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*MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ.*

Great French Writers.

Edited by J. J. Jusserand.



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MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

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*Great French Writers*

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MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

BY

GASTON BOISSIER

(OF THE FRENCH ACADEMY)

Translated by

HENRY LEWELLYN WILLIAMS

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## GREAT FRENCH WRITERS.

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### ORDER OF PUBLICATION :—

- 1.—*MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ* (with Portrait) By GASTON BOISSIER (French Academy). Translated by H. L. WILLIAMS.
- 2.—*MONTESQUIEU*. By ALBERT SOREL. Translated by GUSTAVE MASSON.
- 3.—*VICTOR COUSIN*. By JULES SIMON (French Academy).
- 4.—*GEORGE SAND*. By Professor E. CARO (French Academy).
- 5.—*VOLTAIRE*. By FERD. BRUNETIÈRE.
- 6.—*RACINE*. By ANATOLE FRANCE.
- 7.—*TURGOT THE FINANCIER*. By M. LÉON SAY (French Academy).
- 8.—*BALZAC*. By M. PINE BOURGET.
- 9.—*VILLON*. By Professor GASTON PARIS (French Institute).
- 10.—*D'AUBIGNÉ*. By Professor G. GUIZOT (College of France).
- 11.—*BOILEAU*. By FERD. BRUNETIÈRE.
- 12.—*ROUSSEAU*. By M. CHERBULIEZ (French Academy).
- 13.—*JOSEPH DE MAISTRE*. By Viscount F. M. DE VOGUE.
- 14.—*LAMARTINE* By M. DE POMAIROLE.
- 15.—*MUSSET*. By JULES LEMAITRE.
- 16.—*SAINTE-BEUVE*. By M. TAINÉ (French Academy).
- 17.—*GUIZOT*. By G. MONOD.

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1887 GREAT FRENCH WRITERS.STUDIES BY THE PRINCIPAL FRENCH AUTHORS  
OF THE DAY ON THE LIFE, WORKS, AND  
INFLUENCE OF THE PRINCIPAL FRENCH  
AUTHORS OF THE PAST.

FROM its commencement, our century has had a profound taste for historical researches, which it will bequeath to the next age. It yielded itself up to it with an ardour, a methodical application, and a success unknown to anterior times. The history of our globe and its inhabitants has been wholly rewritten: the archæologist and pickaxe have unearthed the bones of the heroes of Mycenæ, and the countenance of Sesostris itself has been laid bare. Ruins explained, and hieroglyphics translated, have allowed the reconstitution of the existence of the illustrious dead, and, oftentimes, penetration into their minds.

With a still more intense passion, because affection mingles with it, our century has applied itself to reviving the great writers of all literature, those depositaries of national genius and interpreters of the popular thought. France has not wanted for erudite pens to engage in this task: the works have been published and the biographies have been made clear of the famous men cherished as our own ancestors, who contributed, better than princes and captains, to the formation of modern France, if not of the modern world.

For it is one of her peculiar glories, that the task of France has been less accomplished by sword and cannon than by the arms of the spirit; and the action of that country has ever been independent of her military triumphs—indeed, it has preponderated in the most sorrowful hours of her story. Hence the great thinkers of French literature interest not merely their direct descendants at home, but the strangers around her numerous posterity scattered beyond the frontiers—wherever in England the Huguenots carried arts and crafts, and in the Americas and Australia, where the Canadian *voyageur* and fur-hunter traversed the wilds, where Lieutenant Bellot sought for Franklin in the eternal ice, and where La Perouse planted the red, white, and blue.

Imitators first, then diffusers at large, the French were the foremost in the vortex of the turbulence marking the opening of the Middle Ages to resuscitate literature; the first songs heard by modern society in its cradle were French. Like Gothic art and the institution of universities, study of mediæval literature commenced in France ere it was propagated throughout Europe. But this literature ignored the importance of forms, steadiness, and restraint; it was too spontaneous and not sufficiently thought out, as well as too heedless of artistic questions. The realm of Louis XIV lifted form into honour; it was the period of literary doctrines made common to the masses, preparing them for the age of the philosophical renewal in the 18th century, with Voltaire and Rousseau for its European apostles, and preceding our own electric and scientific era. If their task had not been carried out as it was, the destiny of literature would have been changed: Shakespeare, Spenser, Ariosto, Camoens, Tasso—all the foreign writers, those of the Renaissance and those subsequent—would not have sufficed to occasion the reform; and, perhaps, our age would never have enjoyed those impassioned poets, who are as well perfect artists, freer than their old-time precursors, purer in form than Boileau dreamt,—the Keats, Chéniers, Goethes, Lamartines, and Leopardis.

Many works, justified in their issue by every reason, have been devoted in our days to the great French writers, and yet, have these mighty and entranc-

ing geniuses taken the places due to them in actual literature? Nowise, for multiplied causes.

In the first place, after having, in the last century, tardily welcomed the revelation of Northern literature, ashamed of their ignorance, the French became impassioned for the foreign works, not without profit, but to excess, greatly detrimental in any case to their national ancestors. However, it had not been possible to enter them into modern life, into the current of our daily ideas; or, at least not readily, on account of the nature of the labour given them. How were they to be revived, indeed? By their works, or our treatises on them? Something was done by both, and fine, full editions and artistically-composed articles rendered this communion of minds less difficult recently. But this is not enough; we are habituated nowadays to have knowledge made easy, grammars and sciences have been clearly put before us, and travel has been simplified. What was impossible yesterday has become a matter of course to-day. This is often why the old papers on literature repel us, and complete editions attract us not; they are all very well for the studious hours—which are rare outside our obligatory occupations—but not for the leisure time, more frequent. The book alone opened then is the latest novel; and the works of great men stand untouched in their fine array on the highest shelves of the bookcase, like those family portraits—truly venerated, but never contemplated.

They were loved—and neglected. They seemed too wise, too distant, too different, and too inaccessible. The mind is oppressed by the idea of the Complete Edition in many volumes, with notes that distract the attention, the scientific surroundings—mayhap the vague remembrance of classic studies and juvenile tasks dinned into us at college; away flies the hour without occupation, and one becomes accustomed to leave the old authors, mute majesties, and not seek familiar converse with them.

The design of the present collection is to bring to the fireside these great men enthroned in seldom-visited temples, and to re-establish between descendants and forefathers that union of ideas and sayings which alone may ensure, notwithstanding time's changes, the integral preservation of genius. In these volumes will be found precise information on the life, work, and influence of each of the writers remarkable in universal literature or representing an original facet of French wit.

The books are short, the price moderate, so that everyone can possess the whole series. They will be uniform in all respects of mechanical execution and material with the first volumes.

On doubtful points they will give the latest statement of knowledge, and hence will be useful even to the well read; they contain no notes, as the name of the author will be sufficient guarantee of thoroughness for each work. The concurrence of the most noted contemporaries is ensured to the series. Finally, an exact reproduction of an authentic portrait will enable the reader to make, in some degree, the acquaintance by sight of the great French writers.

In short, our principal aim is to remind the reader of the parts these worthies played, better known to-day, thanks to erudite searches; to fortify their action on the present time; to tighten the bonds and revive the affection uniting us to past literature; by the contemplation of that past to excite faith in the future, and, if possible, to silence the doleful voices of the disheartened. We also believe that this series will have several other advantages. It is right that every generation should count up the budget of riches found in ancestral inheritances, learning thus to make a better use of it; moreover, it unveils itself, and makes itself known by its judgment. This series is useful to reconstitute the past, but it will be still more useful for making the present known.

J. J. JUSSERAND.

## PREFACE.

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IT may appear hard at present to speak about Madame de Sévigné ; so much has been written upon her that it seems nothing considerable can be said. As she had particularly a sincere and open character, the writers who have treated of her have generally drawn an exact portrait, and have not been put to much trouble to depict her as she was. The consequence is that, if a writer endeavours to do otherwise than they, there is a risk of painting her likeness untruthfully ; the more apparent parts would, perhaps, be neglected under pretext that everybody had seen them, and others would be given more than suitable importance, so that, to show her with a fresh face, a fanciful one would be traced.

This is a danger to which I do not care to expose myself. I shall, therefore, make no effort to seek novelty. I shall not busy myself in hunting for unknown inferences, and discovering quotations never heretofore cited. After having read again the Sévigné Letters, I am going plainly to tell the impression they left on me, without stopping to question if I repeat what has been previously said : this is all the method I shall follow in this work.

I do not believe there is any great interest in here relating Madame de Sévigné's life anew in a consecutive arrangement. Others have done that with an abundance of details which leave nothing to be desired. Those who wish to know her biography thoroughly need only read Walckenaer's uneven yet agreeable "Memoirs," or, which will more greatly please them, the happy notice Mesnard has set at the head of the edition of *Les Grands Ecrivains de la France*.

There is nothing romantic in this life, all things considered, being composed of the ordinary incidents of a lady's life, and it can be summed up in a few words.

Born in 1626, in the midst of the reign of King Louis XIII, of a great Burgundian family, orphaned at seven years, Marie de Rabutin-Chantal married the Marquis de Sévigné, a Breton nobleman, in 1644. It was not a happy marriage; the Marquis was killed in a duel in 1651, leaving two children. One was a man of wit and a brave soldier, but, heartsick at not being promoted, and homesick to boot, he left the service whilst young and married in Brittany; and a daughter who was espoused in 1669 to the Count de Grignan, Lieutenant-General of Provence. Into his lord-lieutenancy, as we may term it, she followed her husband, and all Madame de Sévigné's existence was in waiting to see her daughter, going to see her, thinking of her, and writing to her. Thus arose that correspondence which has caused her fame. In 1696 she died, during one of those meetings which she yearned for with so much ardour, in the Château de Grignan.

These few dates will be ample to guide us in the study we undertake.

The letters are quoted out of the "*Grands Ecrivains*" edition, rectified and completed by the "*Lettres Inédites*" of M. Capmus.

# MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ.

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## CHAPTER I.—THE WOMAN.

THE most interesting person in the Sévigné Correspondence is that lady herself. We must try to know her by what she says of herself or by what others say. We possess nearly five hundred letters written or received by her; more than what is requisite for her to be entirely viewed. It is very probable that a woman who wrote so much, even if she were mystery-loving and dissimulative—certainly not faults of Madame de Sévigné—must have let all her secrets escape.

### I.

In the first place, was Madame de Sévigné lovely? We are not wishful to know out of futile curiosity. Although we are chiefly bent on learning the parts of her mind and heart, it will not be useless to have power to

place them in a living figure: the union will better impress us in the whole person. Unfortunately, portraits preserved of her do not well agree with one another, and many excite plenty of doubt. Nanteuil's pastel (the one reproduced to face our title) appears alone to be of incontestable authenticity, but it has the defect of portraying the Marchioness when no longer young.

It is a kindly face—broad, lively, and smiling, reflecting good nature and intelligence; but it is not a lovely woman's countenance. Looking on this, surprise cannot be helped that she had so many worshippers. We shall see how—when she was a wedded woman, and after she was widowed—they mobbed her to supplant or replace the husband; and among these numerous suitors were the handsomest of courtiers and bearers of the grandest names in the kingdom. Evidently they would have been much less eager to please her had she been uncomely. In her winter days, as she had been told, her grand-daughter Pauline resembled her. She wrote to Madame de Grignan: "Was I ever as pretty as she? It was said I was very pretty."

In her portraits, it must be owned, she is but moderately good-looking, and, taking her face as the painters represent her, we cannot see in it what justified Conti, Turenne, Rohan, Bussy, du Lude and the rest, to pay her so much homage. There is temptation to accuse the limners of not having fairly copied her charm of face; but as they were men of merit, renowned in their art, it is



more likely that the charm partly fled in the painting, and that the features delighting in her aspect were the very ones the pencil had most trouble to depict.

In the portrait Madame de la Fayette made of her friend under a fictitious name, she said: "The brightness of your wit cast so great a glow on your eyes and complexion that, although it would seem mental brilliancy can only affect the ear, yet it is certain yours dazzled the eye." This sentence, meseems, explains the powerlessness of artists to represent our subject as she appeared to her friends. How could this gleam of the mind on the countenance, this illumination of the features by interior lustre, be painted? Still it was the principal attraction of Madame de Sévigné, and the peculiarity of her beauty.

Therefore, if her true likeness be sought, much must be added to the one left by the painters. Let us take it, if you like, as in Nanteuil's crayon drawing, and begin by removing many years. When we shall have placed her back in "the flower of her twenty summers," as Madame de la Fayette words it, let us give her what no one refuses her—not even her grudging cousin Bussy—thick, fluffy fair hair, eyes full of fire, an admirable complexion with a splendour and freshness—"such as one sees on the loveliest spring roses when Aurora rises;" embellish all this with the charming gleams of goodness and intelligence which lighted up her visage; her soul could be read in her features; and we understand how—albeit she may not have been in very deed beautiful—she produced

more effect immediately than many women of irreproachable beauty.

It is stated that the winningness of her first glance was almost irresistible.

“Methinks I see her yet,” relates Abbé Arnould in his “*Memoirs*,” “as she appeared on the first time I had the honour to see her; arriving in her open carriage, seated at the back between her son and daughter. All three were such as the poets picture—Latona beside young Apollo and the little Diana. So shone beauty and pleasingness in mother and children.”

It was a little later, when the early surprise had passed, that the flaws in her face were noticed, where all had at the outset enchanted. It was remarked that “her eyes were too small and of different hues; the lids odd and the nose a trifle square at the tip.” But these blemishes did not long shock the gazer. As he would be nearer her then, her voice could be heard and her conversation was another witchery which none ever withstood. “When you are listened to,” said Madame de la Fayette to her, “it is no longer remarked that your features fail somewhat in regularity, and you are conceded to have the most finished beauty in the world.”

## II.

So far we have made Madame de Sévigné’s acquaintance but rapidly and very confusedly. We have scarcely seen her, and only from afar and in a rather indistinct manner.

If desirous to know something more of her than her facial features, we must try to follow her into the high society which she early entered and in which she spent her life. We know little of her youth.

Bussy-Rabutin, a cousin to whom it was attempted to marry her, asserts that he was alarmed at the hoydenish manner in which he saw her act, and he considered her "too much the prettiest girl in the world to be anybody's wife." Though Bussy is a great slanderer, I am prone to believe him when he speaks of Mdlle. de Chantal's hoydenish manners. She had been deprived of the boon of being reared by a mother; her uncle the good Abbé de Coulanges, who took so much care of her fortune, could not teach her the little dainty traits which only a woman can appreciate properly. At an early hour she mingled in free society where no constraint was known; she knew closely the gallants and beauties entangled in amours which were nobody's secret; and it stands to reason that with her fine observancy little of these transparent intrigues eluded her. Young though she was, she must have comprehended what was only half hid; she heard what was spoken in words of double meaning. Was this regrettable in her case? I do not know. In the education of young womanhood it is a delicate problem whether they should be taught everything or nothing. There is no head of a family who has not been forced to ponder over this, and contrary decisions are come to, on this subject, by men equally wise. In fact, each method may produce different effects, according to the pupils to

whom they were applied. There are some to whom the revelation of evil is most harmful when it is made too soon : it taints their imagination prematurely, and may cause them precocious incitement. Quite the reverse, the heart of others is only tempered by it : the sights to which they become accustomed at an age when they might have fatal effect, preserve them eventually from troublesome surprises ; by removing from some feelings the attraction of the unknown, their violence is lessened. It is a certainty that for Mdle. de Chantal this premature knowledge of matters of life had none of the dangers to be dreaded. Later on, Bussy was compelled to acknowledge as much.

