
THE FRANCE OF RABELAIS

THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF VISITS TO THE TOWNS OF SIXTEENTH CENTURY FRANCE

by Albert Jay Nock

THE next day, having put on a clean white jacket, he takes on his back the two precious hatchets and comes to Chinon, famous city, noble city, ancient city, yea, the first city in the world, according to the judgment and assertion of the most learned Massorets." Chinon still keeps its luck, after all the centuries. It missed destruction by the religionists in the Sixteenth Century and by the revolutionists in the Eighteenth, but only by the closest kind of shave. Now, in the Twentieth, it escapes the worse fate of vulgarization by tourists. Every year thousands of tourists who are doing the round of the châteaux in the Loire valley visit the great ruined castle that lies up on the hill, but they do not stop. Some of them troop into town for luncheon, but as soon as their meal is over they pile into their chars-à-bancs and leave, for they are on a schedule and must keep moving. Thus the town gets only a dissolving view of strangers, and remains unspoiled.

The tourist, however, gets his money's worth out of the castle's associations with the Plantagenets, especially with Henry II of England, and with Jeanne d'Arc, who ferreted the weak and wabby Charles VII out of his seclusion there, and galvanized him into asserting himself. The lover of beauty also gets his money's worth. Chinon's situation in what Panurge so well called "the garden of France", the panorama seen from the heights where the castle stands, the graceful

bend of the little river Vienne, the gardens and pointed roofs of the old town clustered at one's feet, make up an incalculable deal of loveliness. One of the most charming and mysterious things in the world is the solid mass of foliage on a half-mile of huge plane trees along the river front. The mystery is how these enormous trees do so well so close together, most of them being not more than fifteen feet apart.

But it is the literary man who gets most, for, knowing a good thing when he sees it, he camps down in Chinon and stays. Thus he gets all that appeals to the tourist and connoisseur; moreover, he can take his time about it and let the flavor soak in. He sits on a bench by night at the end of the boulevard, under the plane trees, and watches the moonlight on the Vienne; looking over his shoulder, he sees the castle in a spectral, washed-out appearance which gives a better tone to its burden of legend than it has when seen under the midday sun. By day he moves about among the old houses, in and out over the old thoroughfares, quite at his leisure; no guide whistles him back to his round of organized sightseeing—a wearying business—no one flaunts any catch-penny devices at him or tries any ruinous English on him to get him to buy something. He is left alone with his self-respect amidst a self-respecting people, courteous, speaking no language but their own, devoid of vulgar curiosity, and who seem—perhaps it is imagination—a bit more

on the merry side than one sees usually in France, short of the Midi. Quite the people for Rabelais to spring from, one would say, just as one would say that this country-side was specially designed and made for the sake of producing him. The natural genius of the Touraine still seems to be his—fruitful, beautiful, stable, wise, experienced, dignified, and above all, charming—its pervading genius is of *la vie laborieuse*, which he understood so well, “*une succession de travaux qui remplissent et moralisent les jours*”. One wonders why Americans with ever so slight a literary turn do not oftener come over here to spend a summer without stirring outside the Touraine and the Poitou.

As far as civilization has developed, which is no great way, political and commercial interests are always uppermost, which is why the Plantagenets and Jeanne d'Arc mostly touch the imagination of visitors here, to the exclusion of personages whose value is greater and more nearly permanent. There is a tablet on the site of one of the old gates, showing where Jeanne entered the town, and her route to the castle. One wonders whether she has as much significance for the best reason and spirit of the race as she is supposed to have. Mr. Shaw dramatized her story and got fine social and moral lessons out of it, but they still leave one wondering. On the other hand, who would not give all he has to know where Tom Wellhung entered Chinon with the gold and silver hatchets on his shoulder, the gift of Jupiter, and what route he took to the goldsmith's where “he turned his silver hatchet into fine testons, crown-pieces and other white cash; his golden hatchet into fine angels, curious ducats, substantial ridders, spankers and rose-nobles . . . and in a short time became the richest man in the country, nay, even richer than that limping scrape-good Maulevrier”? One feels that whatever may happen to our theories of nationalism, Tom's great story, as told in the prologue to the Fourth Book, will lose no force upon our descendants. Even now, the church that

