

AT RHEIMS. 1823-1838.

It was at Rheims that I heard the name of Shakespeare for the first time. It was pronounced by Charles Nodier. That was in 1825, during the coronation of Charles X.

No one at that time spoke of Shakespeare quite seriously. Voltaire's ridicule of him was law. Mme. de Staël had adopted Germany, the great land of Kant, of Schiller, and of Beethoven. Ducis was at the height of his triumph; he and Delille were seated side by side in academic glory, which is not unlike theatrical glory. Ducis had succeeded in doing something with Shakespeare; he had made him possible; he had extracted some "tragedies" from him; Ducis impressed one as being a man who could chisel an Apollo out of Moloch. It was the time when Iago was called Pezare; Horatio, Norceste; and Desdemona, Hedelmone. A charming and very witty woman, the Duchess de Duras, used to say: "Desdemona, what an ugly name! Fie!" Talma, Prince of Denmark, in a tunic of lilac satin trimmed with fur, used to exclaim: "Avaunt! Dread spectre!" The poor spectre, in fact, was only tolerated behind the scenes. If it had ventured to put in the slightest appearance M. Evariste Dumoulin would have given it a severe talking to. Some Génin or other would have hurled at it the first cobble-stone he could lay his hand on--a line from Boileau: *L'esprit n'est point ému de ce qu'il ne croit pas.* It was replaced on the stage by an "urn" that Talma carried under his arm. A spectre is ridiculous; "ashes," that's the style! Are not the "ashes" of Napoleon still

spoken of? Is not the translation of the coffin from St. Helena to the Invalides alluded to as "the return of the ashes"? As to the witches of Macbeth, they were rigorously barred. The hall-porter of the Théâtre-Français had his orders. They would have been received with their own brooms.

I am mistaken, however, in saying that I did not know Shakespeare. I knew him as everybody else did, not having read him, and having treated him with ridicule. My childhood began, as everybody's childhood begins, with prejudices. Man finds prejudices beside his cradle, puts them from him a little in the course of his career, and often, alas! takes to them again in his old age.

During this journey in 1825 Charles Nodier and I passed our time recounting to each other the Gothic tales and romances that have taken root in Rheims. Our memories and sometimes our imaginations, clubbed together. Each of us furnished his legend. Rheims is one of the most impossible towns in the geography of story. Pagan lords have lived there, one of whom gave as a dower to his daughter the strips of land in Borysthenes called the "race-courses of Achilles." The Duke de Guyenne, in the fabliaux, passes through Rheims on his way to besiege Babylon; Babylon, moreover, which is very worthy of Rheims, is the capital of the Admiral Gaudissius. It is at Rheims that the deputation sent by the Locri Ozolae to Apollonius of Tyana, "high priest of Bellona," "disembarks." While discussing this disembarkation we argued concerning the Locri Ozolae. These people, according to Nodier, were called the Fetidae because they were half monkeys; according to myself, because

they inhabited the marshes of Phocis. We reconstructed on the spot the tradition of St. Remigius and his adventures with the fairy Mazelane. The Champagne country is rich in tales. Nearly all the old Gaulish fables had their origin in this province. Rheims is the land of chimeras. It is perhaps for this reason that kings were crowned there.

Legends are so natural to this place, are in such good soil, that they immediately began to germinate upon the coronation of Charles X. himself. The Duke of Northumberland, the representative of England at the coronation ceremonies, was reputed fabulously wealthy. Wealthy and English, how could he be otherwise than a la mode? The English, at that period, were very popular in French society, although not among the people. They were liked in certain salons because of Waterloo, which was still fairly recent, and to Anglicize the French language was a recommendation in ultra-fashionable society. Lord Northumberland, therefore, long before his arrival, was popular and legendary in Rheims. A coronation was a godsend to Rheims. A flood of opulent people inundated the city. It was the Nile that was passing. Landlords rubbed their hands with glee.

There was in Rheims in those days, and there probably is to-day, at the corner of a street giving on to the square, a rather large house with a carriage-entrance and a balcony, built of stone in the royal style of Louis XIV., and facing the cathedral. About this house and Lord Northumberland the following was related:

In January, 1825, the balcony of the house bore the notice: "House for Sale." All at once the "Moniteur" announced that the coronation of Charles X. would take place at Rheims in the spring. There was great rejoicing in the city. Notices of rooms to let were immediately hung out everywhere. The meanest room was to bring in at least sixty francs a day. One morning a man of irreproachable appearance, dressed in black, with a white cravat, an Englishman who spoke broken French, presented himself at the house in the square. He saw the proprietor, who eyed him attentively.

