

LETTER XXXIX.

STRASBOURG.

MY DEAR:--

We arrived here this evening. I left the cars with my head full of the cathedral. The first thing I saw, on lifting my eyes, was a brown spire. Said I,--

"C., do you think that can be the cathedral spire?"

"Yes, that must be it."

"I am afraid it is," said I, doubtfully, as I felt, within, that dissolving of airy visions which I have generally found the first sensation on visiting any celebrated object.

The thing looked entirely too low and too broad for what I had heard of its marvellous grace and lightness; nay, some mischievous elf even whispered the word "dumpy" hi my ear. But being informed, in time, that this was the spire, I resisted the temptation, and determined to make the best of it. I have since been comforted by reading in Goethe's autobiography a criticism on its proportions quite similar to my own. We climbed the spire; we gained the roof. What a magnificent terrace! A world itself; a panoramic view sweeping the horizon. Here I

saw the names of Goethe and Herder. Here they have walked many a time, I suppose. But the inside!--a forest-like firmament, glorious in holiness; windows many hued as the Hebrew psalms; a gloom solemn and pathetic as man's mysterious existence; a richness gorgeous and manifold as his wonderful nature. In this Gothic architecture we see earnest northern races, whose nature was a composite of influences from pine forest, mountain, and storm, expressing, in vast proportions and gigantic masonry, those ideas of infinite duration and existence which Christianity opened before them. A barbaric wildness mingles itself with fanciful, ornate abundance; it is the blossoming of northern forests.

The ethereal eloquence of the Greeks could not express the rugged earnestness of souls wrestling with those fearful mysteries of fate, of suffering, of eternal existence, declared equally by nature and revelation. This architecture is Hebraistic in spirit, not Greek; it well accords with the deep ground-swell of Hebrew prophets.

"Lord, thou hast been our dwelling-place in all generations.

"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God.

"A thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday when it is past.

"And as a watch in the night."

The objection to Gothic architecture, as compared with Greek, is, that it is less finished and elegant. So it is. It symbolizes that state of mind too earnest for mere polish, too deeply excited for laws of exact proportions and architectural refinement. It is Alpine architecture--vast, wild, and sublime in its foundations, yet bursting into flowers at every interval.

The human soul seems to me an imprisoned essence, striving after somewhat divine. There is a struggle in it, as of suffocated flame; finding vent now through poetry, now in painting, now in music, sculpture, or architecture; various are the crevices and fissures, but the flame is one.

Moreover, as society grows from barbarism upward, it tends to inflorescence, at certain periods, as do plants and trees; and some races flower later than others. This architecture was the first flowering of the Gothic race; they had no Homers; the flame found vent not by imaged words and vitalized alphabets; they vitalized stone, and their poets were minster builders; their epics, cathedrals.

This is why one cathedral--like Strasbourg, or Notre Dame--has a thousand fold the power of any number of Madeleines. The Madeleine is simply a building; these are poems.

I never look at one of them without feeling that gravitation of soul towards its artist which poetry always excites. Often the artist is unknown; here we know him; Erwin von Steinbach, poet, prophet, priest, in architecture.

We visited his house--a house old and quaint, and to me full of suggestions and emotions. Ah, if there be, as the apostle vividly suggests, houses not made with hands, strange splendors, of which these are but shadows, that vast religious spirit may have been finding scope for itself where all the forces of nature shall have been made tributary to the great conceptions of the soul.

Save this cathedral, Strasbourg has nothing except peaked-roofed houses, dotted with six or seven rows of gable windows.