At eighteen, as we have stated, our subject married the Marquis de Sévigné. As she was free in her actions and controller of her property, under the light guardianship of the Abbé de Coulanges, it is probable that she was not constrained, and Sévigné pleased her. He was a bold, handsome cavalier ; on his side were birth and bravery ; and judges as hard to please as Bussy, considered him witty. Marie de Chantal, kindly, affectionate, so apt to attach herself to her associates, had to make no effort to love him. Hence we may suppose the honeymoon, and beyond, was happy. They passed it in their own country house of Les Rochers, and it lasted so long that Bussy and his friend Lenet, a man of brains deeply involved in the intrigues of the Fronde outbreak against Cardinal Mazarin, felt it their duty to address the billing and cooing pair, who would not leave their

nest, a request in agreeable verse to win them back to society :

“ All hail !\* you couple, deep afield ;  
So close in Brittany up-sealed,  
Attached unto your country seat,  
Beyond what can in sense be meet ;” etc.

It cannot be doubted this was a happy period for the young wife ; but it did not endure. Sévigné turned out to be the most fickle of mates. “ He loves on every side,” Bussy tells us, “ yet can nowhere love anyone as lovable as his own wife,”—a capital jest, applying to many another than the Lord of Sévigné. At the same time that he was distressing her with his infidelity, he was ruining her by his follies. It must be owned that among fine ladies of that epoch, on whom Victor Cousin expended so much eulogy, many as often sold themselves as threw themselves away, and Sévigné found it very simple to purchase his sultanas out of his wife’s fortune. Hence, no doubt, sharp wrangles on the hearth. Like all who expect reproaches deservedly, the husband anticipated attack ; he was brusque, grumbling, and brutal, and showed the conceit of resembling the Grand Prior, Hugues de Rabutin, whom he styled “ My uncle the pirate.” As he did not take any pains to conceal his treachery, Madame de Sévigné could no longer esteem him highly ; but it is asserted that she still loved him, and could not help weeping when he fought a duel for one of his light-

\* “ Salut à vous,” etc.

o'loves and was killed by his rival. Whatever Bussy may put forth, her tears were genuine ; but it is readily understood that, after the first natural emotion was over, she quickly entered into the repose and freedom given her by widowhood. Moreover, she forgot the spendthrift and libertine husband so utterly that she never mentions his name in her correspondence with her children.

She was twenty-six or seven when she returned to the world after her mourning. Here we commence to behold her more closely. We have a goodly number of her letters of this date, and the testimony of contemporaries upon her becomes more precise. This return of the young widow into the fashionable reception-rooms was a great triumph for her, as she came back more enchanting than hitherto seen. Her good looks, as we have described them, better suited maturity than maidenhood. Her assurance in conversation, perhaps out of place in a young lady, was a great charm in a woman ; she had the right to let the vivacity of her mind have full flight ; she had no need to check the witticism rising to her lips, and she could yield without constraint to that intoxication of tittle-tattle wherein the chatterers spur one another and each gains by the neighbours' spirit. "When we fell a-talking, I did not come out badly," she says. She must have been incomparable. It follows that she speedily had a court of worshippers. The memoirs of her time, and Bussy's correspondence, make some of them known who clustered around her. As aforesaid, they were the

highest personages of the royal court : a prince of the blood, Conti ; a victor in battles, Marshal Turenne ; a financial minister, Fouquet ; the Duke du Rohan ; the Marquis de Tonquedec, the Count du Lude—perchance the one most likely to carry away the belle ; but they all failed, we must believe, since Tallement—slander's self—and Bussy-Rabutin, who had smarts to soothe, find nothing to say against her. But the latter, who does not like to make a panegyric, tries to pare down in some degree the merit he is forced to recognise, saying : "She is cold-blooded ; at least, if her late husband is to be credited. Hence her behaviour is no thanks to her virtue."

Here we have, certainly, one of the unkind cuts doing the most injury to the Marchioness in her cousin's spiteful sketch of her. A woman does not like to hear that she is only virtuous because of her nature ; some, mayhap, would even prefer to be deemed slightly naughty. This explanation of Bussy's was bound greatly to irritate her friends. Shall I admit that it is hard to find any other ? Remember that she was not one of the widows of whom Bossuet speaks : "Truly forlorn widows, they enshroud themselves in the mausoleum of their dead husband." She lived in a circle of amorous folk, and was very fond of it. She called on women whom critics, not severe, accused of being "a little too rompish" (*guillerettes*). She liked to be in a swarm, and willingly received tribute. She did not detest broad sayings ; it is asserted that she had the talent to enter opportunely into what was

suggested and drive her interlocutors farther than they thought of going ; the words are "they sometimes showed her a wide stretch of country." How comes it that all this did not turn out badly for her? and how, that a handsome woman who played so wantonly with fire was not consumed in the end? She has herself furnished a reason which appears truthful on the face of it. It is that love of her children shielded her from all peril ; more than one heart is needed to love several objects at once. "I perceive every day that the big fishes eat up the little ones," says she to her daughter. But this explanation does not explain everything. In reality Madame de Sévigné's affection for her daughter would not have sufficed had she felt any need of another affection. These are of different natures and do not exclude one the other ; beside maternal love there is ample room for another sort. Must we therefore, as suggested, ascribe the honour of her virtue to her devotion? But she was at this time little religious ; besides, religion prevents a woman sinning, but not taking a second husband. Around her she frequently had examples of this ; there is no period when bereavement was less long submitted to. The Count de Grignan had married twice already, so that Mdlle. de Sévigné was only his third wife. "He steps from one wife to another as upon stones across a brook," run Bussy's words to that effect. The Prince de Guémené had lost a very dearly-beloved life partner, and (so they said) was plunged in the blackest grief, when, at the end of three months only, he made a mid-



night marriage without anybody's knowledge save the King's. "He has lived on salt all his life," wrote Madame de Sévigné to her daughter, "and cannot do without it. Three months' widowerhood have seemed three centuries to him; he might taste other condiments, but had to come back to the standard table relish; and his affection will always settle on this unrivalled solid attraction." The Duke de St. Aignan waited a thought longer—six months he bewailed his wife, and wore the mien of one going to retire into the desert; but he quietly wedded "a little tiring-woman" of the duchess's, at the age of three-and-seventy. Next year he had a son, who belonged to the French Academy like himself, and who lived up to 1776, so that we have a span from the father's birth in the reign of Henry IV., to the son's decease under Louis XVI. Women did like the sterner sex, and neither would have blamed Madame de Sévigné if she had found a successor to the husband whom they considered she had too long lamented. It is true that they said her experience of married life was not apt to give her a desire for repetition; but there is no lack of wives no more fortunate than she, but not discouraged for all that. On the contrary, they believe they have a claim for recompense, and their losing first is no proof that they will not be winners last. If the widowed Marchioness had not acted like them, it arose from her not having the inclination and not being impelled by her nature. In this her daughter resembled her, and so did her son—notwithstanding his wildness. He had

mistresses, but merely to be like men of his age and rank ; and La Rochefoucauld, a good judge in such cases, pronounces him “not of the wood to make Cupid's shafts.” Their cold-bloodedness was a maternal inheritance in the Sévignés.

## III.

Bussy must not be believed when he tells us his cousin had “all her warmth in her mind.” She has loved considerably and steadily, too ; but she rendered unto Cæsar-friendship what she refused to Pompey-love. She spent her youth in making friends whom she preserved to the end of her days ; is there a more enviable fate than hers ? She willingly lent her ear to declarations made her because such a proceeding did not displease her ; she was right glad to inspire them with feelings not shared by herself ; but, I believe also, that she feared showing herself too severe lest it rebuffed men of sense and cordiality whom she saw flock to her. Above all things, she could not bear to lose a friend ; therefore, without scruples, she encouraged their assiduity. As she was no prude, and mere speech did not shock her, she let them prattle on. Nothing equalled her skill in checking them with a smile when it threatened their going too far, and in reviving them with a cheering quip when they began to despair. Was this really coquetry ? It has been said so, and there may be reason in it. But may there not be friendly coquetry as well as loving coquetry ?

Madame de Sévigné never deceived those who paid her homage ; she made them clearly understand how far she might be led and what alone they might expect from her. Within these "limits of becoming mirth," she was capable of going to great outlay to enchain them, and maintain that degree of warmth and liveliness beseeming true affection.

Of all these adroit and alluring artifices, some trace remains in her letters. It was upon her tutor, Ménage, that she, for the first time, perhaps, had to exercise her dexterity. She was under much obligation to him and bound not to hurt his feelings ; besides, it was not unpleasant for her to be celebrated by one of the sharpest wits of her time. "Always speak well of me, it will do me signal honour," was her appeal to him. This learned man had the failing to want to shine as a beau ; he liked to stand apart from scholars, whom he treated with profound disdain. To overwhelm his enemy, Father Bouhours, he said merely, "this is a petty teacher of the third class who is setting up as a 'pretty fellow.'" He did all he could not to be taken for a pedant. In his youth, he tried to learn the coranto and gavotte to have the gait of good society ; but, he confesses, he was obliged to give it up after three months' useless trial. His conceit slipped into his most erudite books. In a dedicatory epistle addressed to a fashionable author, the Chevalier de Méré, he says : "I entreat you to remember that, when we paid court together to a lady of high quality and great merit, whatever the passion I felt for that

illustrious personage, I willingly suffered her loving you above me, because I love you more than myself." This fustian is singularly placed at the head of "*Observations on the French Language.*" He was a great runner after the furbelows, and, as was the custom, freely uttered soft speeches; the misfortune was that, in courting them according to the ruling style, poor Ménage was more often caught than he liked. What should have been a mere game like Voiture's wooing of Mdlle. Paulet, turned out rather more serious for him. He began by being deeply enthralled by Mdlle. de la Vergne; then by Madame de la Fayette, at the day when Cardinal de Retz said of her, "she pleases me vastly, and the fact of the matter is that I cannot do so with her." In order to be happier, Ménage showered compliments in every tongue upon her, celebrating her in Latin verses in which he called her, "*Sequanidum sublime decus, formosa Laverna;*" and in French and Italian. Then he wheeled round towards Madame de Sévigné whose assiduous adorer he was for years. It is visible in her letters to his address, which have come down to us, that it was not an affection without storms. Ménage was never satisfied; if refused anything, he bitterly complained; and went on complaining if too much was granted him, because he feared this was treating him as a person of no consequence. The good opinion he had of himself did not prevent him perceiving at whiles what a ridiculous figure he cut in a quizzical world as a lover so old and wise; if he had not, his enemies—he had many—would not have

left him ignorant. Naturally he became mistrustful, abrupt, uncertain, and grumbling; he was sulky or he caused wrangles. We have verses of his in which he runs tilt at the lady :

“ My wrath’s pent up no more !\*  
Ingrate ! I would ignore  
So cruel, vain a dear  
Who mocks my every tear.  
Tigress, with steely heart,  
I charge thee, quick depart ;  
E’en mem’ry to entomb  
In night’s most sable gloom !”

Madame de Sévigné was always engaged in pacifying him. Sometimes she gently bantered him to make him smile; at a pinch, she feigned to be jealous. “ You are only picking this sham quarrel with me to give yourself entirely to Mdlle. de la Vergne,” she writes. If he pretended to shut himself obstinately at home, she would write to him without any prudery: “ Again I conjure you to come hither; and if you are determined it shall not be to-day, make it to-morrow. If you come not, perhaps you will not close your door against me, and you shall be compelled to confess that you were a shade in the wrong.” Another time, as he was leaving town, probably angered against her, she finished her letter by saying: “ Farewell, friend,—of all friends the best !” How could any man resist so sweet a line? The vexation did not last, and the sulker was reconquered.

It was not very difficult to handle *Ménage*; but the

\* “ *Enfin ma colère éclate,*” etc.

lady was oft entangled with more dangerous sighers. Her cousin Bussy, who had scorned her, or rather, dreaded her when she was a maid in her teens, came over to her side when she was married. He slyly sought to profit by her husband's unfaithfulness, which he took care to let her know, to incite her to be revenged. His non-success did not dishearten him ; he relates how, after her bereavement, he was the first to broach love to her ; but he owns, with sincerity meritorious in him, that he was none the more happy. Although the part of "tame cat" did not appear wholly sufficient, he was forced to content himself with it ; he had, as he said, to wish her whatever she liked, and to love in her own way.

Superintendent of Finances, Fouquet, offered still more peril. "What state-treasurer ever met a fair one unkind?" (*Jamais surintendant trouva-t-il de cruelle?*) He assailed the lady with the audacity of one habituated to success, but he also was obliged to "submit to reason." It is known how he did her the wrong of storing the Marchioness's letters in the famous casket which contained the secret of his luck with the sex. They were found there, when a search was made in his papers by the royal warrant ; but the monarch, and Tellier his minister, who read them, declared that they were most honourable. The all-powerful Fouquet had to resign himself like the rest. "When you do not wish what others do," wrote Bussy to his cousin, "they must do as you wish ; it is ample happiness to remain one of your friends. In all the

kingdom, you are the only woman who can reduce your suitors into contentment for mere friendship."

Few have had so many friends as the Marchioness of Sévigné. In all the crises of her life, her correspondence shows her encompassed by devoted persons who vied with one another to be useful and agreeable. She is herself astonished at the general benevolence. "I receive a thousand tokens of friendship; I am quite ashamed of it. I do not know why I should be esteemed so highly." Yet the explanation is very easily found: she was liked because she liked others; say what you will, this is still the surest way of attaching hearts; only what is paid away comes back. One of those best knowing her, La Rochefoucauld, was wont to remark that "she reconciled her idea of friendliness with all her circumstances and dependencies." It is a pity the moralist did not develop his opinion and tell us by what peculiarities Madame de Sévigné seemed to him to earn this fine eulogium; we should have tractates on friendship from the hand of a master. What he has not done, nobody can do now. At our distance from the lady of letters, many things escape us which those beside her saw. Let us, however, inquire into her letters and seek to discover, if we can, some of the grounds which made those love her who lived by her.

