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978-1-108-07807-8 - Palissy the Potter: The Life of Bernard Palissy, of Saintes, His Labours and Discoveries in Art and Science: Volume 2

Henry Morley

Excerpt

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## PALISSY THE POTTER.

### CHAPTER I.

#### PALISSY RESCUED—THE DEDICATION OF HIS SECOND BOOK.

IMPRISONMENT of Bernard Palissy implied stoppage of decorative works upon the premises of many wealthy people. Palissy put to death meant the extinction of an ornamental art. Great men required the service of the Potter, and stretched forth their hands, therefore, to withdraw him from the gallows. Perhaps they were incited to their efforts by his virtue also.

Palissy in Saintes had been protected by the leading men of either faction. By the Catholics it was well known that he worked for Montmorenci, in a building that had been erected for him partly by the constable himself; he held also a document, signed by the Duke of Montpensier, forbidding the authorities "to take cognizance of or undertake anything against him or his house." This had been

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conceded for the express purpose of ensuring the completion of the work in progress for the Constable Montmorenci. To the reformers it was known not only that he sympathised in their religious views, but that the Count de la Rochefoucault had forbidden all intrusion on the workshop of the artist.

Nevertheless, Bernard had been prosecuted by the dean and chapter of his town—men, he says, “who have none occasion against me, except in that I have urged upon them, many times, certain passages of Holy Writ, in which it is written that he is unhappy and accursed, who drinks the milk and wears the wool of the sheep, without providing for it pasture. And by as much as that ought to have incited them to love me, they have therein made for themselves occasion to desire that I should be committed to destruction as a malefactor; and it is a true thing, that if I had depended on the judges of this town, they would have caused me to be put to death, before I should have been able to obtain any assistance.”

The Sire de Pons and his lady—the Sire de Pons being king’s lieutenant in Saintonge—had interfered in time to prevent the complete annihilation of the workshop of Palissy, which had been decreed by the wise men of Saintes in their town-hall. But Palissy was carried off “at night by bye-roads to Bourdeaux.” From the parliament of Bourdeaux he could have no mercy to expect, and once at Bourdeaux, the only rescue that would be available must be the king’s hand stretched out from the throne. The

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## INTERCESSION OF PATRONS.

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king's lieutenant in Saintonge, the Sire de Pons, had power to control the justices of Saintes; but the parliament of Bourdeaux, in its district, swayed the powers of the king, and the justices of Saintes well knew that if they could carry Palissy to Bourdeaux, and there place him at the mercy of the parliament, the interference of the king himself alone could save him.

The Sire de Pons immediately exerted himself; the Seigneur de Burie and the Seigneur de Jarnac were equally prompt to communicate with Montmorenci. Palissy, in a dedicatory epistle to his great patron, the constable, quietly assigns the motive of their zeal in his behalf. He had said how the Duke de Montpensier gave him a safeguard, "well knowing that no man could bring your work to a completion but myself." He adds, that when he was imprisoned, the above-named seigneurs "took great trouble to cause me to be delivered, with the design that your work might be completed." If Palissy had not acquired his secret as a potter, if his death had not meant the extinction of an ornamental art, in that year 1562 he would have died upon the gallows.

Montmorenci, being suddenly informed by his good friends upon the spot of the fate that threatened the ingenious Potter, Master Bernard, lost no time in addressing the queen-mother, and securing the safety of his workman. Queen Catherine, who would, of course, in so trifling a matter oblige the great constable, had also a taste for the patronage of clever artists. An edict was therefore issued

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in the king's name, appointing Palissy inventor of Rustic Figulines to the king and to the constable. This removed him from the jurisdiction of Bourdeaux; for, as a servant of the king, his cause could come under no other cognizance than that of the grand council. By the same edict Palissy received also, of course, such encouragement as public honour might afford him in the prosecution of his art. The court protected Master Bernard not because he was a shrewd observer, a good naturalist, or a pure-minded reformer; the honour of its protection was bestowed on Palissy the Potter, worker in earth; according to his own designation of his calling, "Worker in Earth, and Inventor of Rustic Figulines."\*

The men who have just been named as intercessors for the life of Palissy, were men of mark in their own time, whose names are constantly recurring in contemporary records which extend over a large part of the sixteenth century. The Seigneur de Burie was an old man who had fought in Italy, and whose name has already occurred upon these pages, in connexion with the early campaigns of Montluc. He belonged to an ancient house of Saintonge, and was now lieutenant-general of the king in Aunis, under the orders of Antony, King of Navarre. The Seigneur of Pons, which is a town not far from Saintes, was, as we have seen already, the king's lieu

\* "Ouvrier de Terre, et Inventeur des Rustiques Figulines." The meaning of the term, "Rustic Figuline," has been explained in a preceding chapter. Vol. i., page 212.

