

CHAPTER I

Character

THE EARLY GAUL is reputed stalwart and of good height, and his posterity resembles him except in stature. The great battles of Louis the Fourteenth and Napoleon, it is believed, have done something toward lowering the French stature, both in the suffering to which the population was subjected, and the indifferent character of progenitors left behind the armies through constitutional disabilities. This, however, is a theory difficult of demonstration.

The physical characteristics of the present race show, in comparison with the American, a frame more compact, limbs rounder, and stature smaller. The lines of formation in the extremities are more graceful, especially at the point where the wrist and ankle enter the hand and foot. The lean, lanky person common in America is rare in this race. But the type of a large class of Englishmen offers a greater contrast, — he of the long neck, exposed teeth, long, thin ankles with bony projections, the calves well up under the hinges of the knee, large feet and hands, and frowzy complexion; a portraiture in France which is made the scapegoat of British eccentricity.

Compared to the Frenchman, the American is more loosely hung together, and has more swing and give in gait and gesture. A Frenchman cannot sprawl. An American does it with facility, over chairs, counters, or dry-goods boxes. In their repose there is the difference between the Dorking fowl which perches in the sun, and the Shanghai who basks his loose limbs in a royal spread.

Out-of-door exercises of a rough kind, such as steeple-chasing, yachting, and pedestrianism, do not enter into the Frenchman's habits. He does no hard trained rowing, but plays with his oars as a pretext for donning a fantastic costume, and repairing to Asnières or Bougival in pleasure junketings. He and the water, fresh or salt, do not seem to be made for each other. He takes a swimming-master as he does a dancing-master, — to learn. One of the establishments which line the Seine is the scene of his first efforts, where he is suspended in the water by a rope, held by the *maître de natation* overhead, who, as he walks slowly along holding the pupil up, encourages him in the style of a fencing-master, with words such as, “Voyons là-bas, un peu de courage. Êtes-vous prêt? C'est bien, partons—un, deux—un, deux” — marking the time with his feet to the “one, two,” with an ardor interesting to a transatlantic spectator. On the seashore the venturesome swimmers are generally English or Americans. It is the same with boating. The Frenchman usually contents himself with sitting on the beach, looking out on the sea, while the other two nationalities must be in or of it.

The national exercise is fencing, on which much time and application is bestowed, both as a matter of hygiene and a means of defending that honor about which there is so much ado. Single-stick and foot-ball come next. There are repulsive features in boxing which have always prevented it from taking root on French soil. Public wrestling is in vogue. There is something classic in this, which appeals to the Athenian-Frenchman's love of art, and it is patronized by high and low. Kicking is practised as a science,—standing, and on the back, — particularly by the lower class. There is no running or jumping to speak of, of any kind. They excel in fencing, football, and wrestling, but are behind English and Americans in other athletic sports. In the easy parade riding about the Bois, they are, perhaps, more graceful than others, but not as firmly seated. Some of them could hardly keep

their saddles in a rough ride across country. In this, as in many other things, utility gives way to the ornamental. A horse trained to climb, arch his neck, and show riding-school paces, bestrode by a cavalier who sits easily and bows gracefully, is the usual limit of aspiration in the way of horsemanship. Comanche and Mexican riding, if seen, would be regarded as miraculous. When American circus-riders first turned summersaults on barebacked horses in Paris, it was too much for the nerves of the public: they cried, "Assez, assez!"

Indoors the national game is dominoes. The habitué of a second-class café has his pipe in a rack of the place of his choice, and is of routine attendance. Smoking *caporal* and drinking beer are accessories to the game. There is more billiard-playing than with us. They excel in their carom game, and regard pocketing balls as a shameful business, much as we look upon the *rolly-bolly* of urchins, — in a word, unworthy of an adult. The monotony of this café life to an active American is tiring, — the eternal rattling of bones under a cloud of smoke, irritating.

The Bible-taught Anglo-American sees something in the Frenchman which displeases him. If he is of theological austerity, it shocks him. He charges him with wickedness, — absence of moral sense. The Gaul replies, that religion is a matter of education, and that the Bible must not be confounded with a perfect code of morals, as they are two distinct things, one being an incomplete expression of the other; that the Bible worshipper endeavors to create an artificial moral man instead of educating a natural one; and the Frenchman puts himself forward as the moral man whose nature has not been warped or thwarted in its growth. He claims, too, to be more advanced, and predicts that fifty years hence we shall be standing where he does now. Such language, of course, has but little weight in transatlantic estimation, and he continues to be arraigned for laxity of morals.