Henry II built, which is very fine and looks as if it had been built last year, does not quite stir the cultivated spirit as do some other landmarks here; the Painted Cellar, for instance, where Pantagruel said he had drunk “many a glass of cool wine”; or the residence of “the hermit of Sainte-Radegonde, a little above Chinon”, whom Friar John of the Funnels quotes as authority in a delicate question of morals, in the thirty-first chapter of the Third Book. Jeanne's story may in time become attenuated into one of simple peasant faith and goodness cruelly sold out—affecting, certainly, and worthy of all respect, but essentially not uncommon. Plenty of simple peasant faith and goodness was as cruelly sold out before her time, and has been since.

Chinon was once the capital of France, in the days of Charles VII, when France was a shrunken kingdom, a good share of it being in the practised and capable grasp of the English. It has always been distinctively aristocratic, like Le Mans, in contrast to towns like Toulouse or Lyons where the traditional tone of the civilization is pretty strictly bourgeois. Literature was never particularly an aristocratic pursuit, less so perhaps in the early days than now; but Chinon could put in a fairly respectable claim to be called a cradle of good prose, on the strength of having not exactly produced, but harbored, two great prose artists, one perhaps the greatest of all who ever wrote in prose since Plato's day. Rabelais's family owned property in Chinon and had a town house here; but he himself most probably was born on a farm-property of the family, called La Devinière, across the river, a few miles out of town. In a general way, however, he owned allegiance to Chinon; as when he matriculated at the University of Montpellier, he signed himself, *Fr. Rabelæsus, Chinonensis*. The other great prose artist was not born in these parts, not even in France, in fact, but he lived in Chinon a long time and was peculiarly identified with it. This was Philippe de Commynes, or Philips van Commijnes, as his later editors

give his name, a Flemish man who took service with Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, in 1464. Eight years afterward he deserted, and went over to Louis XI; the old fox, who seldom made a mistake in his judgment of men, had his eye on Commynes for some time and won him over, as he did many others; no one knows exactly how. Louis XI put Commynes in charge as governor of Chinon at one period and found him an excellent executive; Commynes even had time enough on his hands to build a church, which is still here. He wrote out his personal recollections of the reign of Louis XI, to accommodate the archbishop of Vienna, Angelo Cato, who wanted them as material for a history that he thought of writing. This enterprise did not come off, but Commynes's memoirs survived, and got into print some years after the author's death.

They are today worth a huge deal of respectful study on the part of anyone who proposes to write good prose in any language, especially ours, or even to read with an intelligent appreciation of narrative-prose style. Commynes was in no sense a man of letters, but he had the faculty, common to a good many unlettered men, of telling a story straight ahead, with the utmost simplicity and directness. In *Lavengro*, George Borrow says he was struck by this faculty in certain Newgate prisoners, the very offscourings of England, when he was reading the reports of their trials. He remarks one sentence in particular from the testimony of a murderer named Simms: "Then they took me into a music-booth, where they made me almost drunk with gin, and began to talk their flash language, which I did not understand". Borrow says that this sentence always remained with him as a model of what an English narrative-prose sentence ought to be. Certainly one would be hard put to it to make a better one. This faculty is best observable, probably, in the writers of the Gospels; one wonders how many of our literati have examined the prose structure of the story of

the Prodigal Son, for instance. Turgenev had this faculty above all writers of a more nearly modern period. He was born with it, apparently, for his earlier work shows as much evidence of it as his latter work. *Pyetushkov*, which he wrote as a very young man, is a superb example of it. There is no suggestion of the author's personality anywhere; it sinks down completely out of sight behind the story, and the story rises up and tells itself. Among American writers, Richard Henry Dana had this faculty so highly developed that his *Two Years Before the Mast* is to this day the best sustained narrative-prose ever produced in our country. More than that, it is probably the best example of how a good prose can make even a rather dull story interesting. Very few Americans nowadays could find Mr. Dana's story much worth reading for its intrinsic interest, but the reader who has anything of the artist in him, once started on it, can hardly lay it down.

