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978-1-108-08101-6 - A Narrative of Three Years' Residence in France,; Principally in the Southern Departments, from the Year 1802 to 1805: Including Some Authentic Particulars Respecting the Early Life of the French Emperor, and a General Inquiry into his Character: Volume 1

Anne Plumtre

Excerpt

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A NARRATIVE
OF
A THREE YEARS' RESIDENCE
IN
FRANCE,
&c.

CHAPTER I.

*Departure from London and Arrival at Dover.—
Passage to Calais.*

IT has often been remarked, that a passion for foreign travel is more prevalent among islanders than among the inhabitants of a continent; and the vast concourse of English who were continually resorting to the Continent, from the moment that preliminaries of peace were signed in 1801, till the renewal of hostilities in 1803, appears a strong confirmation of the truth of the remark. This propensity may perhaps have its origin in a principle which seems almost inherent in human nature, the love of conquering difficulties:—thus the islander, having the sea to cross at the commencement of his travels, which presents one more difficulty to surmount than lies in the way of him who has nothing to do but to pursue his course over dry land, finds in this very obstacle an additional incentive to excite him to travel.

Be this as it may, had long been afflicted with a malady the very opposite to that which troubles the Swiss,

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who, absent from their own country, sigh incessantly to return to it, whereas I was tormented with a restless desire to quit mine. It is perhaps no unnatural process in the human mind, after having been much conversant with history, with travels, and with poetry, to be seized with such a malady. Impossible as it is to see the persons whose brilliant actions are consigned to immortality in the pages of history, the next thing is to visit the spots which have been the scenes of those actions. Resting on such spots, the imagination can almost deceive itself into a belief that it is holding converse with the departed spirits of those to whom they owe their celebrity, and what is deeply impressed on the memory appears as if resuscitated before our eyes. When we accompany the traveller in idea over the many scenes of wonder and of beauty which he has passed,—when we read of the sublime features of nature which he describes, of the stupendous rocks and mountains he has climbed, of the deep recesses in the very bowels of the earth into which he has penetrated, our minds, filled with eager curiosity, can no longer be satisfied with knowing these things only by description, we feel an irresistible longing ourselves to climb the same mountains, to explore the same wondrous caverns. Turning to the milder features of nature, the favourite themes of the poet's pen, to gushing fountains, shady groves, meandering streams, glassy lakes,—not content with admiring their beauties in idea, we cannot be satisfied without convincing ourselves by our own experience whether such scenes of enchantment actually exist, or whether they are only to be found in the imagination of the writer.

With the records of history, with the animated descriptions of travellers, and with the lofty flights of poetic fancy, I had from my earliest years been intimately con-

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versant; and if it had been possible to yield entirely to my inclinations, not a spot which has been consecrated to fame by any of their pens would now remain unvisited by me. I mean only as far as relates to the civilised world; for I never experienced any desire to make myself personally acquainted with a Bedouin camp amid the deserts of Arabia, or, with Bruce, to dine upon a steak cut from a live ox on the plains of Abyssinia. To ascend to the top of the great pyramid, or explore the magnificent ruins of Thebes or Tentyra, is the furthest that I have ever been desirous of pursuing my researches in the now uncivilised parts of the globe.

The unsettled state of the Continent, combined with other circumstances, had for many years prevented the gratification of my wishes: but the sword at length being sheathed, and the temple of Janus closed, as we then hoped not soon to be opened again,—while I hailed the return of peace as the greatest of all public blessings, I hailed it no less as facilitating my own private views. They were further facilitated by an opportunity being presented, just at the same period, of visiting France in a manner which was particularly agreeable to me; and that country, from a combination of circumstances the most extraordinary that the world ever witnessed, was then an object of eager curiosity to all ranks and descriptions of persons. It was proposed to me to accompany a French gentleman and lady with whom I had long been in habits of intimacy here, and who on the restoration of peace resolved to return to their own country: very particular business only had obliged them to quit it; they had not left it as emigrants, and never had been enrolled as such among the lists of the proscribed in France. The name of Barthelemy, and a relationship to the celebrated author of *Anacharsis*, were a natural attraction towards persons

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coming under that description, and an acquaintance with their many amiable qualities soon converted those feelings into the warmest friendship and esteem. Scarcely could a more agreeable opportunity of gratifying my inclinations have been offered me; it was not therefore to be resisted, and it was gladly embraced.

