COUNTESS DE GASPARIN.

A PHASE OF FRENCH THOUGHT.

QUELQUES PENSEES. By Madame la Comtesse Agenor de Gasparin. Paris: Calmann Levy.

Perhaps one result of the Chicago Exposition, provided the large Parisian publishing houses make any adequate representation of their editing, will be to impress on even our educated public its tremendous ignorance of the present as well as past intellectual development of France, or of its actual literary expression. French fiction obscures our vision. Either fascinated or shocked, we fail to get beyond this brilliant, if comparatively narrow, edge of France's literary world. Her philosophy, with its modern sequence, from Cartesianism to Comte and his successors; her contributions to historical and archaeological research; her leadership in scientific and psychological investigation; her work in linguistics and belles-lettres—beautiful term of her own invention—are a sealed book to the majority, unconscious of the very existence of such a book, which is encyclopaedic in its proportions. But the student of national or comparative literatures acknowledges the multiform French influence, and if he be Anglo-Saxon—and thus supposedly fair-minded—recognizes the strain of Norman characteristics and French contact, which condition so much of our own English life and speech. In spite of our false criterion—half-knowledge of a fiction investigated on its evil side; in spite—granting a wider point of view—of our glib differentiation of present schools, of poetry or of romance, into Parnassians, Symbolists, Naturalists, Psychologists, Decadents and other debris of a nomenclature caused by the chaos of the literary evolution of the past decade; if we know little of all this or care less, we should yet turn for cardinal principles and illustrations of them to the French literature of the past centuries. The influence of woman on literature, and hence on social life, perpetuated from the original coteries to the Thursday and Saturday clubs of our American cities; the expression of poetic instinct in a polished prose, very different from the prose-poetry of our poor imitations; the aphoristic character of a literature expressing in a page or a few lines its own analytic subtlety and clearness with a profound philosophy of life; a pessimism whose basis is religious; a love of nature and richness of word-painting long antedating even Rousseau's starting of a since unbroken fashion; all these we find first in literature, which still leads in the lines of its own invention or modern reproduction. Many of those traits in small compass reappear in the volume of the present distinguished author, distinguished not by position merely, nor as the wife of the brilliant man and famous publicist and leading Protestant writer in France, who, during the dark days of our war, turned the tide of an adverse sentiment, because misled by blood sympathies toward the Creoles into favoring views, but because Mme. de Gasparin's own works—travels, religious writings, poems, and short stories constantly re-edited in several cases, even to a twelfth edition, have become household works, both in France and Switzerland, and occupy a fitting place beside the able and impassioned pleas by her famous and liberty-loving husband on questions of Church, State, political ethics and American and French liberties.

These "Few Thoughts," collected by another hand, but with her authorization, from her writings and private correspondence, give a good idea of the range of her sympathies and their expression in that exquisite shading of French beauty of thought and delicacy of wording that even transcription into the harsher elements of other tongues does not absolutely destroy. These detached passages, however, scarcely illustrate the sphere in which the author has best touched her countrymen, Swiss and French. The delicious touch of a quaint provincialism in speech and thought, which stirs the heart to such an extent that it has become the open sesame of success in our own developing American literature; the views of "the quiet life," in field and forest, the silence of the vast slopes of the Jura, broken perhaps only by the hum of bee and the call of the high-poised bird; the vivid pictures of natural beauty, and then, in spite of that large, free life which produces freedom of thought and conscience, the petty life of the French peasant and Swiss patriarch of some years ago, before the "inroads of civilization"; the pathos of village prejudices and of lives impregnated with sadness, with silent sufferings, with inexpressible sentiments; the heart-breaking and simple stories which, as in the beautiful "Les Horizons Prochains," made the author's fame; all these are scarcely discernible in the slight volume before us. But perhaps deeper thoughts are. Phrases like:

Earth reveals its mystery of poetry to those alone who clasp it with their amorous hands.

One thing is lacking to these philosophers (of our time), the lamp to illuminate their lanterns.

Those who do not succeed in building avenge themselves by demolishing.

To wish a star is the beautiful folly of the young. He who has not suffered from this evil will never secure it were it even a glow-worm.

He who takes an upward flight risks falls. Who drags on the ground wounds himself on the pebbles, gets entangled in thorns and soils himself in the mire.

I have sometimes thought that monsters were weak souls who had been afraid.

recall a literary succession from Pascal's "Pensees" and La Rochefoucauld's "Maxims," which, in their breadth of thought and crispness of expression, well represent the formula of Joubert: "To put a book into a page, a page into a phrase, a phrase into a word."

Here is a paragraph which well hits off two phrases of our own, as well as continental literature:

Formerly the indifferent, even business men, needed some motive of importance to cut their quill and scribble some paper. Now each interest, each care, each work screeches, takes a beak of steel and plants it in your nerves.