Very few likewise, no doubt, would lie awake nights over a sheer chronicle of events in France during the reign of Louis XI, even if they had got a little previous stimulation from *Quentin Durward*, but any reader, again, with a touch of the artist about him would find it hard to pry himself loose from the structural interest of Commynes's narrative. There was once a good translation of Commynes in the old Bohn Library, but it has probably disappeared by now. This is no great loss, however, for the reader, especially if he wishes to sharpen up his own prose style, will most enjoy trying to turn Commynes's cold-pressed French into an English idiom exactly corresponding—let us say the monosyllabic idiom of the Gospel narratives. It can be done; our idiom is found to lend itself handily, if one only knows it well enough and can manage it; but there is the rub.

Et incontinent passa oultre et tira au pays de Liège, pour ce qu'ilz avoyent desja faict la guerre par l'espace de cinq or six mois à son père, lui estant dehors, ès pays de Namur et Brabant; et avoyent desja lesdicts Liégeois une destrousse

entre eulx. Toutesfois, à cause de l'yver, il n'y peüit pas faire grant chose. Grant quantité de villages furent brusléz et de petites destrousses faictes sur les Liégeois, et feïrent une paix. Et se obligèrent lesdictes Liégeois à la tenir, sur peine d'une grant somme de deniers; et s'en retourna ledict conte en Brabant.

Take this passage, for instance, which was chosen at random where the book happened to fall open, and turn it into an English that has the force and accent of Borrow's model sentence. It can be done, and the doing of it is a superb exercise. This faculty of clear, straight, forceful narration has rather gone out from among us, and our literature would be improved by its recall.

There is moreover a good deal of amusement to be had every now and then out of Commynes's text itself. The foregoing passage, and others that hint the same thing more strongly, make one wonder whether filial piety and family affection are bourgeois virtues. The Fifteenth Century nobles seem to have had very little of them. They would do up their brothers and fathers and trade off their sisters with a workaday calmness that seems surprising. Then again, there are curious features of the way warfare was practised in those days. The combatants seemed to keep union hours, or something of the kind. An army would go out against a fortified town and fight the garrison, say, from ten o'clock to three in the afternoon. Then all hands would knock off, without any apparent reason, until next day, and all the evening there would be nothing but jiggling and feasting in the rival camps. It is a commonplace that war is a dull business nowadays by comparison with what it used to be, and Commynes's narrative seems to prove it in many ways.

But all this is meandering far from Chinon of the present day. The town has done its formal duty by literature in the usual footling fashion, by misnaming streets. It has a Michellet Street, Jean-Jacques Rousseau Street, Voltaire Street, and no doubt none of these

worthies ever set foot within a hundred miles of Chinon. A street is the most nearly permanent of all human institutions. Buildings rise and fall, but the street, more likely than not, remains indefinitely, like the cowpaths of Boston and Brooklyn. There are streets here in Chinon that are all of eight hundred years older than any of the old buildings, and some of those are very old. On this account, naming a street is a serious business, and should be undertaken seriously, but Chinon has made rather a mess of it. One street was originally called Lamprey Street; its name was changed to Rabelais Street, which was proper, because the Rabelais domicile was on it. Not long ago, however, the name of Rabelais was transferred to another street which perhaps did not even exist in his day, and the old street resumed the name of Lamprey. This botching of street-names goes on everywhere in Europe and America; it shows how little of the historical sense is developed by all the instruction in history that is given in our schools. The street named for Philippe de Commynes is properly named, for the old church which he built fronts on it; and when there is nothing left of the church the street-name will still be a reminder both of the church and of him—that is, if meanwhile some crew of ignorant blackguards in the city hall does not change it to commemorate a horse-marine general or a small-fry politician who was never nearer Chinon than the Quai d'Orsay in the whole course of his life.

The rule should be to let no street bear a name, except for something or somebody definitely related to the life of that particular street. No other rule was known to the Romans or to Europeans generally, down to the time of the French Revolution, and it should be restored. Until something happens of enough importance to enable a street, as one may say, to name itself, as European streets always did of old, let it bear a number only. The city that resumes this sound and ancient policy will put itself back in the line

of a fine tradition, and will gain respect for itself in the course of ensuing centuries.