What, firstly, strikes us is to see how kind, amiable and benevolent she is, in general. This merit is the more remarkable as it crops up in a close correspondence, in which she could fearlessly open her heart. Somewhere

it is said by Pascal : " Human life is but one perpetual illusion. Men mutually deceive and flatter. None discuss us in our absence as they speak in our presence. The union between men is founded solely on this cheating, and few friendships would last if either knew what the other said when he was away." But it seems to me that if the majority of those spoken of by Madame de Sévigné in her letters to her daughter, had read them, they would not have found any of those stabs which cannot be forgiven. This is a proof which few private correspondences can withstand. When a writer believes himself sure of the person addressed, and that his secrecy can be relied upon, he unveils the fugitive impressions flitting across the mind with how many precipitate confidences, unjust suspicions, baseless accusations, escaping in the first sting under a spite, and sharp sayings of which he is not the master, but which he wishes to call back as soon as they are out of his reach. Whatever may be said, I see nothing—well, almost nothing of the like in the Sévigné Letters. Their writer was too keen not to see the seamy side of her associates, but she only pointed out the fretted threads with a light finger. She is not always tender to the fools who worried her and the importunate shallow-pates who disturbed her ; she does repeat good stories to amuse her daughter and, once she is in full flow of telling them, her animation sweeps her onward, and she sometimes goes farther than she wished ; but her jokes do not scratch as Bussy's do, and a smile flies with her arrow. Taking it altogether, I do not see



anybody entirely hated amongst all those mentioned in her correspondence. She judges her acquaintances favourably ; everybody is "good" in her eyes, as the good Bon—our good Troche—that good d' Hacqueville—this good Marbeuf, and so on ; she sees mankind with a kindly eye and all the earth looks fair to her. I am well aware that she was irritated one day of ill-humour by Malebranche's optimism. "I would really like to complain to Father Malebranche of the mice devouring everything hereabouts ; are they in the beneficent order of things ? And what about the good sugar, and fruit, and jam ? Last year, was it in the beneficent order of things that nasty caterpillars should eat up all the leaves of our wood and gardens, and all the fruit of the orchard ? And how about Father Païen, whose head was broken as he was peacefully wending his way home,—was that in the beneficent order ?" This is only a merry fling ; ordinarily, the world does not seem to revolve so very badly as is asserted. She does not rebel against generally accepted opinions as sour spirits do. "Listen to my old thesis," she writes, "for which I shall be stoned one of these days ; it is that the public are neither senseless nor unfair." Even when come to the decline of life, she does not look back with bitterness, and she throws no sorrowful glance on past years. Once she says to her daughter, in reminding her of some thorny events she traversed : "Do you think my fate very happy ? well, I am content with it." Sometimes, though, after dark, she had "brown studies which become totally black in the night." But, usually she left them in the shade of solitude and did not

afflict her callers with them. She was one of those whom society excites, and who are so much at ease amongst friends that they forget their misery there and exhale only their delight. She had a hearty laugh and a frank mirthfulness which the most melancholy could not resist. She could smooth out the wrinkles of Cardinal de Retz, that disappointed man of great ambitions. When she entered the garden of the Faubourg St. Germain, where the morose La Rochefoucauld and the virtuous Madame de la Fayette were sadly aging together, she came like a sunbeam piercing mist. There are people whom a kind of general indifference makes kindly to all, and who greet everybody affably because they have no preferences. On the contrary Madame de Sévigné's friendship had an ardour which often surprised. On reading the letter she wrote to De Pomponne during Fouquet's trial, Napoleon the Great remarked that the interest she showed in the financier was too warm, quick, and tender for plain amity. But that was her fashion of loving her congeners, and here was a particular reason to prevent any restraint and to give more vivacity to the expression of her feeling: the friend was in misfortune.

Let us remember on this point that the Marchioness de Sévigné, by age and education, still belonged to the younger generation of the seventeenth century. She was one of those who first applauded Corneille's plays, and formed their mind and heart out of the romances of La Calprenède and De Scudéry—very paltry books as literary works; but an ideal of courtesy and heroism reigns in

them which may ensnare a young heart long afterwards. In the solitary retreat of Les Rochers, she read "*Cléopâtre*" again and found all her original emotions. She says: 'the style of La Calprenède is faulty in a thousand places; long-winded passages of romance, wretched attempts at jesting; I know all that. I wrote a letter to my son the other day in this vein which was very entertaining. I grant that it is detestable, and yet I let myself be captured by it as a bird by lime. The beauty of the sentiments, the gush of passions, the greatness of the events and the miraculous success of the redoubtable swords—all these carry me away as if I were a young girl again.' Such youthful admiration has left its imprint on her; she retained from it a kind of almost natural taste for all that is grand, bold, and heroic. It pleased her to cope with fortune; she felt pride in not changing with it, and in clinging to those it cast off. Whilst the financier was all-powerful, she judged him with cool reason; when he was driven to defend his life against prejudiced and malevolent judges, she felt a tenderness for him which came near to love. In the same way De Pomponne's disgrace made him dearer. "Misfortune shall not drive me away from your dwelling," she said, when she learnt that he had been dismissed from office, and she kept her word; in her letters, her affection is seen to become proportionably more intense as she sees him more sad and abandoned. This trait of generosity still farther relieves her natural kindness and benevolence, and gives them an added charm. Can we be surprised that, with such lovable parts, she was so well loved?

## IV.

It does not seem to me enough to study Madame de Sévigné to know her. There must be attention given to some of those she loved, at all events. She was so tenderly attached to them that they became part of her existence, it may be said, and she would be incomplete without them.

Let us commence this review of her bosom friends by those nearest to her—her children. Her son was goodness and honour themselves in one, and few figures in all the Letters attract us more than his. He adored his mother, and never caused her a single serious sorrow. I would she had been angered to see him sometimes in bad company and injuring his health and reputation by gallant adventures; yet we see she rather eagerly takes his part. When she attempted to make some reprimands, the son answered her so merrily that the sermon was ordinarily smothered in laughter. Besides, when he returned sore in heart to recruit in the refuge of Les Rochers, he brought so much wit, geniality, matter for conversation, and just appreciation of good works, that he was a most desirable companion, and Madame de Sévigné felt a vivid tenderness for *le petit ami*, and “her little dear” could not be let go away.

It seems clear to us that Charles de Sévigné ought to have been his mother’s pet. To begin with, he was a boy, and everybody knows the infinite complaisance for the one who is to continue the line in aristocratic families.

Moreover, he was the best of sons,—the most affectionate and submissive. Assuredly, the Marchioness much loved him, but she loved her daughter better. We are ignorant why, and it may be she could no more say than we. Those around her were as puzzled to explain it, and her best friends—notably Madame de la Fayette—spite of their care taken to flatter her weakness, considered her wrong. Moralists tell us that the strongest passions are the least reasonable and least reasoned out. Madame de Sévigné's for her daughter rose to an extraordinary degree of violence,—all the ardour of her soul rushed to that quarter. Her maternal affection sometimes seemed akin to love; she suffered its agitations and storms; like love, it made the happiness and the torment of the heart it entirely possessed.

The object of this passion, the Countess de Grignan, has been judged with much severity by our times and her own. Bussy says of her: "A woman with wit, but a sharp one, and insupportable pride. She will make as many enemies as her mother has friends and admirers." Saint-Simon, who was familiar with her son, the young Marquis de Grignan, treats her no better. The most untoward thing for her is that the reading of the Sévigné Letters does not appear to us of a nature to make us revoke the sentence. Notwithstanding all the praise with which she heaps her darling, the impressions thence derived are not favourable to her. The poor mother would be heartily pained if she could see herself the cause of the antipathy we feel for Madame de Grignan;

but she has surely injured her greatly without intending it. She has so endeared herself and appears so good, sweet, and winning, that we wonder how a daughter, so adored and belauded, had any difficulty in agreeing with her.

It is not hard, however, to understand that, when it is seen how they differed one from the other. Cast a glance on their portraits,—sometimes mounted in the same frame. It is a perfect contrast. Nothing less resembles the broad, open face,—breathing benevolence, sincerity and good humour—of the mother, than the daughter's little, delicate, and finical countenance. But in their dispositions there is far more diversity. Madame de Grignan joined two defects seemingly opposite and not often found together—pride and timidity. When one has high aspirations and too good an opinion of oneself, which one wants the world to share, perpetual uneasiness about what is thought is natural, and there is a fear to venture anything, lest the success may not be as great as desired. When young, Madame de Grignan was wont to colour up at the least word spoken to her, and her vexation would be so great that she would run away from the ball-room not to let the unkind spectators see her embarrassment. Time and experience in society had never yet imparted assurance. One day, when the King was playing cards, or, more accurately, keeping the bank, she was so agitated that she upset the pool on the floor, and the Prince Royal bantered her pitilessly. This was “one of those cruel minor miseries” so sharply felt

at court. Ordinarily, shy people appear haughty as, to conceal the timidity of which they are ashamed, they don an air of insolence. Their reserve, most often the effect of their bashfulness, seems to come from their scorn for others. The Countess de Grignan passed for very disdainful, even in the eyes of those seeing her oftenest. Her husband, before taking her away to his province, said to her mother in confidence: "Madame, she will not condescend to look at the poor ladies of Provence." Disdainful persons, or those believed to be such, are generally detested. Madame de Grignan well knew she was not liked, and complained of it to her mother, who only imperfectly soothed her. This consciousness of being wrongfully judged made her sour and spiteful. As none were sweet towards her she became stern in her turn to others. There were few spoke well of her, and she did not spare even her mother's best friends. Madame de la Fayette's wit was not to her taste; the Duke de Chaulnes seemed to her a man of evil surroundings; she managed to find Coulanges dull; she teased Corbinelli, and rudely refused a present from Cardinal de Retz, who called her his dear niece, and talked of leaving his property to her. Here was retaliation for the bad opinion which she knew was held of her. She avenged herself by deserving it.

How far this is from the broad kindness of Madame de Sévigné, and from her habit of seeing good in everything and of judging people by their bright side! At least, she was neither vain nor shy, and did not fret before-

hand about the effect she might produce. When she had to write or speak she "let the torrent gush forth," and all that was in her mind and heart escaped at once. On the contrary, Madame de Grignan felt a kind of cramp of the spirit which prevented her feelings issuing. She said of herself that she had no "communicative soul"; this word, so much used now-a-days, but which she was one of the first to employ, paints her wonderfully well. Before her mother, she could not speak out, she seemed fettered and indifferent; she did not know how to respond to the evidences of friendship with which she was overwhelmed. When she was alone, subsequently, and beyond the presence chilling her, she recovered her freedom of action, and terms of affection came to the end of her pen. "Naughty child!" said her mother, "why do you hide away such precious treasures from me, for fear I should die of joy?" When one is temperate, it is natural the heat of others should be burdensome; a kind of confusion is felt in receiving marks of affection which, it is felt, cannot be answered. Madame de Grignan grew finally a little fatigued by her mother's exuberant love. "There are persons," writes Madame de Sévigné, "who wish to make me believe that the excess of my love incommodes you. I do not know, my dear child, if this be true, but I do wish to say that it was assuredly with no design that I gave you that trouble. I own to having somewhat followed my impulse, and I saw you as much as I could because I had not enough power over myself to deny me that pleasure; but I did not believe myself to be burden-



some." She was burdensome sometimes, without being aware of it. We have Pascal's saying that it takes skill to love properly, for one who loves too well does not love wisely. Instead of moderating and regulating herself, and restraining the excess of her affection, the poor mother only thought to weep and moan, and mutual life became intolerable. During the winter of 1676, after an absence of nearly two years, Madame de Grignan came to seek her mother in Paris. Unfortunately they were both out of the normal state just then; the daughter had a chest complaint, and the mother was recovering from a rheumatic attack. As each trembled for the other, both wearied themselves with similar uneasiness: it was a constant watchfulness, ceaseless cares, exaggerated foresight, endless complaints and reproaches arising upon every excuse. Under the pretext of curing one another the sooner, they made themselves more unwell—they drove away that tranquillity of mind which is half the battle in illness. Charles de Sévigné, laid up himself with a wound received at the Siege of Valenciennes, related to his sister how his mother and he arranged about nursing each other, and with his pleasant common-sense, read her a little lesson. "We take care of ourselves whilst allowing fair liberty, and no petty feminine remedies. 'You are well again, my dear mamma! I am delighted! Did you sleep soundly last night? How's your head? No vapours? The Lord be praised! Go, take the air—run to St. Maur have supper at Madame de Schomberg's—walk about the Tuileries gardens. Don't let anything hamper you; I

leave the reins on your neck. Do you like to eat strawberries or drink tea? The strawberries will do you most good. Good-bye, mother. I've a pain in my heel. You may keep me, if you like, from noon till three,—then the boat sails! *Vogue la galère!*' There you are, little sister, that's how sensible people act." But this pair were not sensible, and reciprocal looking after one another became so heavy in the end that they had to give up living together. "I leaped to the clouds," writes Madame de Sévigné, "when someone told me: 'you will do one another to death—you must separate.' Upon my word, 'tis a fine remedy!" It was true, nevertheless; they were killing one another, and, whatever the mother thought, the parting was to be an efficacious remedy for her child. She had barely left town before she felt better, and when she arrived at Grignan she was hale.

What pained Madame de Sévigné was her coming to believe at whiles during these scenes that "her daughter had an aversion to her." This was injustice; Madame de Grignan loved her mother. "It seems to me that this is my best point," she said to Bussy. But she loved her in her own way, which was not her mother's. What proves this affection, though calmer, to be none the less substantial is that when the hour for parting came there were tears on both sides. "You wept, my dearest," writes the Marchioness to her daughter after her going; "it is a matter of course for you, but it's not the same for me, but in my nature." Thereupon interminable correspondence would begin betwixt the twain. Only think, that

during five-and-twenty years, the Countess de Grignan never missed a post when not prevented by illness. All through the year, whatever her occupations, she would write to her mother twice a week such letters that she could but think them much too long, considering the time and pains they must have cost, and begged her earnestly to abridge them in spite of the pleasure she found in reading them. These may be more tender and affectionate than we suppose, forasmuch as they contented the recipient—whose love was so exacting ; it is probable that this timid sensibility became bolder at a distance ; Madame de Grignan felt no more shame in giving free sway to her thoughts when not under beloved eyes. She dared to show her heart as it was, and the enchanted mother used to cry out : “ When you like, how lovable you are ! ”

I am, therefore, tempted to believe that we would have a better idea of the Countess de Grignan if we could read her letters. A bad service was done her in destroying them. In reality she may have been less selfish and indifferent than supposed ; indifferent people do not feel suffering, and she did. Her mother often admired her depth, energy, and solidity of mind, and, in these points, ranked her above herself. As being tokens of a firm and venturesome reason, we are commonly shown her rashness in opinions,—her philosophical escapades on the Descartes theory—her tendencies towards heresy. I own I rather see the disquiet of an unbalanced intellect and a need to flutter about in the open air. At bottom it was a sick, perturbed soul, nourished upon chimerae.

Obliged by duty to live in society, she sighed for solitude ; she saw everything through smoked glass, and made a cause for mourning out of everything. Her mother reproached her for having a taste for despair and grief ; she belonged to that army of blasé and disenchanted spirits so numerous since. Instead of blaming her, as is usually done, we ought perhaps to pity her a little. I fancy hers one of those hapless characters fated, whilst torturing themselves, to be the torment of others.

## V.

Next to her son and her daughter, there is no one who interwove the thread of his life so closely with that of the Marchioness de Sévigné as her cousin, the Count de Bussy-Rabutin. We should have a good deal to say of him if we had to study him on all his facets, as he is one of the most curious characters of the Seventeenth Century. Let us, as much as possible, limit ourselves to what is necessary knowledge to understand his relations with his kinswoman.

Few men opened life as noisily as Bussy. A soldier at sixteen, and remarked from the first day for coolness and bravery, he commanded his father's regiment at eighteen, and had already made much ado with his mad freaks. At twenty he was appointed camp marshal of the line ; he fought duels and had amorous adventures ; none doubted he would speedily arrive at the highest fortune ; he, least of all. Circumstances seemed favour-

able ; an important war had begun, setting bold spirits in relief ; a great reign portended, and its on-coming was felt. All was renewed ; manners and opinions changed ; the actors took a walk upon the outer stage who were to play the principal parts on the greater one within, newly decorated. Impatient to take his place, Bussy endeavoured to draw attention upon himself by every means. He put on the good qualities and, chiefly, the vices that were in fashion ; he struck the view, amazed all eyes and, at need, scandalized them ; he forced everybody to speak about him. Amongst the methods he employed to raise excitement was one which he assuredly would not have conceived a few years sooner. It was to pass as a skilful man of letters ; he made verses which he gave to gentlemen and mostly to lady-friends, and he composed a novel which he circulated in select society. It was a sign of the times ; literature was becoming a power, and Bussy used it as his lever to be prised into renown. Everything at the start appeared to succeed with him ; he was appointed lieutenant-general ; he commanded the light cavalry in Turenne's army ; he became a member of the French Academy ; but, all at once, the publication of his "*Histoire Amoureuse des Gaules*," in which the merry dames of the court and the most important men of the realm were "shown up," as we should say now, raised the ire of his victims ; he was clapped into the Bastille for thirteen months and exiled to his estate, where he remained eighteen years before he could get leave to return to the capital.

