

WASHING UP IN FRENCH LIBRARIES

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IT is always a pleasure to recall happy memories. It is not always certain that these reminiscences will prove as interesting to the hearers as to the speaker. Nevertheless, perhaps the reader may like to hear a little about two Paris libraries that I once knew fairly well, and where, for a time, I was privileged to make myself useful, in a very humble way.

The Hôtel Thiers is one of four or five palatial, old, stone houses, built in a circle around the Place St.—Georges, half-way up the slopes of Montmartre. Seventy years ago, this house was the residence of Adolphe Thiers, the dynamic little statesman who became the first President of the Third Republic. He had no children, and on the death of his widow the estate passed into the hands of his sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Félicie Dosne, who, in her turn, bequeathed it to the *Institut de France*.

Like other fine buildings to which the Institute has fallen heir, the Hôtel Thiers became a museum and historical library. Therein are the personal effects of Monsieur Thiers,—books, papers, furniture, and a collection of coins and ceramics. His bedroom and study remain as he left them, with his writing-table and spectacles, decorations, and his Academician's uniform, the coveted *habit vert*, cocked hat and sword which only the members of the French Institute may don. There is a caricature, by Daumier, representing Thiers as a very knowing little cock-sparrow, perched on the limb of an enormous, benevolent oak that is Gambetta. Without Gambetta, to be sure, there would have been no Thiers, and—of the two—Gambetta's was the nobler soul. Yet the little cock-sparrow, though a persistently unpopular figure, held the fate of France for years, and was a wise and careful servant of his country.

The French Institute keeps material relative to pre-Revolution history at the Palais Mazarin, the palace built, in the seventeenth century, for his own use, by the cardinal-prime minister of Louis the Thirteenth, and now the official home of the five Academies which together constitute the Institute. Material treating of events dating from 1789 on is at Thiers. The greater part of this was amassed and presented by the late Frédéric

Masson, the well-known authority on Napoleon the First and his times. His *collection iconographique*, housed on the ground-floor, is a curious mixture of fine and tawdry. A sample of every thing bearing on his subject that French artists and illustrators could produce found its way into his collection;—marbles, bronzes, medallions in every metal, paintings, etchings, prints (down to the crudest chromos) turned out by the hundred, at Epinal, for use in elementary schools. It was when the entire Masson collection had just been deposited at Thiers, and Monsieur Malo, the curator, bereft of his regular assistant, was tearing his hair at the task incumbent on him, that I first found my way up Monsieur Thiers's great staircase, with its beautiful wrought-iron balustrade, to lend a hand where I might be able. In France a librarian of standing is a highly-trained and erudite gentleman, an historian and a man of letters, a graduate of the *Ecole des chartes*, and an expert archivist and palaeographer. He must also have passed a very stiff competitive examination, held only once in three or four years, and known as the *Grand examen des bibliothécaires*. Gloriously ignorant, but bursting with good-will, I was politely written down in the ledger as *bibliothécaire auxiliaire*. Aware, as I was, of what librarianship in France really meant, this euphemistic title tickled me tremendously. So when Monsieur Malo asked me what the English equivalent would be, I said "washer-upper", which word amused him, especially as he found it difficult to pronounce. So, ever after, when in facetious mood, he used to call me "Mademoiselle Washerupre", and it stuck.

The cataloguing system was simple and easy to learn. At first, I did the usual filing, and checking of accounts, or occasionally stamping, when the *gardien de bureau* was behind with his work; I helped to sort out collections of coins, and verified anonymous volumes. Then came collection of autographs, some of them difficult to decipher, involving work with biographical dictionaries. Next I catalogued the *Coupures Masson* boxes and boxes of newspaper clippings, put carefully away, in pink paper chemises. This would have been tedious work, had not so many of the clippings afforded spicy reading; the late Monsieur Masson had a pungent sense of humour, and history in detail proved piquant, when not scandalous. After that, came a series of in-quartos and in-octavos, and then a number of *éditions de luxe*, which were a joy to behold and handle, but required endless consultation of *Cim* and other reference-books. It was a fascinating study, and now, alas! I have forgotten the little that I ever learned.

