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Julia Pardoe

Excerpt

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THE COURT AND REIGN
OF
FRANCIS THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.

IN the person of Louis XII. of France expired the elder branch of the House of Orleans. Only three months subsequent to his nuptials with the young and beautiful Mary of England, (the sister of Henry VIII,) his third wife, he was seized with fever and dysentery at the palace of Les Tournelles in Paris; and breathed his last in the seventeenth year of his reign and the fifty-fourth of his age, leaving the vacant throne to Francis, Comte d'Angoulême, the husband of his daughter Claude.

The extreme personal beauty of this prince, combined with his fearless and engaging qualities, his eloquence, courtliness of demeanour, and unbounded liberality, dazzled alike the courtiers and the people; and the dying king was probably the only individual in the nation who had reflected with misgiving upon the possible, and indeed inevitable, results of the uncalculating profusion and ungovernable ambition of his successor. In himself a model of integrity, and well deserving the title of

the Father of his People, from his constant and zealous watchfulness over the interests of his subjects, he could not witness without anxiety the brilliant but dangerous qualities of the young Count ; and it was consequently with earnestness and care, that he applied himself before his death to the execution of such public measures as might at least tend to mitigate, even if they could not altogether avert, the evils which he deprecated. Although occasionally the dupe of his own kindheartedness and the treachery of his neighbours, Louis XII. never lost his confidence in human nature ; and constantly sought to remedy rather than to revenge the wrongs to which he was subjected by others ; while, carrying his prudence to an extreme which was on many occasions stigmatized by the young and inconsiderate with the name of penuriousness, he was accustomed, when this fact was hinted to him, to reply that “ the justice of a monarch should teach him to render to every one his due, rather than to suffer his generosity to induce him to display too great a profusion.” It was therefore natural that the opposite qualities, which he early discovered in his son-in-law, should cause him to look with distrust into the future. “ *Ce gros garçon nous gâtera tout ;*” he was wont to exclaim whenever any instance of the improvidence of Francis was forced upon him ; but not even the most serious of his delinquencies sufficed to diminish his affection, or to excite his anger towards the offender.

Moreover, it is certain that if Francis I. became not only a chivalric, but also, for the age in which he lived, an accomplished sovereign, his predecessor may nevertheless be justly styled the Father of letters in France ;

learning having been greatly encouraged during his reign, and learned men especially honoured. Cicero was his favourite author among the ancients; and his collection of autographs was of considerable extent and value. He employed many Italian scholars at his court and in the public offices; and his directions to his judges were stringent, that they should upon all occasions decide such causes as came before them according to the dictates of their conscience; and utterly disregard, under every circumstance, even any orders to the contrary which might be wrung from himself during the progress of the proceedings. He also discouraged, in so far as he found it possible, the inordinate taste of his nobility for costly studs and extravagant establishments of hounds; declaring that, like Actæon, they were devoured by their dogs and horses. Nevertheless, he was accomplished in all feats of joust and tourney; and so brave in the field, that upon one occasion, when his immediate attendants, who considered their own lives endangered by his impetuosity, ventured to expostulate with him, and besought him not to expose his sacred person with so little precaution, he replied disdainfully: "Let all who are afraid stand behind me!"

Neither would he, however great the provocation, ever suffer himself to be betrayed into an undue intemperance of speech or bearing, by which his kingly dignity might be compromised; and to such an extent did he carry this difficult self-government, that when, during the wars of Italy, d'Alviano, the general of the Venetian army, was brought before him a captive, and replied to his courteous and considerate greeting with an insolence

which overpassed all bounds, Louis magnanimously controlled every symptom of indignation, and contented himself with directing his removal to the quarters which had been assigned to the other prisoners; simply remarking to those about him, as the arrogant soldier was led away: "I have done well to dismiss him, as I might have lost my temper, which I should have regretted. I have conquered him; and it is no less essential that I should learn to conquer myself."

No wonder then, that when he expired, the watchmen of Paris announced the fatal event to the inhabitants of the city in these touching words: "Frenchmen! we declare to you the most fatal news that you have ever heard. The good King Louis, the Father of his People, is dead! Pray to God for the repose of his soul."

The greatest blot which rests upon the memory of Louis XII. is his repudiation of his first wife, the unfortunate Jeanne de France, daughter of Louis XI, for the purpose of marrying Anne de Bretagne,¹ the widow of Charles VIII; and even in this act there are extenuating points. Compelled by the last-named monarch to affiance himself while yet a mere youth, and Duke d'Orleans, to Jeanne; and subsequently to complete an alliance which was repugnant to him, when he

¹ Anne de Montfort, Duchesse de Bretagne, was the daughter and heiress of Duke François II. Born in 1476, she married, in 1491, Charles VIII. king of France, and governed the kingdom during his expedition in Italy. On his death, she became the wife of Louis XII, over whom she exercised extraordinary influence. She was the first queen who had a separate body-guard; and also the first who adopted black as mourning, white having previously been the conventional colour. She died in 1514.

had already bestowed his affections elsewhere, he had the additional mortification of seeing himself united to a princess deformed in person, and totally deficient in beauty ; although her meekness of temper and gentleness of disposition might perhaps have ultimately reconciled him to this fact, had he been heart-free at the period of his marriage ; but with his imagination full of the splendid beauty, and courtly fascinations of the heiress of Brittany, his dislike to his enforced bride soon grew into disgust.

