugene — The Secret Society — The Allies enter Italy — Promises of independence — Revolution at Milan — Murder of Prina — Provisional Government — Austrians recover Milan and all Lombardy — Attempt at insurrection in 1820-21.

WE arrived in Milan on the 12th of October, 1816, and left it on the 3rd of November. Those with whom we chiefly associated during the time were the Abate Monsignore Lodovico Gattinara de Breme, and his brother the Marquis, the head of that distinguished Piedmontese family; the celebrated Monti; Silvio Pellico, the author of 'Francesca da Rimini,' afterwards so well known by the painful narrative of his sufferings in the dungeons of Spielberg. There also we saw Count Perticari, an author of some repute, and Bosieri, the conductor of a literary journal called 'The Day.' These gentlemen—even Monti, of whom it may now safely be told, for "nothing can touch him further,"—were all of one way of thinking in politics; but we also saw something of the inmates and frequenters of the Casa Castiglione, such as Acerbi, conductor of the

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Biblioteca Italiana, Anelli, and others whose opinions took their complexion from the recently-restored masters of Lombardy.

I passed through Milan in 1822. All my friends of the Liberal party had disappeared. Where is De Breme? "He is happy in having died; he has seen none of these things," was the reply. And Silvio Pellico? "In an Hungarian dungeon." Bosieri too? "In prison." De Tracy? "Also in confinement." Confalonieri? "Reprieved on the scaffold; but whether dead or in prison now, no one knows." Count Luigi Porro? "In exile." He had been executed in effigy a few days before my arrival. Such were the bitter fruits of that unhappy attempt to shake off the Austrian yoke in 1821. Shortly after the failure of this conspiracy it was known that the Heads of Departments were prepared to retire from Milan, with the treasure and the archives, had the Piedmontese advanced into Lombardy with the expected force. The fate of Italy was then in the hands of the Prince of Carignan, the unfortunate Charles Albert of later days. It should be told, however, that neither Count Strasoldo nor Count Bubna, the civil and military governors of Milan, were accused of remembering their dangers with the rancour which such recollections usually inspire; indeed their administration generally could not be called tyrannical or unjust. The severe punishment of insurrection, or political conspiracy, is an inevitable condition of foreign subjection; but the ordinary tribunals