It is in this work that he placed the sketch of the Marchioness de Sévigné of which we have quoted several passages. The remarkable thing about this portrait is that nothing is perfectly exact and yet nothing is totally false. Taken separately, the features are enlarged and disfigured, but they are recognisable collectively. Thus was he able to gratify everybody's malignancy; he infused enough falsehood to make the malevolent rejoice, and enough truth to let friends amuse themselves without scruple. Corbinelli—"the good Corbinelli"—confesses that he could not read it without laughing. The anger of Madame de Sévigné, when she saw it printed and in all hands, much surprised Bussy: he was one of those who, speedily forgetting the evil they have wrought, are astounded at those they have injured bearing it in mind; however, he finally begged and obtained pardon of his relative and they resumed writing to one another without interruption to the latest year of their life.

It is by help of this correspondence that we may follow Bussy into his banishment. It is known that he did not support it with courage,—nowise surprising to those who thoroughly knew him. Everything was superficial in him; he had more vainglory than ambition; he liked uproar more than fame, and, for all the airs of the swaggering captain that he donned so willingly, he lack true energy. He deemed it incumbent on him to assume resigned attitudes, and utter some of the rounded sentences which numskulls took for gospel. "As I know," he wrote, "that one must march into death from some place or other, I

am as willing to go from Burgundy as from Paris or St. Germain." The fact was, he meant to have death find him not in Burgundy but at the court, his hope being founded on a reason which he stubbornly clung to, and often repeated to friends. "Nothing lasts and everything comes round," he would tell them; "there is no good or ill fortune for ever. While the happy man has to dread, the hapless one may hope, for his turn will come some day, but he must fight off death from cutting in between. All the wisdom of an exile consists, therefore, in being ready to grasp fortune in her second course round him." Bussy looked to this, and endeavoured as well as he could to avoid all emotions detrimental to health. When he lost one of his best friends, the Marquis de Vardes, he merely wrote to Corbinelli: "After both of us honestly regretting it, let us only think how to avoid soon following him." Still he could not help thinking he was made to wait very long for the day expected with so much confidence, the day of justice and reparation; more than once he lost patience; his mask of resignation fell off, and the pent-up bile was revealed in caustic spirits of satire. Then he attacked the royal favourites and mistresses and the ministers. In brief, here is Colbert the finance minister's funeral oration: "The doctors found seven stones in him; this does not astound me so much as their not finding his heart was all one." The death of Madame de Seignelay at eighteen wrung from him this outcry of savage glee: "We wretches should be all in despair if heaven did not now and then regale us with the death of a cabinet minister!"

Such flashes are rare in his epistles, which I deplore, I vow ; for I would rather see him rebellious than submissive. I cannot believe in his resignation, belied by his ever-attempted efforts to disarm his enemies and win his forgiveness. It must be acknowledged that his position was very delicate, and that he was alive to its difficulties. He knew that he was not generally liked ; as he was stubborn about his merits and his nobility, and sharp and punctilious, he lived at peace with nobody. One day he fell out with the Marshal de Bellefonds, who had made use of the following phrase in writing to him : “ I entreat you to keep me in your good graces.” He should have written “ *the honour* of your good graces.” The “ *Histoire Amoureuse*” had attained a great success, but it was one of those successes through scandal, which, whilst gaining readers for the books, make enemies for the author. Reading it is enough to confirm the opinion that Bussy was an unbearable railer who respected nothing. We have no idea at the present day of allowing anybody to lay bare the private life to public view of the leading personages in society, and recount their least commendable doings with embellishments of abominable details borrowed from the most cynical writer of antiquity. However ruined in reputation were the Countess d’Olonne and the Duchess de Châtillon, they belonged to the foremost families under the crown, and had husbands and relatives whom their public disgrace ought to cover with shame. How can we understand it being openly stated in a book anybody might read that they



were debauched, perfidious, and mercenary in amours ; changed lovers according to whim or want of money ; and for two thousand pistoles smiled on upstarts without rank or birth ? Not a soul is spared in this satirical romance ; neither the Prince de Marcillac, shown like Samson crushing enemies “ with his ass’s jawbone ” ; nor the Counts de Guiche and Manicamp, to whom shameful habits are attributed ; nor the Prince de Condé, “ born cunning, insolent, and without respectfulness ” ; nor the Duchess de Longueville, “ who was uncleanly and smelt strong.” When Bussy was seen attacking everybody, of course all were a-tremble for themselves, and glad to see sauciness punished, from which none believed himself shielded. Bussy was therefore aware that contemporary opinion did not uphold him ; and what completed his exasperation was his perception of his not being able to rely any better on the goodwill of posterity. He said to Madame de Sévigné that he did not expect history to treat him better than fortune, “ because writers of it were court pensioners, and made up their works out of ministers’ memoirs.” He has been more unfortunate than he foresaw. It is not only official historians who have maltreated him, but independent writers expecting nothing from the court, and detesting the cabinet. St. Evremond, an exile likewise, and for more futile motives, has not spared him, saying : “ To his promotion he preferred the pleasure of making a book, and making the public laugh ; he set out to make his freedom a meritorious act, and he has not acted the character to the exit. When a man renounces

fortune by his own deed, and willingly does all that M. de Bussy has deliberately done, he ought to spend the rest of his days in retreat, and sustain with some dignity the awkward part he charged himself with." Saint-Simon, not to be suspected either of servility, and not founding his memoirs on those of cabinet officials, meeting Bussy on his path, merely remarks that "he is known by his '*Histoire Amoureuse*,' but more by his vanity and the baseness of his heart."

Bussy passed his exile of seventeen years on his estate in Burgundy at Chateau, Forléans and Bussy. Through a rare and happy chance the Château de Bussy remains to-day almost in the condition as left by its master. In his letters he boasts of having built "one of the finest houses in France"—an excessive eulogy, we think. It is a heavy-looking building, towering over a characterless vale, surrounded by rising ground not mountains, and watered by streams not rivers. Before the entrance extends a park handsomely timbered, but the unevenness of the ground does not allow its extent to be embraced. On the other side, a rather paltry lawn with straight narrow walks and an apology for a brook, forming a terrace, beyond which the eye meets a common average horizon. At the foot of the mansion cluster the few houses of a poor hamlet; the rest scatter out upon the plain or climb up the hill, so that there is neither wholly the stern beauty of solitude nor the movement and bustle of life. But Bussy was not a friend of nature. I suppose the view out of the château windows was very

unenticing to him, and that he only strolled in his park walks in obedience to hygienic prescription. What was an exile—who could not endure the country—to do amid the fields to fill up the void of long days? He tells us more than once in his correspondence, as soon as he arrived in Burgundy after coming out of the Bastille, he had artists of all kinds from Dijon and even down from Paris, chiefly architects and painters, and set to beautifying his reception-rooms. These halls are what were most liked in the Seventeenth Century, as reminding of the happiest moments of life passed in charming gatherings of lovable women and witty gentlemen; so that Le Notre, to please this world-loving society, planned the Park of Versailles to reproduce the Palace itself with long galleries, where the trees form a roof by arching over, leading to rooms and halls of verdure. The manner in which Bussy decorated his dwelling makes us see clearly in what state of mind he was then, and what occupied all his thoughts. He fed upon regrets and remembrances; he mused only upon the seductive company from which he was banished, and wished at any price to have its simulacrum before his eyes. Many rooms are adorned with emblems and allegories, almost all recalling his mistress, the lovely Marchioness de Montglas. Bussy—who accused her of having abandoned him in his blight, and had her represented now lighter than the wind, now more changeable than the moon, and then more fleeting than the swallow—shows that he still loved her by the fierceness with which he hunts her about. In one room he collected portraits

of the great captains of the time, and unceremoniously puts himself in their company. Elsewhere he had all his amorous conquests depicted with inscriptions often epigrams. No doubt, it did not seem to him he had altogether quitted Paris and Versailles when all around him he found familiar faces and forms recalling his happier years. He could delude himself in gazing on them and momentarily forget his exile. His correspondence was another means of attaching himself to the world from which he was debarred. Every post brought him communications from the few friends he had preserved, principally of the softer sex, who showed themselves more faithful than men, albeit he had not spared them ; with them were a small number of courtiers, such as remember unfortunate friends, and several lights of the colleges and academies highly honoured by being in connection with a grand lord who prided himself on loving literature. These letters were impatiently awaited, bringing to him from afar an echo of the stir in that world towards which his ear was always turned. But whilst his curiosity found pleasure in perusing them, what cruel wounds his pride must have experienced ! what bitterness to learn the success of his former rivals, men who had served with him—ay, under him—to whom he esteemed himself superior, but they were mounting one after another to the prime dignities of the State ! what vexation to run over the lists of field-m Marshals and promotions in knightly orders, where his name was not to be found ! And when he was given the story of battles won, pro-

vinces conquered and coalitions overcome, what fury for a man of infinite conceit, who believed he was called upon to command armies and bear away the laurels—to see all these great events come to pass without his being by! The pangs that rent Bussy's soul can be understood, and one is prone to pardon the desperate efforts he made to return into favour.

## VI.

THE Marchioness de Sévigné must be placed in the foremost rank amongst the faithful correspondents who undertook to send Bussy news from the court and the capital. She liked writing to him and receiving his letters, finding her cousin's fire to kindle and excite her own; his sharpness piqued her into animation, and, in answering him, she felt one of the pleasures to which we are most sensitive—self-contentment.

Yet she had friends whom she better liked and to whom she wrote more freely. A great number can be cited with whom she held ceaseless communication; but as space is limited, I shall merely mention the better known,—those who took up most place in her life. First, Madame de La Fayette, and La Rochefoucauld, and the Coulanges.

When Madame de La Fayette died, in 1693, Madame de Sévigné said that their friendship had lasted forty years, dating from the time when Madame de La Vergne, mother of Madame de La Fayette, made a second

marriage with Chevalier Renaud de Sévigné. Madame de la Vergne's daughter and Henri de Sévigné's young wife felt drawn to one another by similarity of age and tastes. Of those early, distant years we know very little, and I shall not allude to them. When the Sévigné Letters to the Marchioness's daughter begin, Madame de La Fayette had long been a widow, and had formed a close relation with the Duke de La Rochefoucauld which was a bone of contention in society.

What was its nature? A very delicate question, I grant ; but it is hard to elude having to answer it. Their contemporaries asked it with malicious curiosity. Madame de Scudéry writes to Bussy : " The Duke de La Rochefoucauld is living openly with Madame de La Fayette ; there appears only friendship in it. The fear of God on one part, and on the other hand, may happen, politics, have at last clipped love's wings. She is his favourite and foremost friend." But Bussy, a mistrustful fellow, suspected another matter, answering : " For my part, I maintain there is still love in it." It may not be wise to throw too much light on such delicate ground. If their connection commenced in 1665, as Sainte-Beuve thinks, the Duke was then fifty-two and the lady thirty-two. Under pressure their ages may allow any amount of supposition, though it must be pointed out that a long career of barren agitation and baffled ambition had worn out La Rochefoucauld ; as for Madame de La Fayette, no doubt of her having been gay and lively in her bloom, and when she was in a set of sure bosom

friends, it had happened her sometimes to speak out freely. A long while afterwards, Madame de Sévigné reminds her daughter of it : “ For all her goodness, we had many a laugh and acted such nonsense ; do you remember ? ” But goodness had retaken the upper hand, and she was a ripe and serious woman, although only thirty, when La Rochefoucauld met her in Madame de Sablé’s *salon*. It is my opinion that the acquaintance was slowly formed, neither being of the age or mood to feel one of those violent and inevitable passions which spring up at a touch. No doubt the Duke perceived the sense in the lady’s remarks, and was struck by her perfect knowledge of high life, and her clear, sure manner of judging men and events. On her part, we may conclude she felt most flattered when she marked the effect she produced upon so distinguished a nobleman, who had played an important part in public matters. Therefore the mind had at first the greatest place in the acquaintance, but the heart was not totally stranger to it. The Duke was not intended for those fierce passions in which the hazard of his romantic adventures had once entangled him. Madame de Sévigné had rightly said of him : “ I do not believe he has ever been in love, as we understand it. ” When past fifty only did he meet a love of the kind he was capable of reciprocating. Although he had seen much of life up to this, Madame de La Fayette opened out new prospects. She inspired him with a moderate and reasonable affection,—the only one suitable to both their natures, and one that gilded their

declining years. In these stormless intimacies late in life, there is still much charm, and they may have the tempered lustre and gentle warmth of an autumnal sunset. "I believe that nothing can surpass the strength of such a connection," says Madame de Sévigné. Thenceforward, they never left one another. Gourville, who hated Madame de La Fayette, leaves us to infer that she entirely won La Rochefoucauld. It is sure that she was by nature imperious and domineering, and laid the yoke on her friends, but, in this case, the yoke was accepted without resistance. There is servitude to which one is happy to submit; and, besides, we know that the lady only used her power to mollify the bitter moralist who had recently written "The Maxims" and reconcile him with the human race. It was at the height of this association that "*La Princesse de Clèves*" appeared under the name of *Segrais*, which everybody knew to conceal Madame de La Fayette, and many suspected that the Duke had a hand in it. The devotee Madame de Scudéry writes to Bussy hereon: "The Duke de La Rochefoucauld and Madame de la Fayette have made a romance on the court of King Henry II.; they are not of an age to make anything else together." At present it is impossible to know if, indeed, the Duke aided the authoress, and what is his in "*La Princesse de Clèves*." All that can be said is that there seems to be some trace in this charming work of the dual authorship, and that the state of mind of the lady in writing it can be surmised by the perusal. The calmness seems to me to be felt of a



soul enjoying shared affections from the repose befalling her. She gazed with amiable and compassionate sympathy upon the hapless passions of others, and shed upon the objects of her dreams that soft and even light which is the very medium wherein she was passing her life.

The following years were less blissful. As ever, age brought ails: the gout chained the Duke to his easy chair. Always going to die, his consort never could form any project for the morrow. She tells how, having started for Chantilly where the Prince Royal was expecting her, fever seized her on the Pont Neuf and she could not go any further. This condition made each more needful to the other. As their poor health compelled them to shun company, they arranged more than ever to be company enough between themselves. We are told by Madame de Sévigné, who saw them more regularly after they were more alone and cheerless, that "nothing could be compared to the charm and trustfulness in their union."