But by far the most interesting part of the material was the collections of documents. Just before I arrived, Monsieur Malo had begun to go over the Montholon papers. It will be remembered that General Montholon was one of three staff-officers who accompanied Napoleon to St. Helena. When, after his abdication, Bertrand and Druot refused to go with their emperor into exile, Napoleon appealed to Montholon, who consented on the spot, and sailed with him on the *Bellerophon*, together with Gouraud and Las Cases. The two latter soon wearied of the life, and returned to Europe. Montholon stayed on, as Napoleon's secretary and major-domo, nursed him devotedly through his last illness, and closed his eyes when the end came. The original last will and testament is not at Thiers, but at the National Archives; nevertheless, several copies in Montholon's writing were in our papers, as well as all the household accounts of Longwood. In spite of all the propaganda that was fabricated at St. Helena and spread all over Europe, later on, the French group lived comfortably, on an adequate allowance. They took with them enough gear for an army. One item that aroused our curiosity was three hundred odd pairs of something called "Charivari". What "Charivari" might be, none of us knew, but finally, in a late eighteenth-century book of fashions, we discovered them to be knee-breeches. Three hundred pairs of white satin knee-breeches for St. Helena! Did Napoleon imagine that he was going to hold a little court, with levees,—*fêles gelantes sous les palmiers*? Or had the European tradesmen seized the opportunity to get rid of superfluous merchandise, at their government's expense? Did those elegant garments serve to stuff up the rat-holes of which Barry O'Meara complained so bitterly, or did they come back to grace the nether limbs of Louis the Eighteenth's courtiers? There was no telling.

Correspondence that I remember especially was relative to a most unfortunate incident which occurred, after the Franco-Prussian war, at the close of the Prussian occupation of France. Largely thanks to Monsieur Thiers and his intelligent system of taxation, the iniquitous indemnity had been paid in full, and the Prussian troops were about to evacuate French territory. What the formation was I could not make out, but the French and Prussian regiments were lined up, and the order to wheel and march was about to be given, when, quite accidentally, the end of a French officer's whip flicked a German cavalry-horse, causing him to rear and throw his rider. However natural the satisfaction of many of those present, events took a most unpleasant turn.

Here, to the Prussian mind, was a heaven-sent pretext for postponing evacuation and extorting further indemnity. The consternation at the Quai d'Orsay can be imagined, and Monsieur Thiers was ill with anxiety. However, after a tense forty-eight hours, the Boche was persuaded to behave with amazing magnanimity, and pardon this grievous offence.

It was a pleasant life that we led, in Monsieur Thiers's long, sunny drawing-room, with its tall windows looking out over the old Place St-Georges. Not many historians seemed interested in post-Revolution research, but the lack of numbers made visitors feel all the more at home, and what happy hours I spent, listening to the talk of men and women versed, *par excellence*, in the art of good conversation! Monsieur Octave Aubry came, from time to time, to discuss early nineteenth-century France, and Monsieur Maurice Paléologue, who knew and wrote so touchingly of the ex-Empress Eugénie. Now and then Madame Yvette Guilbert would drop in, in search of *Directoire* ballads, and keep us in fits of laughter, with her droll stories and mordant wit. What a tongue! But what kindness of heart, as well! Another musician, a very great one, whom we saw occasionally, was the late Monsieur Ch.-Marie Widor, whose *heure de musique*, on Saturday afternoons, is one of the pleasantest things I shall ever have to look back upon. He was ninety years old, and still climbing up to the organ-loft of St-Sulpice, every single Sunday; he prided himself on never having missed a Christmas Midnight Mass. Sometimes a visitor would recall to mind the observation of a small girl I know, who once said to me, "You know, Auntie, the more people are, the less they look it, don't they?"

One afternoon, I was alone with Gouais, the *gardien de bureau*, when there appeared the oddest, most down-at-heel, little old man and woman I had ever seen in my life. I could only assume that they had come to try to sell a family treasure, — a drawing, or a book, or a coin. We were used to such folk, who had to be dealt with gently, and the pitiful air of these two made me fairly melt with compassion. But it seemed that they wished only to borrow and take away a volume of our autographed edition of *The Golden Bough*. I thought I saw a light; they doubtless belonged to that shabby army of paid readers who, for a pittance, collected material for *saucants*. We explained that only Monsieur Malo could authorize a loan, and advised them to wait until he arrived, which he was likely to do at any moment. The man, though obviously put out, was quite polite and reasonable. His spouse was of another kidney altogether. Brandishing

an enormous ear-trumpet, which, in her agitation, she endeavoured, every now and then, to use as a megaphone, she went, then and there, into a tantrum that was worth seeing, all in the most remarkable French. "Mademoiselle speaks English!" shouted her perturbed little husband,—"very nicely," he added, beaming kindly at me. She would none of it, and finally, bursting into tears, cried, "We've had nothing to eat since yesterday noon!" This was too awful! But while I was wondering whether they would be insulted if I sent Gouais across the street for sandwiches, the man observed, a little peevishly, "I don't see why I can't have the book. It was I who presented it to the library. In fact, I'm the author." Sir James and Lady Frazer! Well, they went away, dreadfully disgruntled, and Gouais and I waited, shaking in our shoes, for the Chief to return and scold us roundly for not having made an exception, in the circumstances. However, Monsieur Malo only laughed, and sent Gouais over to the Hôtel Terminus, with the book and a note, and next day we read in the *Temps* all about the Folk-lorist conference, at the Sorbonne, where Lady Frazer had interviewed a group of reporters and told them how, when working at top-speed, she and Sir James usually lived, for weeks together, on oranges, exclusively. "Hunger clears the brain," said she.

