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978-1-108-08103-0 - A Narrative of Three Years' Residence in France, Principally in the Southern Departments, from the Year 1802 to 1805: Volume 3

Anne Plumptre

Excerpt

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

CHAPTER I.

Departure from Aix.—Nismes.—Lunel.

OUR stay in Provence had already been protracted far beyond the time we expected on our first coming into the country ; and as no very immediate prospect appeared of the business which principally detained my friends being terminated, I was obliged to think of leaving them without our returning to Paris together, as we had projected. My original intention was to have set out on my return home the latter end of September or beginning of October, as the best season for travelling, the great heats being then past, and the bad weather of winter not yet set in. I had once a prospect of joining an English family at Geneva, and accompanying them to England ; and in that case I had projected to make a circuit by Nice and Turin, and so to Geneva : but this idea was put an end to by the uncertainty the family seemed to be in, as to their own plans ; so that it was not possible to make any decisive arrangement with them. Be-

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sides, they had no thoughts of going to Paris, which I much wished to revisit, though in the end I was obliged to abandon that idea. They talked rather of going through Germany to Hamburgh or Tonningen, and there embarking for England.

The same cause which occasioned my going by Paris to be abandoned, was also the occasion of so long a delay in my time of setting out, that instead of beginning my journey in October it was not begun till December; so that I was at length necessitated to do what I particularly wished to avoid,—to travel at the time when the days are at the shortest. The truth was, that when I first determined upon returning to England without waiting any longer for my friends being able to quit Provence, I was not aware that on account of the war I could not have a passport for my return granted at Aix; that it could only be issued by the minister of war at Paris. In this state of ignorance, it was not my intention to make any application for a passport till every thing should be arranged for my departure; and to this idea I should have adhered, had not an accidental circumstance roused me from my apathy. Happening to mention my purpose of returning to England, in a company where was a gentleman better informed upon the subject than myself, or any of my more immediate friends, he asked me whether I was aware that the passport for my departure must be applied for to the minister of war, at Paris, by means of a petition signed by myself: that such had been the regulation with regard to foreigners since the breaking out of the war. He told me, besides, that I had better remit my petition, if I could, to some friend at Paris to present it, so that I might be sure of attention being paid to it, otherwise it might be thrown aside, and pass a long time unobserved.

This information did, indeed, rather disconcert my

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plans: however, as it was then only the latter end of August, I still hoped that there would be sufficient time to get the passport by the beginning of October, and that I should be able to set out at the time I had proposed. A petition, proper for the occasion, was therefore immediately remitted to a gentleman at Paris, who I had no doubt would render me the service I wanted. He was one to whom I had been much recommended by the late excellent Dr. Woodville; and all the time of my stay at Paris I had received great civilities from him and his amiable wife. He had, besides, connexions among some of the ministers, which I thought would facilitate the matter to him. That I do not here mention his name is solely owing to a hesitation whether or not it might be agreeable to him. In addition to his other civilities, I have to acknowledge the polite and friendly manner in which he assisted me in this instance.

But whatever pains he was so obliging as to take, the delays and forms of office made the matter very tedious. I do not mean to say that any difficulty was started as to granting the passport, but on all occasions of a similar kind there are certain forms which must be gone through; and amidst the multiplicity of business by which ministers in all countries are constantly occupied, the concern of each simple individual cannot receive the immediate attention which he may wish, or perhaps think it might receive. Every man's own affairs seem to himself so important, that he is disposed to think they ought to be as important to all others, and receive such immediate attention as it may be impossible for persons in a great public office to give. I mention this, because I would on no account have it supposed that I mean to cast any reflection upon the French government for the delay I experienced: I can truly say, that as far as concerns myself, I never found

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the least disposition to incivility or unhandsome treatment in any way on account of being an Englishwoman, either from persons in power or from individuals. On the contrary, I have every reason to speak with gratitude of the uniform civilities I received from persons of all descriptions with whom it fell in my way to have any intercourse during the whole of my residence in France.

But it was necessary that the passport should be sent down to the general of division at Aix, who was to fill it up with the description of my person, and with the name of the place at which I decided to embark, the choice being given me between La Rochelle and Morlaix, the two ports allotted to the reception of cartel ships. It was, besides, requisite that I should sign the passport. Afterwards it was to be returned to Paris for the signature of the minister at war, and then to be sent down again to the general to deliver to me. All these things must unavoidably have taken up some time, even if ministers had had nothing else to attend to; and amidst the numerous other and more important objects to which their attention must be directed, the delay I experienced was not surprising, though rather inconvenient to me, since I did not receive the passport finally till the middle, or rather past the middle, of November. Morlaix was the place at which I made my election to embark, both because the voyage would be much shorter from thence than from La Rochelle, and still more because my friend Madame B—— had a cousin established there as a physician, to whom she could recommend me. This was of considerable importance, as it was probable that I might have to make some stay at the place of embarkation, since there was no regular intercourse between the two countries, but I was to depend upon the irregularity of the arrival and departure of cartels.