Hébert's imposing statue of Rabelais is in a magnificent situation on the waterfront, commanding the whole town. The site is worthy of a better statue. It is a pity that no contemporary portrait of Rabelais has been discovered. He was so distinguished in his own time that one can hardly suppose none was ever made, but none has come down to our day, so no one knows what he looked like. Artists usually try to represent him according to the twofold tradition that early grew up around his name and was intensified in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries; a tradition so utterly preposterous that any artist who tries to conform to it is bound to get a very puny effect. A man with all the learning of the Renaissance fermenting in his head; also a red-hot social, political and ecclesiastical reformer; also occupying a place of the highest social and scientific distinction, the friend and trusted confidant of the most illustrious men in the public life of the period; also a low-lived, obscene, drunken atheist and buffoon. No painter or sculptor can "get" this bizarre combination, because there is no such thing existing in nature and it is too fantastic to be put in clay or on canvas as a vision of fancy.

Going up to see the residence of "the hermit of Sainte-Radegonde, a little above Chinon"—and no one who has read Friar John's citation of him would miss going there, especially since it is but a half-mile out—one sees a great deal of cave-dwelling going on, and a great many caves that look as if they had only lately been abandoned. This mode of life prevails largely in the whole region, and on examination one acquires a considerable respect for it. The district is made of a white chalky stone, white as coral, and just a little harder when quarried than good hard Parmesan cheese; it is cut into building-blocks with an ordinary handsaw. Exposure to the air hardens the surface, but only to the depth of a half-inch at most. One

sees blocks of it in the castle wall that have been out in the weather for eight hundred years and have no more than this half-inch skin over them. Hence it is no trouble at all to worm out any size of cellar you like, and any shape; the town is honeycombed with them. If one wants a permanent residence, one gets it by burrowing into a side-hill; one can either sell the excavated stone, or use it to build a sort of lean-to by way of frontage. There is never any trouble about keeping warm in winter or cool in summer under this arrangement, and one never has to buy any ice. Going no more than twenty steps into Pantagruel's Painted Cellar on a piping hot day, one encounters an Arctic cold, and no dampness withal. The hillside east of Chinon is terraced with four or five rows of cave dwellings, which give it a picturesque appearance. These caves have chimneys, all regular and apparently practicable—they are simply bored up through the soft rock and slanted outwards to open on the hillside, eighteen or twenty feet above the floor level. The occupants do not necessarily live in squalor, by any means, nor do they actually, as a rule, as far as one can judge by casual observation. The Touraine generally, in fact, is clean. This is worth mentioning, because, like our South, France has districts that make the description of the Strophades sound as alluring as if it had been written by the general passenger agent, and where the personal habits of the people cause one to suspect that Virgil got what he knew about *dira illuvies* from hearsay. But the Touraine is not one of these. It is in the great flea belt, like most of the Continent, but that is the worst one can say. The inhabitants are stoical towards fleas; not so the cats and dogs, which exist here in whole battalions. Pro-rated to the population, there are about enough for six apiece of each, all round.

The hermit of Sainte-Radegonde lived in one of these stone grottoes, very commodious and pleasant. Being a hermit was a meditative occupation, apparently, like fishing, but

not so laborious; and one thinks that this one must have had rather a good time of it on the whole, with the neighbors sending in enough to live on, and nothing much to do but reflect on the vanity of general human endeavor. His name was Jean, and he was a protégé of the pious queen Radegonde, wife of Clotaire, in the Sixth Century. He is dead now; he died in the odor of sanctity. His grotto was subsequently converted into a chapel, and remains as such at present, very charming and interesting to see. The visitor has a comfortable feeling about him. Evidently from what Friar John says of him, he saw enough of human nature to put no exaggerated expectations on it, and doubtless lived in the equanimity which this experience brings. Peace and repose be his!

Chinon strikes one, as most French towns do, as being curiously self-sufficing. They whittle out their own furniture, raise their own food and drink, make nearly everything they use, all by small local industry. A blacksmith here makes his own horseshoes, instead of buying them in gross lots. He does a land-office business, too, from dawn to dark, bearing testimony that the horse and donkey still hold a reputable place somewhere in the world. The literary man draws the conclusion from all this that if anything worth keeping is ever to be salvaged from our civilization, it will be saved by the dogged French antipathy to the doctrine and practice of mass-production. The French seem to stand out against the idea that they can live, not by bread alone, but by *things* alone—things that can be made and sold for profit—and that if they can only have never enough things and can occupy their minds closely enough with ever wanting more things and getting more things, they will be truly happy. Perhaps they will change in time, and fall in line with ourselves and some other nations—that is, if the doctrine of mass-production does not blow up first—but they have not yet done so.