No description of the *Bibliothèque Thiers* would be complete without a portrait of Gouais, the *gardien de bureau*, (a sort of glorified office-boy), and our guide, philosopher and friend. He must have been seventy or over, tall and straight as a ramrod, in fact so straight he bent backwards, with mustachios like the late Kaiser's, and carefully henna-ed hair. His father had been a railway porter, and his mother a laundress, and what Gouais should have been, and probably will be, in his next life, was Master of Ceremonies at the Quai d'Orsay, or possibly the Court of St. James's. If I may be forgiven the cliché, Gouais really was one of Nature's gentlemen. How many mistakes of mine he pointed out, in time for me to correct them, before they came to the Chief's notice! Monsieur Malo was an extremely jolly person, but not one to suffer fools gladly. If I forgot to number a volume,—"There is a little orphan, here, Mademoiselle, who begs of you to grant him Christian baptism!" No service I might ask was irksome: *Toujours à votre service, Mademoiselle. Vous savez que cela me fait plaisir.* He could spin the most entrancing yarns about Paris, as far back as 1870, of Paris under siege, and of the tons of hoarded food that were unearthed, near the Porte St-Denis, when the siege was lifted. He would describe

Victor Hugo's funeral-cortège, with the flock of doves that flew low over the funeral-barge, as it neared the Pont-Neuf, or the marriage festivities of the Princesse de Chimène, or a row at the Archives, where he had once been employed, or something entertaining in ecclesiastical circles; his mother had washed for the clergy of St-Germain-des-Près, and Gouais was fanatically anti-clerical, most of his convictions being borrowed, I rather think, from the works of the late Monsieur Eugène Sue. Sometimes he could be prevailed upon to—sing he had a good voice—sentimental, delightful ditties of the period of Henri Murger and Alexandre Dumas. His language was ceremonious, when not grandiloquent. One of our regular readers was a charming, elderly lady, an enthusiastic historian and genuine intellectual. She had, however, a soul above clothes, and one day, when she rose to go, Gouais, looking up from his stamping, was filled with apprehension. "It was delicate, Mademoiselle; it was infinitely delicate. But the good God sent me the words; I found the formula. Hastening after her, and respectfully removing my casquette",—Gouais always flourished his peaked cap, as the *seigneur d'Artagnan* would flourish his plumed hat,—"Madame," I said, 'Will you permit your servitor to inform you, in the most respectful manner in the world, that—your stocking—is being unfaithful to you.' "

Time passed, and Monsieur Malo was appointed curator of the Musée Condé at Chantilly. Monsieur Albert-Emile Sorel, son of the historian, came to take his place, and I was transferred to the Palais Mazarin, across the river, on the Quai Conti, the loveliest part, I think, of all that lovely city. Here the milieu was more formal and more picturesque. On alternate days, I worked at one end of the reading-room, cataloguing the Schlumberger pamphlets, and up on a little balcony, just above, sorting out part of the *Fonds Rodocanachi*. I used to like to fetch the boxes, myself, wandering up and down steep little stairways, and along narrow passages, where the tiles, loose under my feet, had faded from crimson to an exquisite, pale coral. Rooms, in what were originally royal suites, had intricate, satiny parquets, and beautiful, carved panelling. Dirt and delapidation were everywhere, alas! Those lovely floors were never made to bear the weight of the books piled upon them. The main corridors, where once the lackeys lay, at night, outside their masters' doors, skirted the outside walls, and from the windows one could gaze down on the cobble-stoned court, lined with creepers and seventeenth-century statuary, where pigeons cooed and pussy-cats

sunned themselves in the niches, and the concierges' babies crept about on shawls, and the Immortals came in and out. Farther along, and one had turned a corner and looked directly across the *rus Mazarin*, and into the apartments opposite, catching glimpses of shabby, cozy, cheerful family life. A little farther still, and there were the *quais*, and the book-stalls, and the gray Louvre across the Seine, and the sturdy little tugs, red and black, pulling their heavy loads up under the bridges and past Notre-Dame. And, one summer's day, I stood in one of the apartments, below, and saw our own King and Queen, smiling from the royal barge, as it passed swiftly along. Never shall I forget how sympathetic and charming the French were, about that royal visit, and how several of them said to me, using almost the same words every time, "Bear in mind, Mademoiselle, that the French are all monarchists at heart, every one." There may have been more to it than a mere pretty speech; certainly they have had little luck with their republics.