But what is puzzling to the austere theologian is, that there are

certain clustering qualities of symmetrical harmony and goodness found in the character of the Gaul, which are not the development of an evil, but a virtuous nature. The key to this apparently paradoxical state is to be found in the man's love of the beautiful with which he strives to invest his religion and his life. He is the cultivated pagan of the nineteenth century, whose faculties are developed in a school of aesthetics where even his acknowledged church is made subordinate, notwithstanding its prestige and requirements. The beautiful in art, in nature, in the soul and physical form, is the idea of which he is possessed; and when this is borne in mind it is easier to understand and judge him.

The Frenchman has his share of vanity. One of the forms of it is his ambition to wear a bit of red ribbon, for which he sometimes sacrifices his own esteem. Proud of himself and his country, which he calls "*la grande nation*," the scream of the American eagle is not worse than this. This vanity is the cause of part of his ignorance. It is common among journalists and publicists of Paris to write of their countrymen as the wittiest, politest, best instructed, and most civilized people of the world, — reiterated from day to day with conviction of truth. This is done with scanty knowledge of other countries; for the French, as a rule, know less of other peoples than any of the other enlightened nations, — a knowledge which is naturally indispensable to a just comparison. They are, in this respect, the Chinese of the West. The centre of the world and all its excellences are to be found within the line which maps out France: beyond that is barbarian waste.

The Frenchman's education, from an American point of view, is defective in what relates to geography and history of nations other than his own. The educated Frenchman will be found to possess a fair knowledge of the classics (with an excellent pronunciation), of mathematics, science, and art generally, and of the literature and history of his own country. An ordinary American lad would put him to the blush on a question of foreign history

or geography. It might be affirmed in his presence, without much fear of contradiction, that Birkenhead was in Ireland, and Missouri formed part of the Mexican Republic.

Such is his national pride, that he is apt to believe that all foreigners regret that they are not Frenchmen. His Chauvinism has nothing analogous in modern history. In its sincerity, there is nothing like it this side of biblical days, when the Jews believed themselves chosen of God. According to him, he is of the elect vanguard of civilization, which overcomes obstacles and shows the way to others. His country is the birthplace of noble political conception, and the cradle of every art. It is the battle-ground where truth is vindicated and error is crushed. From it go out enduring principles of liberty and justice, which carry deliverance with them wherever they are promulgated. Of these things the typical Frenchman has little doubt. In his entirety, he is a man standing on a summit, holding in his hand the torch of enlightenment and progress, whose beneficent rays are thrown broadcast over less favored peoples until they reach the darkest corners of the earth, for which they never can be sufficiently grateful. But—and the but is terrible—he cannot himself profit by the light which he so freely gives to others.

In some of this there is truth, but in his Chauvinistic hands it assumes an exaggerated form.

In the midst of his inconstancies, he is constant in his worship of a theoretical liberty, designated by his severest critics as Utopian. He may renounce it a dozen times under discouragement, for he is easily discouraged, but he comes back to it as the needle points to the pole. He fumes, harangues, and sheds his blood for this pet idea, until the fruits of victory are almost within his grasp, when he finds at the last moment, to use his own words, that he has been betrayed. According to his explanation, the plan is always perfect, but the men are found wanting, in being too weak or too strong, too corrupt, or not of sufficient elasticity for

a political crisis. And thus the same story is enacted from father to son.

His history has been a pursuit of liberty, and it has always eluded him like an *ignis fatuus*. Today he is a revolutionist, resisting tyranny to the death in the name of freedom; and tomorrow, as soon as he holds the reins of power, in turn becomes as much a tyrant as he whom he has overthrown. Yet he is always a votary of liberty. Like the thoughtless child brooking no restraint, who, seizing the butterfly which he admires, destroys its beauty, so the Frenchman kills liberty as soon as it is in his power; and this from being so entirely convinced of the perfection of his own theories that he regards opposition to them as wilful perversity, and he proceeds to convert those holding adverse opinions at the point of the bayonet. And thus he goes on until the position of the bayonet is reversed, for, as a German prince has said, "You can do almost anything with bayonets except sit on them."

Thus he is intolerant in governing, and turbulent when governed. His thought is bold, but his action is feeble. He has long torpors and terrible awakenings, when he wishes to do everything at once. He does not respect the law as much as he does its agents. Law is more or less abstract; but the agents are palpable, and their livery and surroundings appeal to his pronounced sense of the theatrical.

He is warm-hearted and confiding, but with little reverence for men or things. In the zenith of the reign of Napoleon III. there was no loyalty for him such as that which exists for Queen Victoria of England. The motives of the best leaders are often questioned in France. Cincinnatus himself would not be long above suspicion, to say nothing of his simplicity of character, with which France could never be governed. There must be the *panache*, the blare of trumpets, and the gold lace, with those eternal phrases which have always enraptured the ear of the nation, "Quarante siècles vous contemplent," "L'empire, c'est la paix," and the rest

of it. He is a loungeur. The sight of a procession of any kind gives him great pleasure, but a martial one with its shrill trumpets plunges him into ecstasy. The slightest ripple of excitement draws this *badaud*. A crowd gathers on the Pont Neuf, looking intently down into the Seine. New-comers elbow their way to the parapet. The spectators are interested in what is transpiring below; and the thought flashes through the mind, that there is a man overboard or drowning. What is it? Pierre has caught a fish three inches long!