Another is a protest against realism of a certain type:

I prefer a man, his limbs bound, his heart palpitating, and thoroughly alive, to that abstract, refined, dry and selfish something or other, which with great trouble the psychologists of to-day forge for us.

Here is a rather pessimistic characterization of our time: "Our generation rides, hunts, draws the sword, handles the revolver—pretty freely, by the way—but it does not walk, it does not fatigue itself; cars hoist it up the mountains, bicycles drag it upon the roads; it is a generation with telescopes, eye-glasses and lorgnettes. Oh, yes! I understand the other side. It is suspended from ropes, perched on ladders, balanced on trapezes, thrown into the water; by A plus B it is taught the great art of gymnastics. But it is pedantic, arch-pedantic, but blood does not flow in its veins. That did not produce the men of the sixteenth century, Coligny, Agrippa-d'Aubignes, Duplessis-Mornays, skilful in arms, masters in science, great workers, good warriors, stern to themselves, lovers of valor, natures complex, full of grace, of chivalry and of faith."

In all Mme. de Gasparin's work on what we may call its secular side (for her religious contributions constitute a large part of her writings) will be found this note of a pessimism de bon gout, permeated by profound piety of a Protestant cast, and a wide view of life. It is a temptation to multiply extracts from these suggestive and delightfully expressed pages, which contain in their short compass so much of a thoughtful philosophy playing under an iridescent word-texture. For instance:

To read everything, to face everything, to be startled at no picture, to stop before no word! Where is the woman whom such a privilege would not terrify? Where is the one who, in the presence of the world, would dare to claim it? Are there many of them, however, who, in the secret of the boudoir, shudder with horror at all this? I see coming a heavy machine of oppression, an enormous van piled up with ingots of metal. One hears the axle groan under the load; where it passes the ground gives way; if by chance a flower is growing there, it is crushed. Some look at it more astonished than dazzled; others fasten upon its sides, streaming with gold, looks inflamed by desire; there are some whom its sight makes crazy; these throw themselves under the wheels and are crushed by the idol.

But the author's work has its best expression in the descriptive power and coloring of scenes of her travels or pen-pictures of place and people. From the Bay of Biscay to the Bosphorus and in more Northern regions her observing pen has noted the picturesque and never failed to express the subtler thoughts suggested by the place and her own poetic appreciation. With three passages illustrating this, we may close this attempt to broaden our sphere of acquaintance with a phase of French literature, many of the characteristics of which we find in this author:

Do you like the coloring, the joyous coloring of Germany, with its indigo lakes, its crude green forests, its apples round to bursting, its pumpkins of golden yellow? The father in scarlet coat is fishing beside a clear pool. The mother, in short waist, her arms full of babies, is gazing at him with an interested air. Hens, cock, and the geese, and the turkeys shround the oldest girl with skirt gallantly tucked up. Opposite a bulldog which is growling, the cat has its back up, perched on the tips of its four paws. Three silvery fish show their heads from the river. A stork outlined against the ridge of the church spits with its beak a crimson sun. It is crazy, ridiculous, whatever you please. But one effect, here it is: joy, friendly laughter. I don't know what motley chimera which takes you behind and carries you toward absurd and charming shores.

Do you recall the "Miserere" of the Sistine chapel? As each strophe a taper dies away. The chant continues to weep, sadder as the darkness grows deeper. It is indeed that: a tender emotion, a faculty, happiness, unhappiness, everything disappears. The man, seated in the deserted night, moans; he turns to the beautiful pictures which are fast disappearing. Then, when all the light has vanished, when the dawn settling darkness no longer allows him even to distinguish some fleeting appearance, then, a voice begins to sing. Alone, outbursting, it recounts the power of the God of resurrections. The man rises. He has understood, he resumes his road, he will walk on.

And finally notice this passage, which in these days of Irridentist demonstrations has something besides its poetry to recommend it, as showing the patriotism and policy of the stanch Swiss Republic: "O, our beautiful Pessin, carbuncle of a thousand twinklings; O, our fantastic and charming Geneva; who could grudge thee thy prank? Yes, thou art restless; yes, thou art somewhat blustering; yes, thou hauldest somewhat; yes, thou stormest, thou dost irritate our nerves; enfant terrible, thou cuttest out plenty of work for thy prudent nurse, the Confederation; yes, the "big bears" of Berne have wiser ways; we all on the other side of the Alps, hold better our sword in sheath, our tongue in bridle, our temper in sadness; we speak lower, we gesture less, we weigh more carefully, at need we would strike more firmly, it may be; but thou art our ornament; thou art our pleasure. Thou art the balcony from which our eye looks down upon the orange trees; thou art the staircase of marble by which, from our bee-palaces, under our northern sky, we go to bathe our feet in the warm waves, to dip our hair in the billows—all steaming with the heats of the South—which rock between the olive-trees of thy shores. No, we will not give thee up, we will not let thee be taken away. God keep thee! Thee, our beautiful Italian Switzerland. Our hearts, in seeing thee, swell with pride and palpitate with love."

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