To pass from this couple to the Coulanges, is to go from one extreme to the other. As much as one were grave and serious, the other were gay, bustling, and animated. Life and movement itself were this delighted pair. It is impossible to have brighter mental gifts than they—minds of witty sallies and sprightliness, ever under arms and ready to retort. In the connubial dialogue, epigrams showered down in sparks. Dulness durst not go nigh them, and consequently, everybody was fond of them, sought them out, invited them, and strove to keep them. For all this, when eyed narrowly, it was percept-

ible that they did not very well harmonise. When these merry-makers were alone they became serious, and, though inexhaustible conversationalists away from home, found nothing to talk about ; hence they were as seldom within their own doors as could be. They had no children to retain them there ; they were almost always unoccupied ; the wife did not feel at all interested in household matters ; and her lord and master, who had been successively counsellor and clerk of petitions to the Parliament of Paris, refrained as much as possible from attending office. The pair were always out in the streets or on the roads. The lady frequented the reception-rooms of the capital and went visiting to Versailles, where she had high connections of whom she was proud, such as the Premier Louvois, her kin, the Duchess de Richelieu and the Marchioness de Maintenon in particular, who much liked her turn of mind. The gentleman allowed himself longer runs, spending whole seasons in the country residences of mighty noblemen whom he amused. Once he travelled in Germany with M. de Lyonne ; later on he accompanied the Duke de Chaulnes on his embassy to Rome, sat out two conclaves, and remained over two years in Italy. At the period when the Sévigné Letters make them more intimately known to us, they had been seven or eight years married, and their marital standing was continued to the end. Each did as he or she fancied, and both had settled down in their courses after this separation under the same roof. Was this managed without conflict ? Of this we are ignorant ; but it is hard to imagine there could

have been any rough rupture between such well-bred people, so hostile to noise and tolerant by nature. The probability is that they softly drew apart when they found less pleasure in dwelling together, and, as the parting was gradual, there was no violent rending; even as liquids slowly cooling in a vessel do not burst it. But how came it that these two winsome beings, so alike, did not agree better? Was it not because they were too much alike? If opposite spirits risk clashing, it may be difficult for those of too great a resemblance totally to convene. It is better that, between persons fated never more to part, there should be likeness enough for them to comprehend one another, yet enough variation for them to need one another for mutual completion. In any case, esteem for each other had survived in this semi-detached couple, and even more, a basis of trust and unity; whence it may be concluded that the merely nominal husband and wife had never felt a very fervent love for one another; since, according to Bussy's most just reflection, out of a fierce love one sooner goes into hate than friendship. In a very serious illness of Madame de Coulanges, there was the edifying sight of the husband showing tokens of the most profound sorrow and the dying wife only thinking of her husband. It is true that when she was out of danger, all went on as usually. This blending of reciprocal attentions and mutual indifference, of complete separation indoors and a seemly show to public eyes, forms a most curious contrast; can one not see in it a forward glimpse of a fashionable alliance in the Eighteenth Century?

There is one important point missing, however. This airy husband who flitted about beyond the cote, had not any strange mate, as far as we know; not one of those connections which replace family life was apparently formed by him. He chiefly liked good cheer, high-spiced talk and boon companions. Wherever he was welcome he sat at ease. At first agreeable, he soon became necessary; but he amused himself in entertaining others, and was fully content with this jester's existence, not to everybody's taste. Some vexations he met—not a doubt of that; who can entirely avoid them? Once he was urged to sue for an important financial office which, although he was a kinsman of the Marquis de Louvois, the Prime Minister, he did not obtain. He felt the rebuff, for all his philosophy; but the chagrin did not last, and, as was his wont, he comforted himself with song:

“Fortune with me hath picked a bone,\*  
But on it left meat to atone.”

and recommenced his jolly vagabond roaming. “What a gladsome life!” writes Madame de Sévigné to him, “and how softly fortune handles you! always beloved and held highly; always bearing joy and pleasure about with you; always the favourite cheek-by-jowl of some potent friend—a duke or a prince or a pope (I throw in the Holy Father for rarity's sake!); always hale and never a burden upon anybody; never bothered by business or fretted by ambition; and, above all, with the blessing of never growing old! It is the climax of bliss. You fear a

\* “Fortune tu m'as fait querelle,” etc.

little that you are aging, by computation of time and years; but the dread is afar, and does not foreshadow any horror, as it does to some people I could name; it is your neighbour who is getting on in years, and you have not really that alarm which is usually caused when our neighbour's house catches fire. In short, after duly musing over it, I see you are the happiest man in the world."

But how about Madame de Coulanges? Was she contented with what sufficed her husband? How did she accept the loneliness in which he left her? Was there no hawk who profited by the chance to glide into the empty place? Saint-Simon, not to be suspected of kindness, tells us that she was always irreproachable; and we may believe him. Not that she lacked for suitors who offered to console her during her husband's absence. Madame de Sévigné names three who paid her assiduous court. In the first place comes Abbé Têtu, a wit of the alcove—the ladies' pet, whom they fought for at conversational gatherings. He had divided up his time regularly. In the fine season he was not to be found—he was keeping company with the witching Abbess of Fontevault, and in the darksome weather he returned into winter quarters, to use his own words, at Madame de Coulanges'. Though often jealous and overbearing, our Abbé had the advantage of not injuring the reputation of ladies to whom he attached himself; it was known that all his ardour lay in murmuring sweet nothings, and that he never went beyond madrigals. The next was

still less dangerous, being the eccentric Count de Brancas, about whom the Marchioness de Sévigné often made merry : he was in the same breath amorous and devout, and pretended that he was striving to win Madame de Coulanges only to help her save her soul. She preferred to save it single-handed, but willingly entertained herself with this mystic suppliant who, in his proposals, mingled theology and gallantry, in the Tartuffe vein. There was more to apprehend from the third, the Marquis de La Trousse, Coulanges' cousin, one of the leading officials in the royal household. He was deeply smitten with his relative, and never quitted her when in town ; but she treated him no better than the others. "He is ever assiduous," we have Madame de Sévigné's word for it thus, "and she was ever hard, bitter, and scornful." The trio of lovers did not displease the lady with their behaviour, and she rather liked seeing them contend against one another. What is more singular is the husband's finding sport in it, and taking pleasure in noting the progress and chances of each one, and celebrating them in his songs :

"Têtu hath Brancas overcome,\*  
 La Trousse is thrown, supine and dumb :  
     The tourney queen is gay,  
     Whilst trolls her lord this lay :  
 Têtu hath Brancas overcome,  
 La Trousse is thrown, supine and dumb !"

Behold a married man of rare tolerance and disinterested-

\* "Têtu est vainqueur de Brancas," etc.

ness. Madame de Sévigné was not wrong in saying, on the eve of his starting for Rome: "His wife had no particular reason for wishing him well off upon this journey, for he really was not at all in her way."

On the whole, it is likely that marital confidence was not deceived. Madame de Coulanges took pleasure in the badinage of light gallantry, but, we see, Saint-Simon affirms that she did not drink too deep of the cup. She may have regretted this at stray moments; it is possible that she caught a glimpse beyond these futile flirtations of some deeper affection, which would have made her feel unknown sentiments. In one of her letters I come upon a sentence that sets one thinking; it is speaking of the Marquis de Villeroy, the Prince Charming, as they styled him, who was wildly in love with a deceiving fair: "Everybody deems him worth pitying, but to me he appears to be envied." Meseems that these words, if you read between the lines, allow regrets to be divined. But the fact is, her nature did not soar into the firmament of *grandes passions*; the lightness of her spirit protected her during the perilous years. Towards the close, she became grave and religious. We have a letter of hers wherein she upbraids her husband for his wayward humour and incorrigible youthfulness. "For my part," she tells him, "I confess that I believe myself little caring about society. I no longer find myself fit for it because of my age; thank Heaven, I have none of those engagements with it which retain one in it in spite of themselves; I have seen all it has to show, and can, in return, only show

it an old face, and nothing at all new to discover. So why recommence that eternal round of visits and agitation over occurrences not concerning us? My dear, we ought to think of more substantial things."

The Ladies of La Fayette and Coulanges were the Marchioness de Sévigné's best friends. Sometimes she doubtlessly suffered from the one's imperious spirit, and the frivolity of the other often irritated her; but, through all crosses, she fondly loved them both. In allusion to Madame de La Fayette, she said: "We never saw the faintest cloud dim our friendship," and she might have said the same of Madame de Coulanges. On their side, these two felt all the charm and solidity of her affection. On the point of dying, Madame de La Fayette wrote to her: "We must end when God pleaseth, and I am submissive. My dearest, believe that you are the person of all whom I most truly loved." Madame de Coulanges had the pain of surviving her, and she felt the loss most keenly. "No more friends are mine!" she said when she received the news; and, a year subsequently, she wrote: "The woe of seeing her no more is ever fresh; so very much is missing at the Carnavalet Mansion!" What an eulogium for Madame de Sévigné to be equally loved by two of such opposite humour! It is this assuredly which gives us the best opinion of her.



## CHAPTER II.—THE WRITER.

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VICTOR COUSIN points out that in the first half of the Seventeenth Century the epistolary style became very fashionable ; letters, like portraits and conversation, occupy a great part of the current novels,—being, in Madame de Scudéry's, printed in different type in order to catch the eye. This vogue is easily understood. It is a very common failing to like speaking about one's self, and putting one's self forward, and, in correspondence, there is nothing else to be done. The *ego* dominates and is quite in place. What is a fault elsewhere becomes a necessity here and the very rule of the style. Hence we all like to write letters, because we can speak of ourselves as we fancy ; and we like to read them, too, because it is nice to enter into others' minds and learn their most secret feelings, particularly when they do not wish them known. It follows that the epistolary style is sure of being agreeable to the conceited and inquisitive, which is tantamount to saying almost all mankind.

This is why, doubtlessly, Balzac and Voiture give their

principal works the form of letters,—unfortunately, only the form. Read all Voiture's correspondence, wherein he prates of himself the whole time ; when done, you will not know whence he came, what he did, on what grounds he was received in the society where we know he held so important a place, why he remained in town and why he left it, and what he went to do in the distant lands whence he wrote so many lines to his friends. He never reveals his true feelings. He belonged to a society where every man took a part and conscientiously played it,—as the lover, the jilted, the moping, the coquettish, the careless, and the proud. Once chosen, a line of character could not cease to be enacted, or at least walked through ; speaking or writing, one was always in stage clothes. It was understood that Voiture was to be the unhappy lover of the severe Mdlle. Paulet, *la belle lionne*, as she was termed, and he acquitted himself regularly of that task as long as he frequented the Hôtel de Rambouillet ; even his travels did not free him. From Brussels, Rome, or Madrid, he never wearied of sending elegant “fiddle-faddle.” From Ceuta he wrote to her once : “I have left Europe and crossed the Strait which serves as its boundary ; but the ocean between you and me cannot extinguish aught of the passion I feel for you ; and, though all the slaves of Christendom become free on landing here, I am none the less in your bondage.” I need not tell you that he never felt a word of the pretty stuff he uttered in so believing a tone : it was a fashionable pastime which cheated nobody—a kind of literary

exercise which may seem piquant, but contained nothing serious or sincere.

Consequently it seems to me that, whatever may have been the success of Voiture's "Letters," anyone feels the lack of something in reading them. Even those most delighted with them, doubtlessly muttered that they would be still more enjoyable if truly letters in which the writer, believing himself safe from betrayal, speaks out confidently and tells us what he feels and thinks, in lieu of expressing conventional sentiments—in short, shows himself as he is. If, furthermore, this writer shows talent and—in the rush of the pen, during close communion—those qualities to him natural which are due to toil in others, then there is no more to desire. What proves that sound heads hold this idea, at present, of a perfect letter-writer, and that above Voiture's "Letters"—though so much read and admired—they perceive others more admirable and joining the merit of sincerity to that of style, is their never hesitating, upon their being given the Sévigné Letters to read, to acknowledge at the first instant that these are perfection. Public opinion has perhaps never so promptly and unanimously hailed a fine work. When, after Bussy-Rabutin's death, his daughter brought out his correspondence with the letters he received from his cousin, the latter ravished the world. Bayle was so enchanted that he declared "this woman deserves a place among the illustrious of her sex and period." About this epoch, a Jesuit published a Latin poem, entitled "*Ratio Conscribendæ*

*Epistolæ*," in which he proclaimed the Marchioness de Sévigné's writings to be the model of style, and that she wrote with so much facility that some of her letters call for more time to read them than she took to compose them.

It is clear that our reverend poet imagined Madame de Sévigné as one who dashed off a letter in one breath, without taking any pains to trim and polish it. It is true that she suggests this when she tells us that she even "let her pen run with the bridle on its neck," and, generally, it has been taken on her word. But there have been some doubting Saint Thomases to whom this mode of composing masterpieces seemed suspicious. The very merit of her letters made them surmise that they cost her more trouble than she pretended was the case. The piquant grace of minutiae, the ingenious turns of thought, the alluring variety in the repetition of the same reflections, and the wit in the expression of heart-emotions, seemed to betray art and labour. "So much fineness and care," they reasoned, "were not to all appearance expended upon one person; a mother does not make so much ado in writing to her daughter; ordinarily, everyday wit is kept for home consumption and the choicely cut stones shown to strangers and the public." These will have it that Madame de Sévigné wrote under cover of her daughter for posterity, and if so, these letters did not miscarry on arriving to us. Let us seek for the truth in their opinion, as it will be important to learn it, if only to save us from being duped.

There are distinctions to draw in the Sévigné Letters; she does not write to all her friends in the same way, because she is not equally sure of them. She knew well that some of them would not keep her letters to themselves. For example, in corresponding with Bussy, any act might be expected; did he not one day commit the indelicacy of admitting the King into the secret of this intimacy, and show his Majesty her letters as well as his own? Is it not, therefore, natural that she should be fettered sometimes in writing to Bussy? could she know what would become of confidence sent to him? What Bussy often did for his own gain, Coulanges did for the writer's; the admiration he felt for her wit was so vivid that he could not keep it to himself. She strongly suspected this, and was tempted, in addressing him, to dress herself a little—not to be caught in dressing-gown and slippers by prying eyes. We ought not to be surprised at some constraint and even some preparation springing from this; it was not in her power to be long the mistress of herself; ere long her spirit overcame her and swept her on; she forgot the precautions she meant to take, and gave herself up entirely to current inspiration; and it was well she did so, for she became never more bewitching.

In any case, she had nothing to fear in writing to her daughter, even if the impression of this uncertain and unknown audience did exert any influence over her when she wrote to Coulanges and Bussy. Now we are in the narrowest circle; all that lies on the heart may be spoken with full trustingness,—that can be related which might

not be repeated without peril; private and State affairs, the neighbours' gossip, the most scandalous stories and the most compromising confidences—all is stated. Hence the Countess de Grignan never let her mother's letters get about, and when by chance she was reading a passage about important news, she tells us she took the greatest care that nobody should read over her shoulder what ought not to be seen. The writer, therefore, believed herself safe from the outside world ever knowing these letters, and was at ease when writing them. She gave herself no pains about meditating, watching, and taking a style which, for her, were *cothurnæ*; she abandoned herself to the flow of her thoughts and feelings: "Do you know what I am going to do? what I have so far done? I always commence without knowing how far I shall run; I am unaware whether my letter will be long or short; I wrote so much that it pleases my pen, and that governs the whole." Elsewhere we read: "Firstly I send my love to the Count; I much admire him, and you too, my child, for liking my letters so well; I am always astounded at the good words you tell me about them, for they fly so quickly from me that I never feel what they are worth, or that they are worth anything at all." She must have written at a pace to have written so much. With all the social duties obligatory upon her, if she had attempted to compose pieces of eloquence, she would never have found time to write such a great number of letters; above all, she must have made them shorter. Nothing more plainly shows her improvisation than her

wealth of detail, and abundance and amplitude of narration,—the traits that delight us, but which she sometimes blamed herself for as for crimes. When she thought of the fatigue she was imposing on her daughter to go through all this “chatter,” she resented it herself, asked her forgiveness, and promised to be more sober in the future ; but once she set to converse with her, all her good resolutions were forgotten and she did not know how to stop. “I am pouring forth prose with a facility which must be the death of you.”

## I.

WE have before us a young woman, lively, sprightly, much in request by society and passing her days in it, very busy pleasuring, without the faintest notion of composing literary works, and yet, the first time she takes up the pen, in letters addressed to one person, without dreaming of the public or attitudinising in its view, she writes with the sureness and exactitude of a professional author ; she knows how to say what she feels and thinks ; she hits on the fit word ; she avoids floundering, repetition, and the obscurity from which literary craftsmen escape so difficultly ; in short, without trying for it, almost without being aware of it, she is perfect.