When I first quitted England, I hoped to have been able to extend my wanderings much further than subsequent events rendered possible. *L'homme propose, et Dieu dispose*, is a common saying among the French; and a variety of circumstances prevented my ever going beyond the French territory, as it was my earnest wish to have done. The peace, in which the nation had exulted so much, was, alas! of short duration; and I had soon to regret the renewal of hostilities no less on my own account, as foiling many a pleasant project which I had formed, than to deplore it as the heaviest of all public calamities. But if I have not been able to penetrate, with Hannibal, into the very heart of Italy, those rich plains of Languedoc over which he led his bands in hostile array I have traversed pacifically;—that Rhone, whose rapid stream has been rendered doubly celebrated by his memorable passage over it, I have crossed and recrossed,—along its banks, the wild and romantic beauties of which must ever delight the eye of the poet and the painter,—which, from having so often resounded with the ly of the Troubadour, may be almost considered as classic ground,—along the banks of this river I have travelled many a mile; and if I could not sit, with Marius, amid the ruins of Carthage, I have visited more than one spot in Gaul rendered celebrated by the efforts of his arms.

Having obtained passports for our departure, my two companions and myself set off from London on the third

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of February 1802, and, sleeping that night at Rochester, arrived the next day at Dover, having seen in our way the dock yard at Chatham and the venerable cathedral at Canterbury. To me every step of the route beyond Blackheath was new; and if I thought with delight on the many objects of curiosity which I hoped to contemplate in foreign countries, I had anticipated no less pleasure in becoming acquainted with one object which I was to see in England, the celebrated cliffs of Dover. Who can read Shakespeare's description and not wish to behold those stupendous heights, in looking down from which we are told that

The crows and choughs that wing the midway air
Show scarce so gross as beetles!

Familiarized as we are with this description, if we are disposed to allow for a little poetical colouring in the sketching it, we yet expect to see something very astonishing, very sublime: How great then is the disappointment at finding a distance so immense between the picture as embellished by the poet's imagination, and the scene as it actually exists! Dr. Moore, in his *Travels in Italy*, speaking of the Tarpeian rock, which he says now measures only fifty-eight feet in height, though from the accumulation of dirt and rubbish! at its base he supposes that it might formerly have measured eighty, proceeds to say: "In reading the history of the Romans, the vast ideas we form of that people naturally extend to the city of Rome, to the hills on which it was built, and to every thing else belonging to it. We image to ourselves the Tarpeian rock, as a tremendous precipice; and if afterwards we have an opportunity of actually seeing it, the height falls so far short of our expectation, that we are apt to think it

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“ a great deal less than it is in reality. A mistake of this kind, joined to a careless view of the place, which is not in itself very interesting, has led Bishop Burnet into the strange assertion, that the Tarpeian rock is so very low that a man would think it no great matter to leap down it for his diversion.”—And, indeed, when I saw Dover cliffs they appeared to me so very diminutive in comparison of the picture with which my imagination was filled, that I was almost tempted to say the same thing of them. Here I might perhaps have been guilty of an extravagance not less glaring than that of the poet; but I was absolutely mortified to find that even if the crows and choughs had been at the bottom of the cliffs, instead of winging the midway air, I should have distinguished them very plainly for crows, and never have mistaken them for beetles.

The two days of our journey to Dover had been extremely mild and calm, and we flattered ourselves with the idea of having an immediate and favourable passage to Calais. But unfortunately the wind rose in the night, and before morning it blew a violent storm, so that the first thing we heard on quitting our rooms was, that a French vessel had been wrecked about two hours before in coming into the harbour. This was not very pleasant intelligence to persons who were then waiting to cross the Straights. The vessel was not however lost. She had been thrown by the force of the waves against the pier, the timbers of which had beat in part of a plank on one side, and she immediately filled with water and sunk: the crew saved themselves by scrambling out upon the pier, but many effects were lost. On the tide retiring, the vessel was left aground, so that the breach was stopped before the return of the waters, and she was then carried into the inner harbour to undergo a

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more effectual repair. She had been fourteen hours in coming from Calais.

Scarcely had we alighted at our inn when we were visited by half a dozen captains of vessels, soliciting to carry us over, each assuring us that his vessel was the most safe, the most commodious, and the best sailer of any in the harbour. From such a competition one advantage at least we hoped might have been derived, that we should be able to make an arrangement for our passage upon reasonable terms. But in this we found ourselves mistaken. As the definitive treaty of peace was not yet concluded, the price of the passage had not been regulated, and passengers were wholly at the mercy of these gentlemen, who had been so long deprived of the profits arising from the customary intercourse between the two countries, that they were now like a flock of hungry cormorants contending for their prey. And though they used all the means of competition which were to be derived from their own eloquence, or from making interest with the landlord of the inn to recommend them, they had agreed not to have recourse to that of underselling each other, and had fixed the price of the passage at the enormous rate of three guineas each person. But there was no help for it on our parts, and that they well knew; so we were obliged to submit to the imposition, and engaged our passage with the captain of a packet who we found was patronized by our landlord, and who he assured us must sail the first moment that it was possible, as he had government dispatches to carry over. This we found afterwards, when it was too late to profit by the lesson, was rather a reason why we should not have engaged to go with him.