"You wish to sell your house?" queried the Englishman.

"How much?"

"Ten thousand francs."

"But I don't want to buy it."

"What do you want, then?"

"Only to hire it."

"That's different. For a year?"

"For six months?"

"No. I want to hire it for three days."

"How much will you charge?"

"Thirty thousand francs."

The gentleman was Lord Northumberland's steward, who was looking for a lodging for his master for the coronation ceremonies. The proprietor had smelled the Englishman and guessed the steward. The house was satisfactory, and the proprietor held out for his price; the Englishman, being only a Norman, gave way to the Champenois; the duke paid the 30,000 francs, and spent three days in the house, at the rate of 400 francs an hour.

Nodier and I were two explorers. When we travelled together, as we occasionally did, we went on voyages of discovery, he in search of rare books, I in search of ruins. He would go into ecstasies over a Cymbalum Mound with margins, and I over a defaced portal. We had given each other a devil. He said to me: "You are possessed of the demon Ogive." "And you," I answered, "of the demon Elzevir."

At Soissons, while I was exploring Saint Jean-des-Vignes, he had discovered, in a suburb, a ragpicker. The ragpicker's basket is the hyphen between rags and paper, and the ragpicker is the hyphen between the beggar and the philosopher. Nodier who gave to the poor, and

sometimes to philosophers, had entered the ragpicker's abode. The ragpicker turned out to be a book dealer. Among the books Nodier noticed a rather thick volume of six or eight hundred pages, printed in Spanish, two columns to a page, badly damaged by worms, and the binding missing from the back. The ragpicker, asked what he wanted for it, replied, trembling lest the price should be refused: "Five francs," which Nodier paid, also trembling, but with joy. This book was the *Romancero* complete. There are only three complete copies of this edition now in existence. One of these a few years ago sold for 7,500 francs. Moreover, worms are vying with each other in eating up these three remaining copies. The peoples, feeders of princes, have something else to do than spend their money to preserve for new editions the legacies of human intellect, and the *Romancero*, being merely an *Iliad*, has not been reprinted.

During the three days of the coronation there were great crowds in the streets of Rheims, at the Archbishop's palace, and on the promenades along the Vesdre, eager to catch a glimpse of Charles X. I said to Charles Nodier: "Let us go and see his majesty the cathedral."

Rheims is a proverb in Gothic Christian art. One speaks of the "nave of Amiens, the bell towers of Chartres, the façade of Rheims." A month before the coronation of Charles X a swarm of masons, perched on ladders and clinging to knotted ropes, spent a week smashing with hammers every bit of jutting sculpture on the façade, for fear a stone might become

detached from one of these reliefs and fall on the King's head. The debris littered the pavement and was swept away. For a long time I had in my possession a head of Christ that fell in this way. It was stolen from me in 1851. This head was unfortunate; broken by a king, it was lost by an exile.

Nodier was an admirable antiquary, and we explored the cathedral from top to bottom, encumbered though it was with scaffolding, painted scenery, and stage side lights. The nave being only of stone, they had hidden it by an edifice of cardboard, doubtless because the latter bore a greater resemblance to the monarchy of that period. For the coronation of the King of France they had transformed a church into a theatres and it has since been related, with perfect accuracy, that on arriving at the entrance I asked of the bodyguard on duty: "Where is my box?"

This cathedral of Rheims is beautiful above all cathedrals. On the façade are kings; on the absis, people being put to the torture by executioners. Coronation of kings with an accompaniment of victims. The façade is one of the most magnificent symphonies ever sung by that music, architecture. One dreams for a long time before this oratorio. Looking up from the square you see at a giddy height, at the base of the two towers, a row of gigantic statues representing kings of France. In their hands they hold the sceptre, the sword, the hand of justice, and the globe, and on their heads are antique open crowns with bulging gems. It is superb and grim. You push open the bell-ringer's door, climb the winding staircase, "the screw of St. Giles," to the towers, to the high regions of prayer; you look down and the statues are below you. The

row of kings is plunging into the abysm. You hear the whispering of the enormous bells, which vibrate at the kiss of vague zephyrs from the sky.