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## PALISSY GETS AN APPOINTMENT.

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tenant in Saintonge. He was also Count of Marennnes, the famous salt-district. The Seigneur de Jarnac, Governor and Seneschal of Rochelle, was a veteran soldier, chiefly famous for his duel, fifteen years before this civil war, with the Seigneur de la Chateigneraie. As the story of that duel illustrates the times, it may be worth narrating.

In the last year of the reign of Francis I., scandal arose at court, which very much concerned the Dauphin Henry. Jarnac had communicated to the dauphin flattering intelligence from a great lady of the court, which the imprudent dauphin had confided to some friends. His friends increased the circle of the revelations, and the enemies of the great lady, hearing the story, published it abroad, and made the best or worst use of it they could against her. The king, incensed, proceeded to inquire with whom the scandal had originated. The dauphin, who was no great favourite with his father, and had fallen recently into disfavour by seeking the recal of Montmorenci, dared not avow his fault. To check further inquiry, a friendly knight, the Seigneur de la Chateigneraie, stepped forward and declared that the unwelcome rumours had originated with himself. Chateigneraie was one of the two or three most formidable knights in a court that laid the greatest stress on chivalry, and was accordingly a favourite companion of the king. He could literally take a bull by the horns, and felt, therefore, that he incurred little risk in doing so metaphorically in the present instance, to protect the dauphin. Jarnac felt

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compelled to challenge the camp Hercules, who, with the true instinct of a game-cock, crowed in advance over an easy victory. The challenge was of course accepted, and King Francis dying, the combat, which took place at sunset, in the park of St. Germain en Laye, before the new King Henry and the assembled court, was one of the first acts at which Henry assisted after his accession to the throne. Chateigneraie, who could hurl his lance into the air and catch it three times in succession, while he galloped at full speed over a plain, prepared a feast beforehand in his tent to celebrate his victory. Jarnac was accounted a doomed man, but by a dexterous stroke, known to this day in duels as the *coup de Jarnac*, he wounded his opponent in the ham, and vanquished him completely. Chateigneraie lay bleeding under the sunset on the greensward of the park, and was carried thence, not to the feast prepared within his tent, but to the bed on which he was to while away the few remaining hours of life. The laurels of this victory were always green upon the head of Gui de Chabot Jarnac, who now, some fifteen years after the duel, united with the Sire de Pons and the Seigneur de Burie in intercession for the life of Bernard Palissy.

It is a coincidence of no very startling character, although perhaps worth naming, that the edict against reformers, under which Palissy was arrested, had been dated by Henry II. from Ecoeu, in June, 1559; while it was from his own labours at Ecoeu that Palissy derived the patronage which saved his life.

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## RETURN OF PALISSY TO SAINTES.

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Palissy, saved from the power of the parliament\* of Bourdeaux, and being thoroughly protected now against hostility from the belligerents on either side, returned to his family, and quietly resumed his occupations in the half-depopulated town of Saintes. Churches had been battered, and antiquities destroyed. Friends of the Potter had been slaughtered in the streets, or sent to die upon the gallows. The workshop of Palissy had been thrown open to the sky, and its broken doors invited the intrusion of the people. Bernard made the requisite repairs, and wiped away the traces of the interruption, while he not only resumed his old work, but also his old habits among the woods and fields, and his old way of speaking freely what he felt to be the truth. The prison of Bourdeaux, and his near escape from death, inspired him with so little terror, that the first months of recovered liberty were occupied in seeing through the press of Barthelemi Breton,

\* The word "parliament," which occurs often in this narrative, must not incautiously be taken in our English sense. There were in France thirteen parliaments, sovereign courts, lay and ecclesiastic, high courts of appeal for their respective districts. There were attached to them notaries, attorneys, fiscal attorneys, attorneys-general, &c., each court having, of course, a president. They had cognizance of civil and criminal cases, made special laws, and represented to those under them the power of the king. The most ancient, and for a long time the only parliament, was that of Paris, which gave immediate assistance to the king in his deliberations, and both by seniority and influence deserved the first rank among others of its kind. It was often spoken of simply as "*The Parliament*." Other parliaments were instituted in different provinces at different dates; that of Bourdeaux was the fourth, but the exact date of its establishment is unknown.