The wind continued so high all that day and the next that it was impossible to think of crossing the sea: so

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after going through the necessary business at the custom-house, and getting our passports countersigned, we had nothing to do but to walk about and amuse ourselves as well as we could during the time that we must of necessity be detained.

One thing which amused us much was, the pretensions made by the inhabitants of Dover to talking French; and as they found that two of our party were French people, they were eager to make all possible display of their talent. We had sent a trunk to Dover by the waggon, which we expected to be there before us, and on our arrival we dispatched the waiter of the inn to the office to inquire for it. When he returned, he said that no trunk was come: this surprised us much, and we questioned him whether he had been to the right place and spoken to the bookkeeper of the waggon. He replied that he had; and that the trunk certainly could not be there, for the bookkeeper understood French extremely well, and must have known if it had been. This I suppose was very conclusive reasoning in the waiter's conception of things; but to us it did not very clearly appear how the bookkeeper's understanding French was to affect his knowledge or ignorance of the arrival of our trunk, which was directed in plain English. In walking about the town we found a notice stuck up at a window, that the master of the house and his clerk might be found *speaking French at all hours of the day*. Such was his mode of announcing that he and his clerk could speak French, and might be found at all hours of the day.

At length, after having waited two days for fair weather, we crossed on the third in a violent storm. The night had been calm, and about ten in the morning we received a message from our captain that the vessel

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would sail as soon as the tide would serve for carrying her out of the harbour, which would be in about two hours. Before the expiration, however, of those two hours the wind had risen again so much, that when we embarked, my companion, Monsieur B——, observed to the mate, that it seemed extremely boisterous; to which the other coolly answered, “*A fresh breeze, sir.*” But the breeze continued freshening so much during the voyage, and the waves became so tremendous, that the countenances of both captain and mate began to lengthen exceedingly; and when we were about half way over, Monsieur B——, observing to the latter that the breeze seemed to have *freshened* very much, he turned away without making any answer, while the captain muttered between his teeth, “*Worse than I thought,*” called for a glass of rum and some hot spice gingerbread, and advised the gentlemen, most of whom had remained on deck, to go down into the cabin. The motive of this advice was perfectly well understood by them, that they might, by not seeing, be less sensible of their danger; but they had already seen enough not to be perfectly at their ease, and did not wish to experience, in addition to their fears, the physical inconvenience of helping further to crowd a little cabin, already overfilled by having nineteen women and children in it.

If, however, our passage was boisterous, it was soon over: unlike the vessel which had been fourteen hours coming from Calais to Dover, we crossed the same space in only two hours and a quarter. The arrival of a vessel in such weather excited no small degree of astonishment in the good people of Calais. They all cried; “*Il faut être Anglais pour se mettre en mer dans un pareil tems; mais ce sont de vrais loups de mer, ces messieurs-là.*” — “None but an Englishman would think

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“ of putting to sea in such weather ; but the English “ are absolute sea wolves.”—It must not be supposed, however, that in calling the English *loups de mer* (sea wolves) the French mean to represent them as savage and ferocious ; it is merely a phrase in common use to express a very adventurous seaman, one who braves all dangers on his favourite element, whom no winds or waves can deter from pursuing his course. Our captain had indeed, it was agreed on all hands, run a very great risk both for himself and his passengers in putting to sea at such a moment ; but being obliged to go at almost all hazards, on account of the dispatches which he had to convey to Lord Cornwallis, who was then negotiating the definitive treaty of peace at Amiens, and being much better paid for the transport of passengers than of dispatches, he was very unwilling to carry over the least profitable part of his cargo and leave the most profitable behind. For ourselves, the whole complement of passengers I mean, to the number of thirty-two, we placed implicit confidence in the captain’s judgment, and concluded that as he thought it safe to go himself, we had no reason to hesitate in accompanying him. It appeared, however, that our confidence was rather the result of ignorance, and that we might have known that these captains are not a little addicted to running foolish risks of this kind with the lives of their passengers for the sake of profit to themselves. The storm increased so much after our arrival at Calais, that two coasting vessels were lost in the evening in attempting to make the harbour, and in the night several others were driven ashore.