One day I gazed down from the top of the tower through an embrasure. The entire façade sheered straight below me. I perceived in the depth, on top of a long stone support that extended down the wall directly beneath me to the escarpment, so that its form was lost, a sort of round basin. Rain-water had collected there and formed a narrow mirror at the bottom; there were also a tuft of grass with flowers in it, and a swallow's nest. Thus in a space only two feet in diameter were a lake, a garden and a habitation--a birds' paradise. As I gazed the swallow was giving water to her brood. Round the upper edge of the basin were what looked like crenelles, and between these the swallow had built her nest. I examined these crenelles. They had the form of fleurs-de-lys. The support was a statue. This happy little world was the stone crown of an old king. And if God were asked: "Of what use was this Lothario, this Philip, this Charles, this Louis, this emperor, this king?" God peradventure would reply: "He had this statue made and lodged a swallow."

The coronation occurred. This is not the place to describe it. Besides my recollections of the ceremony of May 27, 1825, have been recounted elsewhere by another, more ably than I could set them forth.

Suffice it to say that it was a radiant day. God seemed to have given



his assent to the fête. The long clear windows--for there are no more stained-glass windows at Rheims--let in bright daylight; all the light of May was in the church. The Archbishop was covered with gilding and the altar with rays. Marshal de Lauriston, Minister of the King's Household, rejoiced at the sunshine. He came and went, as busy as could be, and conversed in low tones with Lecointe and Hittorf, the architects. The fine morning afforded the occasion to say, "the sun of the coronation," as one used to say "the sun of Austerlitz." And in the resplendent light a profusion of lamps and tapers found means to beam.

At one moment Charles X., attired in a cherry-coloured simar striped with gold, lay at full length at the Archbishop's feet. The peers of France on the right, embroidered with gold, beplumed in the Henri IV. style, and wearing long mantles of velvet and ermine, and the Deputies on the left, in dress-coats of blue cloth with silver fleurs-de-lys on the collars, looked on.

About all the forms of chance were represented there: the Papal benediction by the cardinals, some of whom had witnessed the coronation of Napoleon; victory by the marshals; heredity by the Duke d'Angoulême, dauphin; happiness by M. de Talleyrand, lame but able to get about; the rising and falling of stocks by M. de Villèle; joy by the birds that were released and flew away, and the knaves in a pack of playing-cards by the four heralds.

A vast carpet embroidered with fleurs-de-lys, made expressly for the occasion, and called the "coronation carpet," covered the old flagstones

from one end of the cathedral to the other and concealed the tombstones in the pavement. Thick, luminous smoke of incense filled the nave. The birds that had been set at liberty flew wildly about in this cloud.

The King changed his costume six or seven times. The first prince of the blood, Louis Philippe, Duke d'Orleans, aided him. The Duke de Bordeaux, who was five years old, was in a gallery.

The pew in which Nodier and I were seated adjoined those of the Deputies. In the middle of the ceremony, just before the King prostrated himself at the feet of the Archbishop, a Deputy for the Doubs department, named M. Hémonin, turned towards Nodier, who was close to him, and with his finger on his lips, as a sign that he did not wish to disturb the Archbishop's orisons by speaking, slipped something into my friend's hand. This something was a book. Nodier took it and glanced over it.

"What is it?" I whispered.

"Nothing very precious," he replied. "An odd volume of Shakespeare, Glasgow edition."

One of the tapestries from the treasure of the church hanging exactly opposite to us represented a not very historical interview between John Lackland and Philip Augustus. Nodier turned over the leaves of the book

for a few minutes, then pointed to the tapestry.

"You see that tapestry?"

"Yes."

"Do you know what it represents?"

"No."

"John Lackland."

"Well, what of it?"

"John Lackland is also in this book."

The volume, which was in sheep binding and worn at the corners, was indeed a copy of King John.

M. Hémonin turned to Nodier and said: "I paid six sous for it."

In the evening the Duke of Northumberland gave a ball. It was a magnificent, fairylike spectacle. This Arabian Nights ambassador brought one of these nights to Rheims. Every woman found a diamond in her bouquet.

I could not dance. Nodier had not danced since he was sixteen years

of age, when a great aunt went into ecstasies over his terpsichorean efforts and congratulated him in the following terms: "Tu est charmant, tu dances comme rim chou!" We did not go to Lord Northumberland's ball.

"What shall we do tonight?" said I to Nodier. He held up his odd volume and answered:

"Let us read this."

We read.