How is it done, and by what miracle did she so quickly acquire the art demanding such study and effort from others ?

The reply first coming into mind is, that she received

peculiar gifts from heaven, and that it was her nature to write well ; but nature must be aided by labour. We do not see born artists knowing music before learning it, and they do not play an instrument well the first time they touch it. In all arts there is a portion of handiwork which must be obtained, and the art of writing is not an exception ; quite the reverse, there is none harder. "It is no trivial matter," says Victor Cousin, patly to Madame de Sévigné, "to express ideas and sentiments in a natural order, with their true shades, in terms neither too vulgar nor too refined, which shall not exaggerate or enfeeble them." These delicate powers presuppose some study and practice. I do not believe there ever was a writer who became so without any apprenticeship ; and if it seems to us that men of genius need no preparation, that is because we do not perceive in what way they were made ready. We are too prone to believe that the only education to form the mind is that given in schools, after the usual methods ; in reality, there are a thousand methods, strongly differing from one another. Some require a master, others are self-taught. To one, solitude is necessary, and he must shut himself up in a study to dwell amongst books and in brooding ; on the contrary, another never secludes himself, but seems entirely yielding to the maëlstrom of the world ; but, without having a meditative aspect, this sort let nothing be lost of what they see and hear. Everything serves as a lesson to him who can profit by it. Instruction may come from the instructed and the unlearnt, from the literate and the



ignorant, in toiling and in doing nothing ; but, as there are a multitude of means to learn which elude us, it seems to me always rash to assert that some one knows what he never learnt.

Be this as it may, we can be sure that Madame de Sévigné was taught to write ; and it is an interesting study to seek how she formed her style.

In the first place, she had for masters in her youth two of the most learned men of the era, Chapelain the poet, and Ménage. Chapelain must have been the first to give her some lessons. We know that he was attached to the Coulanges family, and it is natural he should be called in to finish Mdlle. de Chantal's education whilst he was charged with that of her cousin, M. de La Trousse. Chapelain's reputation is bad, and he has never recovered from Boileau's attacks ; and he judged himself with much severity. While everybody agreed upon celebrating beforehand the glory of his work as one certain to make France illustrious, he spoke of it most lowly to his friends. "Referring to my '*Pucelle*,'" he wrote to President Maynard, "she is still so crude and rustic that she will not venture out of my study except along of me, and then in the dusk, when her imperfections less appear. With great impatience I await our good fortune bringing you hither that I may entreat you to give her a little brushing up." He wrote to Balzac elsewhere : "Believe me to be of little account, and what I do still less. The world, perforce, and counter to my intention, wishes to consider me a great poet ; and even though I should

not be quite the other thing, I do not long to be looked upon only in that light. Meseems, I have that within me to pay in better coin, and coin more justly of my minting." It is Boileau's line to a dot: "Why does he not write in prose?" Alas, that is still too favourable! Chapelain is not a bad poet, but none can say he is a good writer of prose. The two volumes of his letters which have been lately published are of dreadful heaviness. His jests in particular are worthy of a hippopotamus. One day when he wished to write a gallant note to the Countess de Grignan, concerning a visit she was about to make to the Fountain of Vaucluse, he said: "Although I be not as tender a rhymers as Petrarch, still I do rhyme like him, and the vocation common to us both may cover my admission to him to obtain his doing a part of what he owes a lady of your rank. As for his mistress, I do not despair of making her understand that she runs no risk in making you welcome, and that your attachment for his lordship the Count de Grignan will not permit your displaying all your charms at Vaucluse to entice away her lover." This is not Madame de Sévigné's style; evidently Chapelain did not teach her to write; but he knew Latin well, and Italian and Spanish; he did her a great service in teaching her to read Virgil "in the majesty of his own text," and understanding "The Jerusalem," and "*Rolando Furioso*." One day when she consulted him upon Tasso's rather mannered verses, he answered her that "a proneness for point-lace and network made him take modes of awkward

and obscure expression ; but because a racehorse runs wild now and then, its hams are not strung." The remark is apt enough, but what a dreadful style ! Chapelain was very proud of his pupil, and she, on the whole, very grateful to her master ; but gratitude did not prevent so bright a girl from perceiving her professor's ridiculous traits. I daresay that, on seeing him come up to her with his lowly mien and negligent apparel, the remembrance of "the uncowed" *Chaplain* sometimes crossed her mind and she could not restrain a smile. Without overmuch respect, she called him her good or old Chapelain. His airs of a majestic pedant had not escaped her. In acquainting her daughter with his having had an apoplectic stroke preventing him speaking, she said : "He confesses by dumb show, as he sits in his chair like a statue ; so heaven confounds the arrogance of philosophers." We must own to this being but a meagre funeral oration.

I suppose Madame de Sévigné owes more to Ménage and was more attached to him. He was much younger than Chapelain, and, above all, more of a man of the world. We have alluded to his paying court to his pupil, who did not grow vexed at it. As none of the pieces of verse he dedicated to her bear her maiden name, it may be inferred that he did not know her intimately until after her marriage. Then her education was finished, and had merely to receive the gilding upon the gold from Ménage. It is likely that she was very glad to know a man enjoying high renown, whose name Balzac and

Saumaise never uttered save with respect. Ménage is neither a Scaliger nor a Casaubon ; his learning is less sure and profound than that of the great erudite writers of the preceding epoch. He himself acknowledges (at least, the "*Ménagiana*" makes him say so) that he did not understand Pindar well enough to take any pleasure in him, and that he had never read any Greek author without the translation by. His clear and elegant Latin is not correct, and his adversaries have picked out rather gross flaws. None the less, he was a wise man, whose knowledge had much extent. He published poetry in French, Latin, Greek, and Italian. Truth to tell, they were often poor, and he rather guilelessly avows it, spite of his not liking to be told so. In the number, though, there are some of easy turn—mainly in Latin ; and it is, at all events, a rare merit to rhyme in four languages. Unfortunately, Ménage had more pretension than deserts. He was free of two different classes, namely the learned and the fashionable, and he endeavoured to please each equally, two aspirations which were contrary. When one tries to be agreeable to two of such a pair, there is a risk of displeasing both : the wiseheads deem us too frivolous and the featherbrains too heavy. Thus it came about that towards the close Ménage's fame declined. It was his misery to perceive it, for his vanity did not completely blind him, and he sadly observed to his friends : "I am out of fashion." Several awkward affairs which he had the imprudence to draw upon himself, set the laughter against him. Notwithstanding all his efforts to appear

of his time, he remained in many respects a pundit of the Sixteenth Century; like Scaliger and the Lipsiuses, he was of combatable humour, and overwhelmed with insult whomsoever dared be not of his opinion. He raised noisy quarrels for motives seemingly futile to those not of the craft; he launched huge volumes against Baillet, d'Aubignac, and Bouhours; he abused Cotin, who retorted with a heavy pamphlet entitled "*La Ménagerie.*" For both, this wrangle had disastrous consequences—for Molière saw sport in it and made it immortal. Who does not know the famous scene between Trissotin and Vadius in "*Les Femmes Savantes*"? Trissotin is Cotin beyond mistaking; and is not Vadius as clearly designated? Ménage had the good-sense not to see his own likeness, which proves that he did not altogether lack discernment, but the public were not hoodwinked. However, Madame de Sévigné had no need for Molière to point her out her master's ridiculous features, for she saw them herself. To her, these clapperclawings of pedants, in which he found pleasure, appeared very foolish. Apropos of the laughable conflict between Father Bouhours and him, this cruel cut escapes her: "They vent truths at one another, and often they are insults." "Behold," says Mesnard, very appositely, "what Ménage reaped by sowing Tacitus: 'Flagitia invicem objectavere, neuter falso.'"

Although she could on occasion jest a little at Chapelain and Ménage, she never ignored her obligations to them. More than once she gratefully speaks of "the

good teachers she had in her youth." These good masters taught her French in two ways ; first by making it known to her in Latin, Italian, and Spanish,—there is nothing better than these comparisons made with foreign tongues to render us masters of our own ; then they taught it to her directly by the mode in which they studied and practised it together. Both were meritorious grammarians, taking an important part in the work in progress to cleanse their language, that it should become purer and more precise and regular,—better prepared, in short, for the great literary epoch commencing. It may be said that this work went on around Madame de Sévigné ; she knew familiarly almost all undertaking it, for they were her friends and masters. As the higher classes had taken a taste for these researches, she might hear in the drawing-rooms where she resorted, pupils of Vaugelas discussing the meaning and value of terms, condemning such as they deemed badly framed, and giving to others their definite form. Were we to say *arondelle* or *hirondelle*, and so forth ? Were we to accept *urbanite*, which Balzac wished to place in credit, and *prosateur*, invented by Ménage ? Not only were the ladies lookers-on in these debates, but often judges. The gallant Father Bouhours rated their suffrage highly, and, to win them over to his side, heaped them with eulogy. " There is nothing more fit, proper, and natural than the speech of most French women," he said. " The words they use seem quite new and expressly made for what they say, albeit common ; and if Nature herself could speak, I believe she would borrow

their tongue." Thinking of the sex witnessing these learned discussions and their taking part in them, one might be tempted at the outset to feel some distress for them, more than all if there be a recollection of the blue-stockings, Philaminte, Armande, and Bélise, so wearisome, pedantic, and conceited, about their grammar:—

"Grammar, who acts the regent e'en o'er kings, and awes,  
As, with high hand, she makes them bow unto her laws."

But Philaminte and Bélise are silly women who would abuse anything, as they did science and grammar. Their example does not prove that a woman of sense and brilliancy cannot draw good profit from them. When one hears about the origin of words around one, and follows the changes through which they have passed and endeavours to establish a real acceptance, there must remain some gold at the bottom ; without special training, by only listening to what is said, one falls into the habit of employing the proper word and placing it timely. It must not be believed, above all, that the surrounding influence of grammar can hamper those, as asserted, who undergo it, so as to lessen the freeness of their pen by the care of exaggerated purity. On the contrary, I find that, far from enslaving them, it delivers them from the most irksome of servitudes, that of words. What is most lacking in women, even when they write well, is originality of expression. As, in general, they have not received the more profound education given to the sterner sex, they only know words by their daily use,

and dare not employ them except in the way everybody does. On the contrary, the student who knows their origin and, it follows, their proper value, is not enchained to that usual course ; he is more free with them, and sees that he may turn them from that ordinary meaning and place them in a new manner. It may be said, he is the master and they obey him, or rather that he does not heed them and they present themselves to mind without being called up ; they come to express his thoughts in all the variety of their hues and in the plenitude of their significance. If the company of Ménage and Chapelain did this service to Madame de Sévigné, she was right in being grateful to them.

To the education imparted by her masters, must be adjoined that due to reading. From all times she was "a great devourer of books." Everything interested her. She liked novels, as we have seen, but the most serious books did not alarm her. History greatly delighted her, even that of the Turks, in which she found some who had many Christian virtues. Her curiosity agreed with all, from Virgil to Father Maimbourg, spite of his dog of a style ; from Nicole, who frightened her, to Rabelais, who made her die of laughter. It was chiefly during her leisure at Les Rochers that she had recourse to all kinds of reading to occupy the days. "We have lovely weather. We are reading a good deal, and I feel the pleasure of having no memory, for everything comes up again before me without tiring me—Corneille's comedies, Despréaux's works, and Sarazin's and Voiture's ; without tiring, I say



—I mean, just the reverse. Sometimes we give ourselves up to Plutarch's '*Morals*,'—admirable they are! the '*Préjuges*' (of Arnauld); the ministers' replies; a page of the Koran, if we like; in short, I do not know what country we do not beat up." When too much ground is beaten up at the same time none are thoroughly probed. Madame de Sévigné was not ignorant of this: she never tried to pass for a sage. In alluding to her neighbour in Brittany, Madame de Kerman, who read a great deal like herself, she said: "She has a smattering of everything and I, a faint tinge, so that our surfaces merge in very nicely together." After all, it may be better for a woman thus to skim over the garden of authors from the Koran to "*Cléopâtre*," than to draw all the honey from one plant: she may be superficial, but at least she will not be a pedant.

Madame de Sévigné always congratulated herself upon the education she received or acquired herself; and, consequently, passionately desired her grandchildren to be brought up in the same way. She wished them to be looked to early, and nothing to be neglected to form their mind. "It is presuming too much to expect everything out of a blessed disposition," she says. When the young Marquis de Grignan returned from Philipsburg with the scratch which made her so proud of him, she sought to persuade him to profit by his spare time to read some good books, but he was too busy running about society and dancing with the young ladies of the Castelnau family to hearken to his grandmother's advice. "His young

blood makes such a buzzing in his ears that he does not hear," she said. She was happier with her granddaughter Pauline. Nothing is more touching than the trouble she took to have her well reared. She watched over her from afar; as soon as any little difference arose between mother and daughter, she flew in; "Pauline is not perfect, eh? so much the better. You will have the joy of remodelling her." In particular, she wanted to prevent Madame de Grignan, in an angry fit, sending her daughter back to the nuns of Aubenas, among whom she had been kept several years. "Do not believe," she says, "that a convent can repair an education either as regards religion, which our good sisters know little about, or other matters." The mother would much better understand how to correct the trifling outbreaks of an umbrageous temper, but she ought to deal with her gently. "Lead her softly. The desire to please you will do more than scolding; endeavour to speak reason to her without scolding or humbling her, for this makes one revolt; and I answer for your making her a little marvel." Her joy is great on learning that Pauline likes reading: "What a fortunate, sweet disposition! now she is out of the reach of *ennui* and idleness—two vile reptiles!" Not to repel her, she wished they would leave the reins loose, lest she were hampered in her choice of books. "I would rather she swallowed some bad stuff, than failed to acquire a longing for good." She grew irate at the scruples of a stupid confessor who would not authorise the reading of theatrical pieces. "I do not think," she says, "that you have the

courage to obey Father *Lanterne* ; would you not rather give Pauline the pleasure—able to appreciate them as she is and to make use of them—of reading the splendid comedies of Corneille, and ‘*Polyeucte*,’ and ‘*Cinna*,’ and others? Not to have devotion without such a loss, not to be brought within the grace of God, strikes me to be wearing boots without stockings.” About novels, opinions were divided. “There are examples,” she says to her daughter, “of the good and the bad effect of this sort of reading: you do not care for them, yet have done very well; I do, and I have not badly run in my course; ‘to the pure all things are pure,’ as you say. For my part, wishful to be upheld by my taste, I think that a young man will become brave and generous by viewing my heroes, and a maid become wise and honest by reading ‘*Cléopâtre*.’ Sometimes there are people who take things askew; but they probably would go no straighter if they did not know how to read. When the mind is sound, it is not easy to mar it.” Yet there are works more liked by her than novels. She chiefly wishes Pauline to get a liking for historical books. “If you have to pinch her nose to make her swallow them, I am sorry for her.” Then come authors still more serious. “Has she nibbled at *Lucian*? is she able to wrestle with the *Little Letters*? As far as morality goes, since she will not make so good a use of it as you, I do not at all wish her little nose to be stuck into Montaigne or Charron or any of the authors of that sort; it is a little too early in the morning for her to lose herself in those fogs. The

true morality for her age is what she will learn in good parlance, fable, history, and examples; I believe this is enough."

The reading she recommended to her granddaughter is the same she had in her youth and so well profited by. She speaks of it with a kind of effusion of gratefulness; knowing all she owes it. By reading one grows habituated to reflect and to write—"and it is so sweet a thing to know how to write what one thinks!"

