

The Memoirs of Victor Hugo

By

Victor Hugo

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PREFACE.

This volume of memoirs has a double character--historical and intimate. The life of a period, the XIX Century, is bound up in the life of a man, VICTOR HUGO. As we follow the events set forth we get the impression they made upon the mind of the extraordinary man who recounts them; and of all the personages he brings before us he himself is assuredly not the least interesting. In portraits from the brushes of Rembrandts there are always two portraits, that of the model and that of the painter.

This is not a diary of events arranged in chronological order, nor is it a continuous autobiography. It is less and it is more, or rather, it is better than these. It is a sort of haphazard chronique in which only striking incidents and occurrences are brought out, and lengthy and wearisome details are avoided. VICTOR HUGO'S long and chequered life was filled with experiences of the most diverse character--literature and politics, the court and the street, parliament and the theatre, labour, struggles, disappointments, exile and triumphs. Hence we get a series of pictures of infinite variety.

Let us pass the gallery rapidly in review.

It opens in 1825, at Rheims, during the coronation of CHARLES X, with an amusing causerie on the manners and customs of the Restoration. The splendour of this coronation ceremony was singularly spoiled by the

pitiabile taste of those who had charge of it. These worthies took upon themselves to mutilate the sculpture work on the marvellous façade and to "embellish" the austere cathedral with Gothic decorations of cardboard. The century, like the author, was young, and in some things both were incredibly ignorant; the masterpieces of literature were then unknown to the most learned littérateurs: CHARLES NODIER had never read the "Romancero", and VICTOR HUGO knew little or nothing about Shakespeare.

At the outset the poet dominates in VICTOR HUGO; he belongs wholly to his creative imagination and to his literary work. It is the theatre; it is his "Cid", and "Hernani", with its stormy performances; it is the group of his actors, Mlle. MARS, Mlle. GEORGES, FREDERICK LEMAITRE, the French KEAN, with more genius; it is the Academy, with its different kind of coteries.

About this time VICTOR HUGO questions, anxiously and not in vain, a passer-by who witnessed the execution of LOUIS XVI, and an officer who escorted Napoleon to Paris on his return from the Island of Elba.

Next, under the title, "Visions of the Real", come some sketches in the master's best style, of things seen "in the mind's eye," as Hamlet says. Among them "The Hovel" will attract attention. This sketch resembles a page from EDGAR POE, although it was written long before POE's works were introduced into France.

With "Love in Prison" VICTOR HUGO deals with social questions, in which

he was more interested than in political questions. And yet, in entering the Chamber of Peers he enters public life. His sphere is enlarged, he becomes one of the familiars of the Tuileries. LOUIS PHILIPPE, verbose and full of recollections that he is fond of imparting to others, seeks the company and appreciation of this listener of note, and makes all sorts of confidences to him. The King with his very haughty bonhomie and his somewhat infatuated wisdom; the grave and sweet DUCHESS D'ORLEANS, the boisterous and amiable princes--the whole commonplace and home-like court--are depicted with kindness but sincerity.

The horizon, however, grows dark, and from 1846 the new peer of France notes the gradual tottering of the edifice of royalty. The revolution of 1848 bursts out. Nothing could be more thrilling than the account, hour by hour, of the events of the three days of February. VICTOR HUGO is not merely a spectator of this great drama, he is an actor in it. He is in the streets, he makes speeches to the people, he seeks to restrain them; he believes, with too good reason, that the Republic is premature, and, in the Place de la Bastille, before the evolutionary Faubourg Saint Antoine, he dares to proclaim the Regency.

Four months later distress provokes the formidable insurrection of June, which is fatal to the Republic.

The year 1848 is the stormy year. The atmosphere is fiery, men are violent, events are tragical. Battles in the streets are followed by fierce debates in the Assembly. VICTOR HUGO takes part in the mêlée. We witness the scenes with him; he points out the chief actors to us. His

"Sketches" made in the National Assembly are "sketched from life" in the fullest acceptation of the term. Twenty lines suffice. ODILON BARROT and CHANGARNIER, PRUDHON and BLANQUI, LAMARTINE and "Monsieur THIERS" come, go, speak--veritable living figures.

The most curious of the figures is LOUIS BONAPARTE when he arrived in Paris and when he assumed the Presidency of the Republic. He is gauche, affected, somewhat ridiculous, distrusted by the Republicans, and scoffed at by the Royalists. Nothing could be more suggestive or more piquant than the inauguration dinner at the Elysee, at which VICTOR HUGO was one of the guests, and the first and courteous relations between the author of "Napoleon the Little" and the future Emperor who was to inflict twenty years of exile upon him.

But now we come to the year which VICTOR HUGO has designated "The Terrible Year," the war, and the siege of Paris. This part of the volume is made up of extracts from note-books, private and personal notes, dotted down from day to day. Which is to say that they do not constitute an account of the oft-related episodes of the siege, but tell something new, the little side of great events, the little incidents of everyday life, the number of shells fired into the city and what they cost, the degrees of cold, the price of provisions, what is being said, sung, and eaten, and at the same time give the psychology of the great city, its illusions, revolts, wrath, anguish, and also its gaiety; for during these long months Paris never gave up hope and preserved an heroic cheerfulness.

On the other hand a painful note runs through the diary kept during the meeting of the Assembly at Bordeaux. France is not only vanquished, she is mutilated. The conqueror demands a ransom of milliards--it is his right, the right of the strongest; but he tears from her two provinces, with their inhabitants devoted to France; it is a return towards barbarism. VICTOR HUGO withdraws indignantly from the Assembly which has agreed to endorse the Treaty of Frankfort. And three days after his resignation he sees CHARLES HUGO, his eldest son, die a victim to the privations of the siege. He is stricken at once in his love of country and in his paternal love, and one can say that in these painful pages, more than in any of the others, the book is history that has been lived.

PAUL MAURICE.

Paris, Sept. 15, 1899.