That is to say, Nodier read. He knew English (without being able to speak it, I believe) enough to make it out. He read aloud, and translated as he read. At intervals, while he rested, I took the book bought from the ragpicker of Soissons, and read passages from the *Romancero*. Like Nodier, I translated as I read. We compared the English with the Castilian book; we confronted the dramatic with the epic. Nodier stood up for Shakespeare, whom he could read in English, and I for the *Romancero*, which I could read in Spanish. We brought face to face, he the bastard Faulconbridge, I the bastard Mudarra. And little by little in contradicting we convinced each other, and Nodier became filled with enthusiasm for the *Romancero*, and I with admiration for Shakespeare.

Listeners arrived. One passes the evening as best one can in a provincial town on a coronation day when one doesn't go to the ball. We formed quite a little club. There was an academician, M. Roger; a man of

letters, M. d'Eckstein; M. de Marcellus, friend and country neighbour of my father, who poked fun at his royalism and mine; good old Marquis d'Herbouville, and M. Hémonin, donor of the book that cost six sous.

"It isn't worth the money!" exclaimed M. Roger.

The conversation developed into a debate. Judgment was passed upon King John. M. de Marcellus declared that the assassination of Arthur was an improbable incident. It was pointed out to him that it was a matter of history. It was with difficulty that he became reconciled to it. For kings to kill each other was impossible. To M. de Marcellus's mind the murdering of kings began on January 21. Regicide was synonymous with '93. To kill a king was an unheard-of thing that the "populace" alone were capable of doing. No king except Louis XVI. had ever been violently put to death. He, however, reluctantly admitted the case of Charles I. In his death also he saw the hand of the populace. All the rest was demagogic lying and calumny.

Although as good a royalist as he, I ventured to insinuate that the sixteenth century had existed, and that it was the period when the Jesuits had clearly propounded the question of "bleeding the basilic vein," that is to say of cases in which the king ought to be slain; a question which, once brought forward, met with such success that it resulted in two kings, Henry III. and Henry IV., being stabbed, and a Jesuit, Father Guignard, being hanged.

Then we passed to the details of the drama, situations, scenes, and

personages. Nodier pointed out that Faulconbridge is the same person spoken of by Mathieu Paris as Falcasius de Trente, bastard of Richard Coeur de Lion. Baron d'Eckstein, in support of this, reminded his hearers that, according to Hollinshed, Faulconbridge, or Falcasius, slew the Viscount de Limoges to avenge his father Richard, who had been wounded unto death at the siege of Chaluz; and that this castle of Chaluz, being the property of the Viscount de Limoges, it was only right that the Viscount, although absent, should be made to answer with his head for the falling of an arrow or a stone from the castle upon the King. M. Roger laughed at the cry of "Austria Limoges" in the play and at Shakespeare's confounding the Viscount de Limoges with the Duke of Austria. M. Roger scored the success of the evening and his laughter settled the matter.

The discussion having taken this turn I said nothing further. This revelation of Shakespeare had moved me. His grandeur impressed me. King John is not a masterpiece, but certain scenes are lofty and powerful, and in the motherhood of Constance there are bursts of genius.

The two books, open and reversed, remained lying upon the table. The company had ceased to read in order to laugh. Nodier at length became silent like myself. We were beaten. The gathering broke up with a laugh, and our visitors went away. Nodier and I remained alone and pensive, thinking of the great works that are unappreciated, and amazed that the intellectual education of the civilized peoples, and even our own, his and mine, had advanced no further than this.

At last Nodier broke the silence. I can see his smile now as he said:

"They know nothing about the Romancero!"

I replied:

"And they deride Shakespeare!"

Thirteen years later chance took me to Rheims again.

It was on August 28, 1838. It will be seen further on why this date impressed itself on my memory.

I was returning from Vouziers, and seeing the two towers of Rheims in the distance, was seized with a desire to visit the cathedral again. I therefore went to Rheims.

On arriving in the cathedral square I saw a gun drawn up near the portal and beside it gunners with lighted fuses in their hands. As I had seen artillery there on May 27, 1825, I supposed it was customary to keep a cannon in the square, and paid little attention to it. I passed on and entered the church.

A beadle in violet sleeves, a sort of priest, took me in charge and conducted me all over the church. The stones were dark, the statues dismal, the altar mysterious. No lamps competed with the sun. The latter threw upon the sepulchral stones in the pavement the long white

silhouettes of the windows, which through the melancholy obscurity of the rest of the church looked like phantoms lying upon these tombs. No one was in the church. Not a whisper, not a footfall could be heard.