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at Rochelle, a little book which he proposed to dedicate to the queen-mother and the Constable Montmorenci, and in which, among other matter, he did not scruple to utter with the utmost freedom his opinions as a Huguenot. No man had any right to put his mind in fetters, no man had power to make Palissy afraid, and so the simple-hearted Potter thought and spoke what seemed to him the necessary truth with tranquil honesty.

The book which Palissy, after his rescue from prison, busied himself in seeing through the press, contained treatises on four subjects, namely, agriculture, natural history, the plan of a delectable garden, to which is appended a history of the troubles in Saintonge, and the plan of a fortified town, which might serve as a city of refuge in those times of trouble. The treatises, containing part of the experience of his past years, had probably been written before his imprisonment, since it is only in his prefatory matter that he has made reference to that event. The book into which they are collected, in which one of the leading objects is to instruct men to avoid the enormous waste occasioned to the fields by defective care of the manure, is thus entitled: "A Trustworthy Receipt, by which all the men of France may learn how to multiply and augment their Treasures. *Item.*—Those who have acquired no knowledge of Letters, may learn a Philosophy necessary to all dwellers in the earth. There is also contained the design of a Garden as delightful and useful in invention as ever has been seen, with the design



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## THE TRUSTWORTHY RECEIPT.

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and arrangement of a Fortified Town, the most impregnable of which men have ever heard.”\* This book was published in a quarto form at Rochelle, by Barthelemi Breton, in the year 1563, being the year succeeding that in which Palissy had been committed to the dungeons of Bourdeaux.

The prefatory matter in the first pages of Bernard’s book, his second book, according to his own phrase, but the first of which there remains to us authentic information, includes the usual modicum of recommendatory verse. This verse is of the usual quality. “F. B. to Bernard Palissy, ‘his singular and perfect friend,’ and to the reader,” rhymes in a way that deprives us of all curiosity to ascertain the other letters of his name. Pierre Sanxay, to a quick tune, dances before the book with a most lusty song of praise. “Through all past ages,” he says, “Nature, mother of things, these heaped treasures has hidden under her wings. Man when he was a child, with wonder could not fill us.

\* *Recepte Véritable, par laquelle tous les Hommes de la France pourront apprendre à multiplier et augmenter leurs Thresors. Item.—Eux qui n’ont jamais eu connoissance des Lettres, pourront apprendre une Philosophie nécessaire à tous les habitans de la terre. Plus y est contenu le dessein d’un Jardin autant délectable et d’utile invention qu’il en fût oncques vu, avec le dessein et ordonnance d’une Ville de Forteresse la plus imprenable qu’homme ait jamais ouï dire.* To make the title more attractive, a publisher who issued the works of Palissy, in 1636, Robert Fouet, entitled them all, “How to grow Rich”—“Le Moyen de devenir Riche,” and “La Manière véritable par laquelle,” &c. Several French writers, and Voltaire among them, knowing the works of their great Potter only by this title, have leapt to the conclusion that he was an alchemist!

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Hercules, or Adam's nephews, built a pair of pillars; Greece has gotten credit for some Caryatides, Egypt for the bigness of her Pyramids; we remember the Carian sepulchre, and the ancient amphitheatre crowns Cæsar with glory; but none of those things come near the Rustic Figulines: they are so well painted, and so ingeniously imagined. The before-named trifling works, namely, the Straits of Gibraltar, the monuments of Greece, the Pyramids, and the Coliseum, required thousands of makers, but the best of them was not equal to a basin made by you, Palissy, alone. The best of them has been bettered by eloquence, but yours are better than the powers of speech. The ancients counted seven wonders in the world; had they seen yours, it would have ranked before the first. Apelles painted better than Parrhasius, Parrhasius better than Zeuxis; but you beat them all. The high and thick rock pours no clearer water than that which you pour in a mimic fall."

At this point Pierre Sanxay becomes luminous. I have quoted the matter of his praise thus far, as an amusing illustration of what used to be done in the old days, when no book could go abroad respectably unless, like the ark of the covenant, it had some worthy men to dance before it, singing songs of triumph. But Pierre begins now to be particular in his laudation, and to specify some works of Palissy which he holds to be peculiarly superior to the Straits of Gibraltar and the Pyramids. We have already referred to the rustic grotto erected by Palissy for Mont-