## II.

WE are not merely the pupils of our masters, but our education is also made by the society we keep and the persons we are mingled with. Nobody entirely escapes the influence of the circle in which he is placed; Madame de Sévigné must have suffered this more than others. We see with what facility, in her mature age, she took the opinions of those surrounding her, and how she was speedily steeped with their sentiments. This disposition must have been still more marked in her in youth, at the period when ideas are least settled, and one is most impressionable to those of others.

We know that she first visited the home of the Rambouillets, where she filled sufficient place for Somaize to insert her portrait in his "*Dictionnaire des Précieuses.*" It was a gathering not to be gone through with impunity; hence some rigorous critics, convinced that she must have been corrupted there, have hunted for traces of

overdone refinement (*préciosité*) in her Letters. If there are any, I believe they are not numerous. As we know the Marchioness, she must have sooner imbibed the good traits than the bad ones in that house. It was rather easy for her to avoid the defects, as she was the reverse of a *Précieuse* through her vigorous spirit, robust common sense, clearness and frankness of mind, and taste for spiced sayings and broad talk. Let us not forget, moreover, that she was but nineteen when Julie d'Angennes, the hostess's daughter, wedded the Count de Montausier, from which moment the society of Madame de Rambouillet began to disperse. Madame de Sévigné only knew it in its sere and yellow leaf when its importance was much diminished. It was not there that she rounded off the training of her mind.

It is likely that she owed more to the sets which collected the crumbs of the Rambouillet Mansion and essayed to continue its traditions. She was highly appreciated among them, and, about 1661, one of her admirers alludes to "the great and legitimate noise her merit made in society." These circles, we know, were very busy about literature; new poetry and works fresh to the day were eagerly conversed upon; authors yearned to please them and made sacrifices to merit their applause. Therefore they influenced the literature of their time in some degree, and if it be wished to know into what channels they wafted it, we can see by the stage,—faithful image of society. It is the juncture when the audience passed from Corneille to Racine; gradually

they turned from the ideal of heroism and grandeur of soul in fashion since '*Le Cid*'; instead of those inequalities of tone, haughty familiarities, and roughness of touch not displeasing to poorly cultured spectators, more tender paintings were required, colours better blended, more scrupulous correctness, and sustained dignity, nobleness and elegance. The fashion of expression in the speech was no longer quite the same. If I did not fear to fix divisions too abrupt in what was gradually done by insensible transition, I would say that there were two French languages then, rather different, one succeeding the other. The former, that of Descartes and Balzac, appears to be the work of learned men from the model of Latin oratory, and from that drew mainly abundance and majesty. The other, written and spoken in the second half of the century, refined and pruned without cessation, continued to grow smarter, lighter, and more active, and the forthcoming age used it as the weapon in pitched battles; it seems to me to have been formed and fashioned in social conversation. Men of letters of those days knew that drawing-rooms were a school for them, where they learned more than they liked thus to acquire. Voiture seems only a kind of shorthand clerk to the witty persons who allowed him into their company. "Mark how well I bring in the pretty talk I heard spoken," he says. Ménage relates M. de Varillas' telling him that out of ten things he knew, nine had been gathered out of conversation; and he hastens to append: "I can almost say the same." These are not mere polite phrases.

I believe that it can be proven by examples that Voiture and Ménage spoke the truth, and that society does teach a good deal to its components. As the century advanced in age, men were to be met who, having no other training than good community, became more exacting and more dainty in the manner of expressing their ideas, and fell more deeply into the habit of writing well. Let us turn back to the epoch of Louis XIII. and the Fronde ; the high-born dames of that period, de Hautefort, de Longueville, de Maure, and de Sablé, had certainly most elevated sentiments and much distinction in manners ; it is probable that they spoke fairly, but, surely, they wrote badly ; their sentences are heavy, draggling, clogged with involutions, full of vulgar turns and common expressions ; to read their letters through demands an affection for them proof to all vexations. The Duchess de Longueville thus concludes her announcement to Madame de Sablé of the decease of her confessor, Singlin, the celebrated director of the Nuns of Port Royal : “ In truth, I am very much touched, for besides the obligation I was under to this holy man for his charity towards me, behold me newly fallen back into the embarrassment in which I lay before taking him—I mean, the need of some priest with no knowledge where to find one. I entreat you to pray God for me. I do not doubt that you are affected also and over and above the link of friendship and necessity, by seeing death strike down one of your friends, which is much akin to having his blow on oneself.” Twenty years later

nobody wrote in this style. To establish this, I do not wish to oppose this informal note with the Sévigné Letters ; it would be too easily snatching a success ; and again, it might be said that she is a woman of exceptional brains with a talent peculiarly her own, and that her example proves nothing as regards others. Let us rather select among her correspondents second-rate hands of modest repute who will better set a common standard. Here is a provincial lady, a young Breton, of whom the Marchioness augured poorly at the first, from her being timid and embarrassed ; she was her step-daughter, Charles de Sévigné's wife ; we have some of her letters, not masterpieces like her mother-in-law's, but with fitting expressions and an easy turn. In writing to her sister-in-law, the Countess de Grignan, she glides agreeably into pleasantries put upon her small stature and fragile air, saying : " I must beg your son not to call me 'aunt,' for I am so 'small' and 'delicate' that I am scarce the size of a cousin. Madame de Sévigné's health is not at all like mine, for she is 'large' and 'strong' ; I take such care of it as would make you jealous. Still, I own that it is without any constraint I let her roam the woods by herself and with her books, and she rushes into them naturally like the slug into the toad's maw. You overjoy me, sister dear, by telling me Madame de Sévigné likes me : my taste is good enough to tell the value of her friendship and to make me love her also with all my heart." Madame de Sévigné was right in finding what her daughter-in-law wrote to be "very fair" ; it is an



easy flowing language, well expressing what she wanted to say. On another time, she was led to insert in one of her letters a few lines from her grandson the Marquis de Grignan, returning home from his first campaign. She was, as usual, writing news of the town and court, when she was suddenly interrupted: "But here comes the Marquis from yonder. I set up singing:

"The hero I expect, will he return no more?"

He is playing with my pen, which I let him keep to go on for me."

It must be granted that the boy officer of sixteen did not bungle with this dread pen. As follows he gives an account of his sayings and doings to his mother: "I am fresh from Versailles, madame, where I went last Sunday. I was first at the Marshal de Lorges to beg him to present me to the King; this he promised, and made the appointment at the door of Madame de Maintenon's apartments to bow to his Majesty when he came forth. I did salute him, and he stopped to nod and smile on me. Next day I paid my respects to Monseigneur and her Royal Highness the Dauphiness, and the royal princes at their own residences, and I was nicely received everywhere. Thence I went to the Duke de Montausier's, where I stayed to see the play; it was '*Andromaque*,' a novelty to me; so judge, madame, what a pleasure I found in it." He continues sprightlily to relate his other delights, and terminates: "You have an exact report, madame, of what happened in Versailles. Allow me, on seeing your

portrait, to lament the inability to cast myself at the feet of the original, kiss her hands and aspire to kissing one of her cheeks." It is clear that this sprig of the ancestral tree had come from hearing the fine speakers of the mode. Since his return from the army he did not quit good company, and he repeated to his mother what light stuff was rattled off there. His letter is, nevertheless, of an easy and pleasing turn, not in a jot resembling those his peers wrote a score of years earlier. Not that he had studied much, for we know, on the contrary, that his education had been at first badly neglected ; it began late and ended early, for at fifteen he was a soldier, and went off into Germany in the Dauphin's army. His grandmother strongly wished his making up the deficiency in his leisure, but we see that she could not fill him with the craving for sound reading. Happily he liked society, and it was enough for him to move about through it, to take on a gloss of polite manners and an ease of style, of which his letter bears a trace.

What did Madame de Sévigné owe to the society in which she spent her life? It is hard precisely to say ; but we may be sure she owed something to it.

### III.

WE see that our subject prepared to write well by means of her excellent education, reading, and association with the most distinguished personages in Paris and at the court. She knows her language, and wonderfully well speaks it ;

in the circles where women of intellect were met at every step, she passed for one of the most sprightly and intellectual: her repartees were quoted and her judgments were repeated as an authority's. At the same time hers was the good fortune to be present at the blossoming of a great literature. In her youth, she had read the "*Lettres Provinciales*" at the time when they were circulating among the upper classes as a clandestine pamphlet; later, she saw the first pieces of Molière brought out, as well as Racine's earliest tragedies and La Fontaine's Fables; she heard the preaching of Mascaron, Bossuet, and Bourdaloue; she chatted familiarly with Retz and La Rochefoucauld. Intelligent as she is, sensitive to all the beauties of superior works and never refusing to try novelties, although with a secret preference for the idols of her girlish years, she understands everything and profits by them; she assimilates all. Let an occasion come to agitate her mind profoundly, and all these accumulated treasures will pour out into daylight. We can rely on her knowing how to tell all she thinks and feels. This occasion was, for her, the departure of her daughter.

No doubt she had previously shown herself to be a woman of mind, who could write highly agreeable letters and come nicely out of entanglements in delicate relations. She had even risen into eloquence when demanded for defence against Bussy's subtleties and impertinence. But this was nothing yet; to show her real standing, it was compulsory for her to be moved in

her liveliest affections. Then her pent-up passion gushed all of a jet from her heart, and it may be said that her talent rushed out entirely with her tears.

Her daughter had left her to rejoin her husband at the world's end in Parisian eyes—in Provence. Before reaching that distant land, whence she returned only at rare intervals, she had to brave perils that made the boldest quail : the descent of the Tarare, the Rhône, the Sainte Esprit bridge, and what not. The mother thought of this, and dreaded it all beforehand. Before her eyes ceaselessly arose chasms, precipices, runaway horses and foundering ferryboats. On her return to the empty home, where everything reminded her of the lately gone, she caught up her pen and relieved her heart by writing : “ My sorrow would seem so slight in words if I could depict it, that I shall not try. In vain have I sought for my dear daughter. I cannot find her more, and every step she takes carries her farther and farther away. I have gone to kneel to the Virgin, always weeping and crying ; meseems my heart and soul have been torn from me ; and, indeed, what a rough parting it is ! I asked to be left alone, and I was taken into Madame du Housset's room, where a fire was made ; Agnes looked at me without speaking, as was agreed between us. I stayed there till five o'clock without ceasing to sob. All my thoughts brought deadly wounds.” Three days afterwards, her daughter's first letters came to hand, and her wail recommenced. “ I receive your letters, darling, as you receive my ring ; I melt into tears in reading them ; my

heart feels as if it split in twain. . . . You make me feel for you all that it is possible to feel in the way of tenderness ; but if you think of me, my poor dear, be assured also that I am continually thinking of you. The devout call this an habitual *mind*,—what we should feel towards God if really dutiful. Nothing can give me distraction—I am always with you, seeing your carriage rolling away and never returning towards me ; I am always out on the highway ; sometimes, methinks, I am afraid it will upset. The three days' rain we have had fills me with despair. The Rhône gives me a strange fright : I have a map before me, and know the places where you will sleep ; to-night you will be at Nevers, and Sunday at Lyons, where you will receive this." Then comes endless advice about all the dangers a traveller incurs. "Have pity on me and take care of yourself if you want me to live. You have so thoroughly persuaded me that you love me that, if only to please me, you are bound not to be venturesome. Tell me how you conduct your bark. Alas ! how dear and precious to me is this tiny bark which the Rhône so cruelly buffets !" Days go by, but the grief is ever with her. Scarce a fortnight has passed since her daughter left her, and it seems to maternal eyes an age. "Ah ! my darling, how I am longing to see you a little while—hear you and fondle you—only see you pass by, if the rest is too much to ask !" Everything replenishes her fount of tears,—letters reaching her ; friends and acquaintances bringing her their compliments ; the sight of places she and her

daughter saw together, but now beheld alone. "I pretend I am in solitude," she says when she went back to Livry for the first time; "I am making this a little monastery of La Trappe, to pray Heaven herein and make a thousand meditations. But, my poor dear, what I can do better than these is muse upon you. Since I came I have not ceased, and in my powerlessness to contain my sentiments about you, I sit to write to you at the end of that darksome little walk you so dearly liked, on the mossy bank on which I have seen you sometimes couched. But oh! heavens! where have I not seen you here? How all these thoughts traverse my heart! I see you, you are present; I think and still again think of it all; my head and heart become hollow with exhaustion; but in vain do I call up and seek the dear child, whom I love with so much passion, who is two hundred leagues away. I have her no more. And I fall a-weeping with no power to stay a tear."

Let us pause,—we must be reasonable. When once Madame de Sévigné is allowed to speak it would be happiness to let her talk on. Nothing is more difficult than to tear oneself from the pleasure caused by her letters, by her proceeding alone and by studying and judging them. But we must do it if we mean to gauge our pleasure and enhance it by analysing it.

The above-quoted passages look so simple, and so naturally put forth what we all feel, that we read them at the outset with surprise; there seems to be nothing to remark but this simplicity and naturalness. Yet these

are points not attracting attention ; they are hardly visible in the works where they are to be found ; in reading such as lack them, we feel all their value. Yet here, as soon as we reflect, we are amazed to mark how this great emotion expresses itself in so firm, and sure, and correct a language, without any wandering or hesitation. The life in these laments presupposes their having flowed straightway, and yet the perfection of style seems not to be attained without some study and retouching. Sometimes it is said that a great emotion creates the language it is expressed in at the first outcome ; I strongly doubt it. On the contrary, it appears to me that, when the soul is keenly struck, the expressions by which the feelings experienced are unfolded, always seem dull and cold, and one is impelled to force them and exaggerate them till they rise to the level of one's joy or grief. Thence comes at whiles excessive terms and unsuitable metaphors, tempting one to believe them coldly imagined at leisure, whilst, quite oppositely, they sprang from the prime impulse by our instinctive effort to find an expression corresponding to the intensity of our passion. There is nothing of the kind in the Sévigné Letters ; and however violent may be her grief, it always is uttered in meet and exact diction—a precious and very rare merit. Lest we be too much surprised at finding it hers in so high a degree, we must recall what has been said of the way in which she was unwittingly prepared to become a great writer.

Another characteristic of these Letters, not the less

remarkable, is that the most tender things are said with fineness. I am not speaking only of a few isolated phrases which have sometimes appeared overwrought, as—“I like me not the wind at Grignan hurting your chest.”—“My darling, how *your* affliction weighs on *me*!”—“I dare not read your letters from the fear of what reading them has given me.” These are but passing words; but almost everywhere, whenever she appears to yield to her emotion, she employs ingenious turns and makes witty reflections; she is agreeable, piquant, and coquettish. To some, this seems to come from a mind very self-governed, not sufficiently occupied with feeling to omit studied speech. I placed but now naturalness among Madame de Sévigné’s leading gifts; those not of this opinion assert that this is precisely the merit most deficient in her; but we must fully agree on the meaning of words. For each, naturalness is what conforms with his nature, and as we all have natures very different from one another, it cannot be the same to everybody—saying nothing of education and habit which give us a second nature, often stronger than the first. In the society Madame de Sévigné frequented, its members prided themselves on fine speaking. The first time a new-comer entered, he would have to study and try a little to reach the tone of others; conversationalists kept on the alert to find those welcome repartees which, among the regular visitors at the Hôtel de Rambouillet or Richelieu, gave the novice a good reputation; but, in a while, the happy thoughts came of themselves without any more need to hunt for them. What might appear



to the outside barbarians subtle and refined, was to the disciples natural and matter-of-course. In speaking or writing, ideas took a certain form, not of other worlds; and quick, witty, and dainty quips, which would have required labour from others, shot out of their own volition. Assuredly, I do not mean to say that Madame de Sévigné wrote well without knowing it; that is what an intelligent woman always perceives, and, for that matter, her friends did not let her dwell in ignorance. "Your letters are delightful," they told her, "and you are even as your letters." This belief was all the more easy to her as she whispered to herself the compliments they shouted on the housetops. One day, when she had written to her friend Bourdelot the physician, she said to her daughter: "Gracious! what a capital retort I made him! it's silly to say this, but I had a good pen, and I was so wide-awake that day." It is a great charm to feel one is witty, and it is readily understood that Madame de Sévigné sometimes gave way to it with a little complaisance. In her most private letters, when she least thinks of the outer world, some lines may be noted in which she is happy to resume her idea and deck it up, embellish and supplement it with fresh details more and more dainty and ingenious. She does it without exertion, to satisfy her individual taste and give herself the joy of pleasantly saying what she thinks. In good speakers it has been noticed that the praise of others is not all they are sensitive to, but they also wish to please themselves, independently of their surrounding audience, and

willingly listen to their own speeches. In the same sense it may be said that Madame de Sévigné sometimes gloated over her own writing,—one of those unaffected weaknesses, this, which, in the fair sex, does not exclude sincerity and may be wedded to what is natural.