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In consequence of this delay, all idea of going by Paris was unavoidably at an end. It was now just the time when the new emperor was to be consecrated and crowned: and from the extraordinary circumstances which attended his elevation and character, as well as from the eclat of the ceremony itself, such a general eagerness pervaded the whole empire to repair to Paris at this moment, that great restrictions were necessarily made in the granting of passports thither. The concourse of people who were summoned to attend at the ceremony officially was pretty considerable; and if, besides, all who wished to be present only as a matter of curiosity had been indiscriminately permitted to follow their inclinations, Paris would have been so overthronged, that it would have been scarcely possible for ail to find lodging, or, what was a much more important consideration, for supplies to have been readily provided for their subsistence. For myself, therefore, a foreigner, an Englishwoman, to think of going thither at such a moment was out of the question.

Two other routes were offered to my choice, very little differing in the length of way; but so materially differing in other circumstances, as to leave no hesitation in determining which to prefer. One was by Lyons, and then cross the middle departments to Nantes: the other through Languedoc to Bordeaux, and so through La Vendee into Bretagne. This latter route lying through some of the finest parts of France, and including a number of towns of particular note, my choice was immediately decided; and the prospect of novelty which it afforded, compensated somewhat for my disappointment in not being able to see Paris any more.

I might have departed from Aix about ten days sooner than I actually did; but as ten days was matter of small importance after so long a delay, I deferred my de-

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parture so much longer in order to be present at the representation of Racine's beautiful tragedy of Esther, by a school of young ladies, in which a niece of Monsieur B—— was to be one of the performers; and this further delay brought the day of my setting out to the second of December, the very day on which Bonaparte was crowned. I was much gratified with the play: it was surprisingly well performed, all circumstances considered; and some figure dances by the scholars, which concluded the evening's entertainment, were admirably executed.

The pleasures of travelling are very great: but as in this world all pleasures have their alloy, so I was now to experience the pains that are attached to this pleasure. Though returning to my own country and family, it was impossible not to feel sensations of deep regret at quitting a society among whom I had passed many months so very pleasantly. I had already partially experienced this regret at my departure from Marseilles after a visit of three weeks, which I had made to Madame V——, for the purpose of taking leave of all my pleasant acquaintance in that town. But the moment that separated me from my excellent friends Monsieur and Madame B——, with whom I had now been domesticated for three years, was a painful one indeed; especially quitting them, as I did, under the greatest possible uncertainty whether it might ever be my fate to see them again: not even the pleasurable feelings attached to the idea of seeing again my own country and family could for a while overbalance it. Our separation has since been rendered more painful by the constantly increasing difficulty of communication between the two countries, even by letter. When may we hope to see the sad and fatal animosity which has so long been unhappily cherished between France and England subside, and the pleasant intercourse renewed, which

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ORGON.

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I trust peace would still reestablish? The short time that the intercourse was allowed to subsist was the means of procuring me so many pleasant hours, that I cannot but ardently desire for my own sake, as well as for that of the nation at large, to see a cessation of the heavy calamities which war always brings in its train. To have quitted the country where these pleasant hours were experienced,—to have quitted a society among whom I had received for so long a time such unremitting civilities, without experiencing any regret, would have been no laudable feeling.

I set out from Aix in the diligence from Marseilles to Nismes, on the second of December 1804, about two in the afternoon, in a day so beautiful that it seemed like the middle of summer. But before evening a most extraordinary change in the weather came on: the north wind rose, and it became so cold, that for the latter part of that day's journey I suffered more from cold, being totally unprepared for it and not clothed to resist it, than I did at any time during the rest of my route, even when I got to the northernmost part of it. So sudden and great a change in the weather I had never seen during twenty-six months that I had passed in the south of France. The roads being very indifferent, we did not reach Orgon, about thirty miles from Aix, our place of rest for the night, till near nine o'clock; and never did I rejoice more at the sight of a good fire. All night it froze very hard, and continued to freeze till about noon the next day, when it began to rain, and the weather became very mild. This was more like one of the changeable fits of our English climate than like the general course of the climate in Provence.