Unfortunately for the timid and neglected duchess, Louis had been a guest at the court of Duke François at a period anterior to their union ; when Anne, although also affianced to the Archduke Maximilian of Austria, whom she had never seen, was in the first bloom of her maidenly beauty. As yet fettered by no definitive ties (for she was aware that her marriage treaty could be annulled as readily as it had been contracted), she was by no means insensible to the evident passion of the gallant and handsome Duke d'Orleans ; and it was, consequently, with increased irritation and chagrin that he saw himself unable to profit by a preference which would have secured his happiness.

The Dauphin, afterwards Charles VIII, had been, in his turn, at the age of thirteen years, betrothed to Marguerite of Austria,¹ the daughter of Maximilian, after his hand

¹ Marguerite d'Autriche was the daughter of the Emperor Maximilian and Mary of Burgundy, and was born at Ghent, in 1480. Affianced to the Dauphin (Charles VIII.), and subsequently sent back to the court of her father, she was again betrothed, in the year 1497, to the Infant John, son of Ferdinand the Catholic and Isabella ; and in 1508, after the death of Don John, she married Philibert le Beau, Duke of Savoy, whom she lost in 1512 ; and who

had been successively declined by the Princess Marie and Elizabeth of England ; and powerless and timid as he was, he revolted at the idea of being thus fettered by an engagement to a child who had scarcely entered her fourth year. According to the command of the king his father, Charles had been reared in the most perfect retirement, in the fortress-palace of Amboise, under the united guardianship of Madame Anne de France, his elder sister, and the Sire de Beaujeu,¹ her husband. The feeble health of the young prince, who was very delicate, and of slight frame, but gentle and kind in disposition, was the plausible pretext of Louis for thus secluding him from the world, and maintaining him in profound ignorance of all public affairs ; the ferocious and jealous monarch remembering, in all probability, that the example of filial turpitude which he had himself exhibited, might, should he suffer the physical and mental strength of his son to attain their just dimensions, be followed in the person of the Dauphin.

Thus Louis XI. had found it difficult to secure such a wife for the young prince as he deemed worthy to share the throne of France ; and it was not without considerable difficulty that Maximilian had at length been induced to grant to him the hand of his infant daughter, who was to remain under the immediate guardianship of the queen until she should attain a marriageable age.

The apparently profound indifference with which

left her, as her first husband had done, a childless widow. Her father appointed her governante of the Low Countries ; and she ultimately died at Malines, in 1530.

¹ Pierre de Bourbon, Constable of France.

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Charles went through the ceremony of his betrothal, had, however, a deeper source than was suspected by those around him ; for he also, although only by report, had suffered his boyish fancy to become captivated by the charms of Anne de Bretagne. Again and again did he question his cousin d'Orleans, and M. de la Tremouille,¹ by whom he had been accompanied to the Court of Brittany, of all they had seen and heard in that brilliant circle ; constantly, but as if unconsciously, directing their reminiscences to the young duchess, and crowding his imagination with scenes of pageantry and pleasure in which she was always the most prominent object. To him, debarred as he was from all the pastimes suited to his age and rank, the bare outline of such festivities would have been attractive ; but blent as they thus were with the image of the beautiful young heiress, they were the greatest luxury of his dull and weary existence. No

¹ Louis, Sire de la Tremouille, prince de Talmont, and Vicomte de Thouars, born in 1460, was the representative of an ancient and illustrious family of Poitou ; and acquired, by his talents and courage, the appointment of general-in-chief of the army of Charles VIII. against François II. Duke of Brittany. He achieved a splendid victory over the enemy at St. Aubin-de-Cormier, in 1488, and made prisoners of both the Duke d'Orleans, afterwards Louis XII, and the Prince of Orange. He also contributed, in a great degree, to the reunion between the two countries, by facilitating the marriage of the Duchess Anne and Charles. His services were rewarded by the post of first-chamberlain to the king, and the lieutenancy of Poitou, Anjou, Angoumois, Aunis, and the Marches of Brittany. Appointed by Louis XII. to the command of his armies in Italy, he effected the conquest of Lombardy, and was made Governor of Burgundy and Admiral of Guienne (1502), and subsequently of Brittany also. Worsted by the Swiss at Novara in 1513, he revenged his defeat upon them at Marignano, at the fearful price, however, of his only son ; and was ultimately killed at the battle of Pavia in 1525.

wonder, then, that after the death of his father, who had confided the government of the kingdom during his minority to his sister and guardian, Madame de Beaujeu, he soon began to cherish hopes which had hitherto seemed more than chimerical.

Other, and more immediate matters of interest, however, in some degree withdrew the attention of the young monarch from this cherished secret. Madame Anne de France, who had hitherto preserved her purity of heart and rigid sense of morality, without one back-sliding, even in thought, had been unable to resist the manly graces of the Duke d'Orleans, and had even permitted him to see the hold which he had obtained upon her affections, flattering herself that the attachment was reciprocal; but Louis, warned by the Count de Dunois not to allow himself to be dazzled by the blandishments of his royal sister-in-law, who was only anxious to enslave his feelings in order to divert him from prosecuting his claim to the regency after the demise of Louis XI.—a warning which was overheard by Madame de Beaujeu, and never afterwards forgotten—caused the young duke to withdraw, with marked coldness, from her advances; and converted a fond woman into an implacable enemy. When, therefore, Louis d'Orleans, who had taken up arms in support of the right which he claimed as first prince of the blood, to govern the kingdom during the minority of Charles, was defeated and captured at St. Aubin, in Brittany, by the Sire de la Tremouille; remembering only the slight which had been offered to her, and anxious to revenge, under cover of political expediency, the affront which she had sustained, she caused him to