This solitude saddened the heart and enraptured the soul. There were in it abandonment, neglect, oblivion, exile, and sublimity. Gone the whirl of 1825. The church had resumed its dignity and its calmness. Not a piece of finery, not a vestment, not anything. It was bare and beautiful. The lofty vault no longer supported a canopy. Ceremonies of the palace are not suited to these severe places; a coronation ceremony is merely tolerated; these noble ruins are not made to be courtiers. To rid it of the throne and withdraw the king from the presence of God increases the majesty of a temple. Louis XIV. hides Jehovah from sight.

Withdraw the priest as well. All that eclipsed it having been taken away, you will see the light of day direct. Orisons, rites, bibles, formulas, refract and decompose the sacred light. A dogma is a dark chamber. Through a religion you see the solar spectre of God, but not God. Desuetude and crumbling enhance the grandeur of a temple. As human religion retires from this mysterious and jealous edifice, divine religion enters it. Let solitude reign in it and you will feel heaven there. A sanctuary deserted and in ruins, like Jumièges, like St. Bertin, like Villers, like Holyrood, like Montrose Abbey, like the temple of Paestum, like the hypogeum of Thebes, becomes almost an element, and possesses the virginal and religious grandeur of a savannah or of a forest. There something of the real Presence is to be found.



Such places are truly holy; man has meditated and communed with himself therein. What they contained of truth has remained and become greater. The à-peu-près has no longer any voice. Extinct dogmas have not left their ashes; the prayer of the past has left its perfume. There is something of the absolute in prayer, and because of this, that which was a synagogue, that which was a mosque, that which was a pagoda, is venerable. A stone on which that great anxiety that is called prayer has left its impress is never treated with ridicule by the thinker. The trace left by those who have bowed down before the infinite is always imposing.

In strolling about the cathedral I had climbed to the triforium, then under the arched buttresses, then to the top of the edifice. The timber-work under the pointed roof is admirable; but less remarkable than the "forest" of Amiens. It is of chestnut-wood.

These cathedral attics are of grim appearance. One could almost lose one's self in the labyrinths of rafters, squares, traverse beams, superposed joists, traves, architraves, girders, madriers, and tangled lines and curves. One might imagine one's self to be in the skeleton of Babel. The place is as bare as a garret and as wild as a cavern. The wind whistles mournfully through it. Rats are at home there. The spiders, driven from the timber by the odour of chestnut, make their home in the stone of the basement where the church ends and the roof begins, and low down in the obscurity spin their webs in which you catch your face. One respires a mysterious dust, and the centuries seem to mingle with one's breath. The dust of churches is not like the dust of

houses; it reminds one of the tomb, it is composed of ashes.

The flooring of these colossal garrets has crevices in it through which one can look down into the abyss, the church, below. In the corners that one cannot explore are pools of shadow, as it were. Birds of prey enter through one window and go out through the other. Lightning is also familiar with these high, mysterious regions. Sometimes it ventures too near, and then it causes the conflagration of Rouen, of Chartres, or of St. Paul's, London.

My guide the beadle preceded me. He looked at the dung on the floor, and tossed his head. He knew the bird by its manure, and growled between his teeth:

"This is a rook; this is a hawk; this is an owl."

"You ought to study the human heart," said I.

A frightened bat flew before us.

While walking almost at hazard, following this bat, looking at this manure of the birds, respiring this dust, in this obscurity among the cobwebs and scampering rats, we came to a dark corner in which, on a big wheelbarrow, I could just distinguish a long package tied with string and that looked like a piece of rolled up cloth.

"What is that?" I asked the beadle.

"That," said he, "is Charles X.'s coronation carpet."

I stood gazing at the thing, and as I did so--I am telling truthfully what occurred--there was a deafening report that sounded like a thunder-clap, only it came from below. It shook the timber-work and echoed and re-echoed through the church. It was succeeded by a second roar, then a third, at regular intervals. I recognised the thunder of the cannon, and remembered the gun I had seen in the square.

I turned to my guide:

"What is that noise?"

"The telegraph has been at work and the cannon has been fired."

"What does it mean?" I continued.

"It means," said the beadle, "that a grandson has just been born to Louis Philippe."

The cannon announced the birth of the Count de Paris.

These are my recollections of Rheims.