We crossed the Rhone in our second day's journey, between Tarascon and Beaucaire, on the bridge of boats which has been already mentioned; but I quitted the carriage, as I had resolved to do if ever again that bridge should

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lie in my route, and went over it on foot. We reached Nismes the same evening about seven, a course of fifty miles. As I had already seen this place, I had not intended stopping there, but had proposed going on the next day to Montpellier, in the diligence from Avignon to Toulouse. A lady from Marseilles, a fellow traveller in the diligence to Nismes, had the same intention, and so had a gentleman of the law of Montpellier, and his wife, whom we had taken up at Beaucaire, where they had been to attend the marriage of a son. But when we came to inquire at Nismes for places, we found that the diligence was full, and that not one of us could pursue our intention. Our lawyer, Monsieur P——, then proposed, as we were four, to hire a carriage to Montpellier, which would not be more expense to each than a place in the diligence, and would save us waiting at Nismes two days till the next diligence was to pass. To this proposal we readily assented, and he sallied forth in quest of a carriage; but such was the general movement at that moment all over France, occasioned by the coronation, that no such thing was to be had, and we found ourselves compelled to remain at Nismes till some means of release should be offered us. Our Marseillaise had a friend in the town, with whom she went to pass her time; but Monsieur and Madame P—— and myself were under circumstances which irresistibly led to our joining company as long as we should be detained, and amusing ourselves together as well as we could.

Madame P——, who was always ill with travelling, sought her amusement in remaining at the inn; but Monsieur P—— and myself were not disposed to seek ours in the same way; and we agreed to walk about, and pass away the time among those never-failing sources of interest, and surely I may add of instruction, the Roman

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NISMES.

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remains; nor was I altogether sorry to have such an opportunity of reexamining them.

I have already expressed my surprise at the indifference which seems to reign in this neighbourhood respecting the stupendous remains of Roman grandeur with which it abounds, and said that I had a very remarkable instance, illustrative of this indifference, to cite in its proper place. This instance was found in Monsieur P——, my lawyer of Montpellier. He was not a young man, being, according to appearance, between fifty and sixty years of age, and had lived all his life at Montpellier, frequently passing through Nismes, in the course of his excursions on pleasure or on business; yet had he never concerned himself further with the Roman antiquities, than as they absolutely thrust themselves upon his notice. The amphitheatre is by the side of the road to Montpellier, so that he had unavoidably seen the outside of that repeatedly; but he had never been inspired with curiosity to examine the interior. So of the Maison Carrée, in walking about the town though he must see it, he had seen it as he might see any of the most ordinary houses, without giving it the least attention or examination. But for the remains of the temple of Diana, as they are in a more remote part and locked up, he did not even know of their existence; and the Tour Magne he had only seen in the distant view of it which is to be had from various parts; he had never taken the trouble to ascend the hill on which it stands, to examine it more accurately. The baths he could not avoid seeing, as the garden in which they stand is the great promenade of the town; but of the history attached to them he was wholly ignorant, not even knowing that any part of the building was a remnant of antiquity.

To all these things I carried him, making him examine them attentively; and in compliance with my enthu-

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siasm' at least, if not from his own feeling, he stopped, he contemplated, he admired them as much as I did, and owned that he had shown great insensibility in having hitherto passed them over unnoticed. He said he should always relate it as a curious circumstance in the Chapter of Accidents, that he had been first led to pay attention to these monuments, which till this moment he had regarded with indifference, though they might be said to be almost constantly before his eyes, by a stranger, an Englishwoman, whom chance alone had thrown in his way: and he added, that he should always in coming to Nismes think of me with gratitude, for the new source of pleasure which I had procured him. Whether he really felt all the pleasure he expressed I shall not pretend to determine; very probably the monuments have been since as little the objects of his attention as they were before.

So much has been already said of these remains in relating my former visit to Nismes, that it would be mere repetition to add any thing respecting them in this place: I shall only say that I was not less gratified with this second sight of them than with the first. The tessellated pavement I was again disappointed of seeing. The silk-merchant, in whose premises it is, had piled so many bales of goods upon it, that it was entirely concealed, and to remove them so as to let it be seen was impossible:—this can scarcely be called less than sacrilege. The evening we passed at the theatre, which has been new built within a few years. It is spacious and handsome, but was badly lighted, thinly attended, and the performers were very moderate. It is said that the theatre is too large for the town, so is seldom well filled; and the ordinary expenses of the house are consequently more than can well be supported by the company.

The day had been fine, but the evening clouded over;