He is constantly complaining of his government, whatever it is, as if each nation does not have as good a government as it deserves, — as if it depended on the government alone to correct abuses. He accuses the administration of doing too much, and with reason; but he does not attempt to do anything himself. He is taken charge of, bag and baggage, by the government on his travels, and carefully looked after in his domicile as if he were a child. Even the omnibus conductor in a certain measure takes him under his protection, demands his fare with an air of command, and sets him down at his destination as if he were a parcel. The man clothed in government authority assumes that laconic, not-to-be-questioned air, which we frequently see in our naval or army officers on duty. This official starch pervades more particularly the subordinate agents of each branch of the government. The private citizen is always inclining himself politely right and left; the official is oppressed with a sense of his dignity, and seems to say, “Don’t trifle with me, for I have a terrible responsibility on my shoulders.”

The Frenchman has ardent longings for liberty which excite American sympathy, but he has no patience. The past seems to show that he is happiest under a strong governor, but this he systematically denies. Few of them can be trusted with power. Ambition turns their heads, and leads them to extremes and oppression; then society’s sub-strata heave, and hurl them from their

places. The love of parade is ingrained, and theatrical effects disturb their reason. A well-contrived dramatic *coup* in politics elicits their admiration in spite of the iniquity of the thing. In a word, they are artists to the point of losing moral discernment,—from the minister to the barber, from the painter to the cook.

Yet few understand liberty in theory better than they. They discuss it from a higher standpoint than we, show a thorough appreciation of its advantages, then make a hurried, nervous effort to put their theories into practice, and, not meeting with immediate success, sit down in a fit of discouragement until one strong man gets hold of the reins again; then it is too late. They make the fatal mistake of making their republic before they make their republicans.

The charge of deceit and falseness sometimes urged against the Frenchman is, of course, the result of *extreme politeness*. He treats his fellows with courtesy by system. The Anglo-Saxon is impressed by his especial marks of interest, and he judges the Gaul by himself. He knows that if he were “enchanted” to see and “desolated” to quit a fellow-creature, that man would be a friend for whom he would stand ready to make sacrifices. Thus, after an effusive reception from the Frenchman, the man from over the Channel or Atlantic is disgusted when his mercurial friend can hardly recall his name or face the next time he meets him. Yet the Gaul’s intentions are of the best, and more or less philosophical. He tries to get the most out of life, by making it smooth and pleasant all round. He endeavors to cast sunshine into the five or ten minute halts along life’s journey. Out of peer and prolétaire he has his tribute of happiness, for no reasonable person can resist him; and he tries to give as good as he gets, thus establishing that system of exchange which makes of the French the attractive people that they are. When thrown for a few minutes with an unthawable creature, he will not make the attempt to be amiable; and here he is right again, for life is too short to melt the ice

with which such a one is incrusted. In this case he wraps himself in pleasant souvenirs, and draws on the past for the present.

Life is compelled to yield all that it has to give. Every function of man's nature is made to contribute to his enjoyment, and thus his sensuous life is larger than ours. This sybarite makes requisitions upon the five senses to their full capacity, and thus enriches his existence, where with us it is often meagre. Material life is studied and made a familiar science. In the matter of eating, it is carried to a perfection not given to every foreigner to appreciate, and this has its effect upon character. Absence of dyspepsia or any malady of the stomach, nourishing food, easy digestion, good climate, and the best wine in the world, make of them a comparatively happy people. The presiding genius of every kitchen is hygiene, which never tolerates such disturbers of the stomach's repose, for instance, as hot rolls and buckwheat cakes. Some of their greatest men have not thought it beneath their dignity to study the pleasures of the palate. Alexandre Dumas and Brillat-Savarin were frequently in the habit of cooking for their guests, and the latter wrote a book on the subject which in point of style is nearly equal to Madame de Sévigné's; and what between the literary excellence of the book, and the good things of this world whereof it treats, one's mouth is made to water in its perusal. A palate and stomach corrupted by hot corn-bread and saleratus biscuit do not at once take kindly to Gallic nourishment, and sometimes never. It is not encouraging to the American reformers of abuse in food and drink to have a Texan say, after a dinner at the Trois Frères, that he prefers the pork and corn-dodger of his native State, or that he never wants to eat a better dinner than that he has in the Palais Royal for two francs, including a half bottle of "the best kind of wine." One can fancy the effect of such statements on Frenchmen, the shrug and smile of commiseration. I was once at a small dinner party in Paris at a restaurant famed for its wine-cellar, where a bottle of Château Margaux was