From time to time there would be a *séance solennelle*, when the members of the Institute would assemble, *sous la coupole*, to greet a newly-elected Academician, and hear his panegyric of the member to whose chair he had succeeded. These seances are events in the intellectual world, and, long before the doors are opened, people who have received invitations are queuing up on the steps of the Palais Mazarin. If one were lucky enough to be given a card, a *séance* was always exciting. But the speeches were long, and the benches hard, and when one had been three or four times, it was really more fun to be inside, and watch what went on in the reading-room, where the members assembled, before and after the seance. Charles Kingsley, who owes much to Rabelais, speaks somewhere of wisdom and mirth meeting together, when *savants* are assembled. His words would come back to me, as I watched the gatherings. On these occasions, the personnel always retired discreetly into the background, my balcony was a coign of vantage from which to view the crowd, and pick out the various illustrious folk, whose fame was world-wide, and whose books one had sometimes read. A jollier lot of old gentlemen it would be hard to find. The secretary, the Baron de Seillières, received the members, looking like an aristocrat in a Paul Bourget novel, a fine figure of a man, with the most beautiful wave in his snowy crest, and a nice discrimination in the manner of his greetings. And there would be Monsieur Paul Bourget, himself, a very old man, leaning heavily on two sticks, and his disciple, Monsieur Henry Bordeaux, tall, stout and

complacent. There would be Monsieur Estaunié, the novelist, and the great barrister, Maître Henri-Robert, and Monsieur Joseph Bédier, and Monsieur Marcel Prévost, wrinkled and dapper, a rather unpleasant old beau. Then would appear the noble head of Monsieur Henri de Régnier, the poet, and the white, pointed beard of Monsieur Louis Barthou, the diplomat, soon to be assassinated, at Marseilles, with King Alexander of Jugoslavia. There were always several ecclesiastics, among others the Abbé Brémond, very tall and stately, and Monseigneur Baudrillart, rector of the Université Catholique, in his purple soutane and calotte, and wearing the pectoral cross. He was well under five feet, and stout,—and the dignity and presence of that tiny little man were simply extraordinary. He has since defied the fat *Gauleiter*, in his quiet study, over in the rue d'Assas, and, I do not doubt, sent him away feeling extremely cheap.¹

All this happy band—the five Academies were always represented—would assemble at the far end of the reading-room and gradually work down, laughing and chatting, and shoving like schoolboys, until just below my balcony, where I was craning my neck from behind a palissade of in-quartos.

Then the great clock in the cupola would chime,—one! —two! —There would be a sudden silence, and then, very important, would come the voice of an official, "*Messieurs!—L'heure a sonné!*" Softly, one after another would disappear down the dark, little stairway, and, from below, would come the roll of the drums, exactly as in the days of Conrard and Vaugelas and the Sun-King, and one knew that the people packed into the amphitheatre were being thrilled, in their turn.

A rather rarefied atmosphere, some will say. Perhaps, but by no means a stagnant one. The great charm of life in France is that it combines being quiet with being intensely alive. That shabby, dim, old room vibrated with the joy of living, seemed to shine, softly, with the contentment that comes of learning, and understanding, and creating, of loving and sharing an erudition that was never ponderous or self-conscious, but as graceful as it was profound. I am not one of those people who, returning to their own country, after years of absence abroad, would represent everything, elsewhere, as superior, if not ideal. As a matter of fact, I could have something to say about other aspects of life in France,—*le revers de la médaille*. But I do maintain that in the society of many French people, especially French intellectuals,

1. The news was announced, last June, of Monseigneur's death, in Paris.

there is much to enjoy and much to learn. Round about me, in the two libraries, where I spent more than seven happy years, and where I fairly basked in kindness and good fellowship, I was aware of an intellectual integrity so perfect, and an inspiration so high that it seemed as though a miracle must be vouchsafed, and work be exalted into prayer.

France has entered into captivity, and darkness has descended upon the sweet city that once radiated light, as, from end to end of Europe, is being celebrated a moral and intellectual Black Mass. There remains the memory of what has been. Grief notwithstanding, I count myself most happy when, with our own Elizabethan, who was wont to philosophize upon the beginning and the end of all things, I "summon up remembrance of things past."