The grapes are coming on nobly, and it looks to be a good year; though, as they say

here, it is only when the wine is in the barrel that you can say whether the year was good. But there is every prospect that, like Gargantua's chaplain, the citizen may soon have "his breath pretty well antidoted with the vine-tree syrup". There are no more cake-bakers at Lerné; their art seems to be lost, and one no longer can know "that it is a celestial food to eat for breakfast hot fresh cakes with grapes, especially the frail clusters, the great red grapes, muscadine, the verjuice grape and the luskard", nor may one test the medicinal properties that Rabelais remarks as residing in that kind of diet. The French breakfast has degenerated since his day—that is, if he meant breakfast and not luncheon; the same word answers for both. It may be heresy to say so, but the legendary French cuisine is a long way from being a national institution.

Yes, Chinon is an aristocratic town; once the capital of France, once too the capital of England, when Henry II lived here as sovereign over everything from the Pyrenees to the Scots border. No wonder Rabelais's essentially aristocratic spirit loved it. His doggerel verse in the thirty-fifth chapter of the Fifth Book has truth and point:

Chinon,
Little town,
Great renown,
On old stone
Long hath stood;
There's the Vienne, if you look down;
If you look up, there's the wood.

He humorously makes Chinon out to have been built by Cain, and thus to be the oldest city in the world, named originally Cainon, after its builder. However this may be, there is none of the bourgeois ideal in the grace and beauty expressed by the line of its plane trees and poplars along the Vienne, especially as seen under a moonlit sky. It is the sort of thing that kings sought out, and that the noble-spirited of the earth may yet today rejoice in.

ROADSIDE MEETINGS OF A LITERARY NOMAD

I. FROM SOUTH DAKOTA TO BOSTON, IN THE EARLY 'EIGHTIES

by Hamlin Garland

Introductory

IN TAKING up the literary side of my experiences during the last forty-five years, I shall necessarily parallel to some extent the line of advance presented in *A Son of the Middle Border*, but the interest in *Roadside Meetings* is almost entirely esthetic. I have excluded most of that which is purely personal or which concerns my family.

Furthermore, as my actual diary did not begin till 1896, I have written in the tone of a man recalling his red-letter days, which I had not originally planned to do. Forced to adopt a narrative form, I have used only such part of my personal story as was required to bind the dated records and my comment together, with intent to save the reader from the necessity of referring back to my other books for a statement of my social condition and the place of my residence.

The larger effect sought is to present, by means of a loosely-strung series of literary and artistic portraits, a revealing concept of the various esthetic "invasions" which have from time to time set in from over-seas, agitating (each in its way) our alert and devoted intellectuals. Without claiming for it the value of history, it will, I trust, illustrate our progress, if it can be called progress, during the fifty years which lie between 1880 and 1930, and present some portraits of the men and

women who represented and vitalized that progress. All of them were known to me and many of them were my friends. For the most part I have included only those with whom I came into friendly relationship.

I

One Sunday afternoon in the summer of 1884 whilst I, a young man of twenty-three, was sitting with my mother and father in our home in Ordway, South Dakota, I heard a knock on the door and, thinking it a neighbor, called out heartily, "Come in".

The visitor proved to be a stranger, a tall, fair-skinned, blue-eyed man of thirty-five, who said, "My name is Bashford. I have just been preaching in your little Methodist church. Someone told me you were from Wisconsin, and I have called to have a chat with you".

We gave him a chair and talked with him as freely as we would have done with a relation. He was humorous, kindly and understanding, and appeared not to count our humble home against us.

My father had been one of the first to settle in Ordway, which was but three years old and had suffered two arid summers. He owned a general store but had not prospered. My mother was keeping house in a narrow one-story building which ran alongside the ware-room—camping out while waiting for something more like a home.