This manner of justly and exactly speaking, and fineness and brightness in the expression of the heart's emotions, are rare parts ; yet they are not what best characterised Madame de Sévigné. These she was not, then, alone in possessing ; for instance, they are to be found in the correspondence of her friend Madame de Coulanges. But what was her own trait to raise her to the foremost rank was her having a quick and mobile fancy above anyone else. In a marvellous manner she possessed the enchanting gift of seeing to a distance and travelling mentally. Is it necessary to say that La Provence and her daughter's house were the usual goals of such journeys ? In her moments of bitter sadness, she would think of the winged steed which spans the earth in two days, and say, " Oh ! that I had the hippogriff at my command ! " Really, she had no need of it—her imagination sufficed. From the first separation, she knew Grignan so well, although she had never seen it, that as soon as her daughter went away from it, she was lost. " I believe you are at Lambesc, my dear ; but I cannot see you clearly from here ; there are clouds in my imagination which cover you in my view ; I had learnt the Château de Grignan by heart : I could see your rooms and promenade upon your terrace. I went to

mass in your handsome church ; but I do not know where I am following you." Another time, having asked news of her dearly-loved Chevalier de Grignan, whose infirmities kept him in Provence, she adds : " Tell me which room you have put him in, so I can pay him visits." She only knew her granddaughter Pauline by the flattering pictures made upon her pleasing countenance, and the beauty of her eyes in chief. Thereupon her imagination enkindles, and she exclaims : " Oh ! how pretty they are, I can see them from here !" This is not mere words ; she did really see them. With distant friends she chatted as though they were by. Her letters are conversations, as she herself says, and they have all the advantages of them. At the start, one meets a piquant variety and disorder, as happens in the familiarity of a dialogue. She is not like her cousin Bussy, who puts exemplary regularity in his letters, priding himself upon answering all observations in perfect order, and even all jests made him ; each thing has its place and coming in its order. Madame de Sévigné has no method, and does not draw up an anterior plan. It is her imagination leads her over to any side and tells her so many singular things which she never thought of at first, so that she becomes slightly confused. " If the post knew with what our packets are filled, they would be dropped half-way." As she saw the events, she relates, at whatever distance they take place ; the pictures she draws are incredible with life and veracity. I am a little embarrassed to furnish the proof, not from lack of

examples, but these charming descriptions are too well known—known by heart in fact. How could I venture at this day to repeat the death of Turenne, the story of the Archbishop of Rheims returning from Saint-Germain, the way in which the game of basset brought about the separation of La Fare and Madame de la Sablière, or the merry chatter about Langlée and the Marchioness de Montespan's dress? But here is one less known, I trust; in a few strokes it is a finished picture; it represents the great Condé, ordinarily very careless about looks and attire, as he appeared to the astounded courtiers on the day when the Prince de Conti wedded Mdlle. de Blois: "I have news for you,—the greatest and most extraordinary you could hear: it is that the Prince de Condé has had his beard cut yesterday; he has been shaved, really; it is no illusion nor chance assertion, but a truth. All the court was witness to it, and Madame de Langeron, watching for the nick to catch him with folded paws, like the lion he is, had a diamond-buttoned doublet clapped on him; a valet, also abusing his patience, curled his locks, and powdered him, and made him a fashionable gem of the first water, with a curly pate which blotted out all the periwigs. Behold the prodigy of the wedding."

With so lively an imagination and so mobile a nature, it was natural for her to yield unresistingly to any impressions others wished to give her. She accepted the ideas of those she loved and quickly shared their feelings. "I am always of the last speaker's opinion," she observed.

It is clear she knew herself well; she even joked upon her own weakness, saying of herself: "And I, the led horse, as you know me;" or again: "You know that I am as others wish, but I invent nothing." In her Letters can be picked out amusing examples of the facility with which her friends made her shift in opinion. This is a defect of character assuredly in the woman, but it has become in the writer a source of great beauties. This ease in feeling with others adds to her own, and their thoughts are fuel to her flame. It is not she alone that is heard when she speaks, but she is often the echo of the great minds whom she meets.

By the mode of her expression, it seems to me one can tell who the people were most lately quitted, and from whom she gleaned those stories and reflections repeated to her daughter. Had she not spent the day with La Rochefoucauld at Madame de La Fayette's, when she made so fine a painting of our good d'Hacqueville,—the lover, in spite of himself, and without his own knowledge: "You ask the symptoms of this love? primarily, it is a sharp, anticipatory negative; an overdone air of indifference proving its contrary; a suspension of all movement in the round machine; a relaxation of all ordinary attention to tend to one alone; a perpetual satire against aged lovers: 'Truly a man would have to be insensate, mad! what, with a young woman? nice business for me; and it would suit me to a dot! I would rather have both my arms broken.' To which the inward answer of ours is: 'Well, yes, it is true, but you do not

escape being in love. You speak your reflections, which are true and apt, but they are your torment ; you are in love all the same. You are full of reason, but love is stronger than all reason. You are out of health, for you weep and fly into rage ; in short, you are in love.’” In a very sad letter written to her daughter when starting for Les Rochers,—in other words, adding a hundred leagues to the distance separating them—there suddenly breaks forth a grand tirade on Providence : “Whosoever should rob me of the delight of Providence would remove my sole comfort ; and if I believed it were within ourselves to arrange and disarrange, do and not do, will this thing or another, I do not think I should find one moment’s repose. I need the Author of the universe to account for all that happens. When it is He against whom I am to cavil, I renounce any revolt whatever, and submit. It was preordained that there should be a Madame de Sévigné to love her daughter more than any other mother does hers, that she should be often banished afar from her, and that the sufferings she has most keenly felt in her life should be caused by this dear child.” We have no need here to go wide afield to seek the suggestion of this meditation : she herself informs us that she had come from dining with people of intellect “who would never dislodge that opinion.” These were her dear friends of Port Royal who had developed before her the great doctrine of the grace of God ; she had simply applied their creed to her particular situation. One of her prettiest letters is that relating the initiation of the Chevalier of

the Order of the Holy Ghost, in the grand promotion of the seventy-four, to which her son-in-law belonged. She had not seen it herself, but Coulanges had been out to Versailles expressly to view it, and she says he came to tell her all about it. There was no need of that in reality, for, it seems to me, we should have known that without warning ; it is his voice and gesture, his spirit of parody and buffoonery which makes him mainly see the comic lining of grave things ; it is he who caught sight in passing of the burlesque incidents of this majestic ceremony, such as M. de La Trousse's wig shifting awry, M. de Monchevreul and M. de Villars hooking their sword-hilts within each other with such fury that no mortal hand could part them. "The more they tried, the closer they became interwoven like the puzzle-rings. As the climax, all the ceremony, all the bows, all the procession had to stop and wait whilst the twins tore away from each other perforce till the stronger bore off the palm." It is he—amusing little fellow—who recounted the mishap befalling good d'Hacqueville. "He was arrayed like Bretons and Provençals, that is to say, in loose vest over a shirt, and breeches ; but his page's trunks being less properly fitting than his usual wear, his linen positively would not remain tucked in, whatever prayers he offered up for its repose ; for, knowing the trouble, he tried incessantly to keep it in order, but always uselessly ; so that H.R.H. the Dauphiness could not any longer contain roars of laughter,—a great pity, the very majesty of royalty was threatened ; and never, on the register of the Order, was

such disorder chronicled." Thus to intertwine her wit, and appropriate the humour of others,—thus to receive the shock that makes the recipient "see stars," and yet "invent nothing"—whilst lending a fresh charm to ideas from without, to rejuvenate them, refresh them with the vivacity of feeling and fineness of expression—is the magic and characteristic of woman. In this sense it may be said that Madame de Sévigné was more womanly than any other. Her qualities are such as we expect to find in her sisters, and which please us most—not the initiative and power to create, but the talent of reflecting those dear to her, and entering into their thoughts, so as to reproduce them more striking and brighter.

It is not surprising that her style thereby does not essentially differ from her contemporaries'. She writes better than they, but similarly. Even when she recounts trivialities, her phrases are broad and in periods; without being ponderous like the Duchess de Longueville's or Madame de Sablé's, she ordinarily has copiousness and amplitude. Long developments do not displease her—she lays stress on ideas, and reiterates them; she knows how to insert oratorical flourishes, as was the habit around her. But, she has also ways of speaking personally; she creates expressions belonging to her alone, freer and livelier than professional writers employed in the Seventeenth Century. Wonder-stricken by the wealth of the country when she crossed Burgundy, she did not hesitate to say: "It's all bursting here with corn!" and, speaking of a progress M. de Marcillac made through his estates,



where he had a quantity of damage to repair: "He was neither amused nor diverted; he had our fat friend Gourville with him (who has not often time to give), whom he drew about over his fields like a flood to enrich them with fat and fertility." I only see her and Saint-Simon writing at this time in so original a manner; perchance because neither of them cared about the public. She believed that her letters would never leave the family circle to which they were addressed; and as for the Duke—as he deferred for a hundred years the publication of his Memoirs, the fear of his distant readers could not have much fettered his freedom.

When one reads the Sévigné Letters, it is natural to be somewhat surprised that a person of so much talent, and conscious of it, should not have been tempted into writing a solid work. Why did she not, for instance, compose Memoirs like Madame de Motteville, treatises of social morals like Madame Lambert, or novels like Madame de La Fayette? Sometimes this is deplored; and it seems, at first blush that, with her happy nature and rich fancy, she ought to have left us some masterpiece. We may be wrong to think so. The grounds for admiration in her epistles are not at all those demanded for a long-sustained work; to succeed in this there must be the capability of self-containing and self-possession, time given to meditation, and knowledge of how to think out and plan beforehand. This habit is not one easy to assume when the custom was to give up to the momentary impression, and to let the pen race at hazard. It has

been remarked that newspaper writers, forced to improvise an article daily and come to making them with marvellous art, cannot after a time produce anything but newspaper articles, and never a book. Madame de La Fayette wrote such good romances because her temperament was not her friend's, and she guided her talent in another course. It is visible that she was born to be an author. Her letters, irreproachable in form, and full of a discreet and winning spirit, are generally short and dry. It is the tone of a woman who reserves better things, making secret provision for her works in mental progress. On the other hand, Madame de Sévigné gives us all she has in her heart and keeps nothing back when she takes up the pen. It is therefore likely that, had the fancy struck her to imitate Madame de La Fayette by writing another "*Princesse de Clèves*," she would have found a void and poor preparation, and her success might have been less than we conjecture. But she has left us her Letters—do we want anything more?

### CHAPTER III.—THE WORKS.

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ALL agree that one of the greatest gains to be drawn from sincere letters of intelligent and well-informed persons, is their more deeply introducing us into the society they moved within. As they were ignorant that we should read them, they did not strive to influence our opinion, and had no thesis or system ; they give us upon events their first impression, which is the good one ; they show themselves as they were seen in their times, and we make them our contemporaries ; having them under our eyes, we can better judge them, and we form our own opinion on them.

This is a service which Madame de Sévigné has better than anyone done us, from her possessing in the highest degree the gift of animating what she narrates. We can, therefore, treat her Letters as historical documents ; but it would be endless labour if we were to undertake to extract all they contain of information upon her time, so

we must limit ourselves and select. Imagine that we have read her whole correspondence and, closing the book and depending on our recollection, ask ourselves what idea she gives us of people she knew, and in what her society is like ours, and in what does it differ. There are two points of equal importance for bringing to light, for, if there be a great interest in showing that common fund by which all men resemble and recognise themselves at all ages, it is not the less curious to mark how usages, ideas, and even feelings change from one to another period; thus we learn that what exists has not always been what it is and cannot be otherwise; this is a truth not felt at the first—however elementary it be, and important to bear in mind to prevent us being too stubborn in our opinions, too firmly anchored to our prejudices, and too rebellious to all useful innovation.

## I.

THE Sévigné Letters are principally composed of those to the Countess de Grignan, and what these first show is family life. On this head it may be believed that we will have no new remarks to make. The relations of a mother with her offspring do not appear susceptible of much change; it would seem that a kind of affection so near akin to nature ought to be evinced in very nearly always the same manner. Nevertheless, from the first

letters, it is easily perceptible from peculiarities that these Letters were not written in our days.

To begin with, the love is almost everywhere measured and respectful, and there reigns a gravity which astonishes us; assuredly, no mother nowadays would make so much ceremony over addressing her daughter. I know well that we must not be the dupe of appearances; much of the surprise felt in reading these Letters arises from an external cause. Near relatives then were not in the habit of speaking together familiarly (*tutoyer*); the *vous* (for *you*) used then, contrary to modern French usages (which employ *tu*, thou, in the same relations), suffices to change the aspect of these confidences and give them an air of constraint and coldness. In Bussy's letters we find a rather curious proof of the repugnance felt to employing forms too familiar in sacred relations; Father Bouhours writes that he is singularly shocked to see poets unceremoniously use "thou" and "thee" towards kings and princes:

"Great king, cease thou to vanquish or I'll cease to write."

"Latin," he says, "no doubt does this in verse, but because it is so in prose. It is not the same in our language, in which 'thou' and 'thee' are used to varlets and petty folk; this is so true that a lover never says to his lady-love either 'thou' or 'thee.'" Bussy is at bottom of his advice wishful, like him again, to bring the poets back to respect for sovereign majesty. On one point, however, he makes a reservation. "It is not true in love,

my reverend Father," he corrects him, "that one's sweetheart is never called 'thou'; but you are not bound to know that." Bussy knew this very well, having had occasion to write many letters of that sort. Beside him, there was no ignorance of it either in his darling daughter, the fair and romantic Marchioness de Coligny, who fell in love with La Rivière, a dubious nobleman but certainly not an honest man. We have the despairing missive she sent to her lover to tell him that she was going to be separated from him for ever. "Thou mayest believe," she writes, "that it would not be hard to induce me to quit my life—the sweetest fate that can befall poor me after having lost thee. Do not seek to see me; nothing would be more dangerous for thee and myself; nor even to write me without extreme precautions, for they are taking most extraordinary ones to learn if we write to one another. Adieu, my all! I have death in me, thank God!" If Father Bouhours had been able to read this letter, he would have been forced to acknowledge that in love sometimes they say "thou" and "thee"; but it is sure that it required as critical circumstances and as fervent a passion for the ordinary trammels to be broken through.

In all Madame de Sévigné's Correspondence, I have only found one passage where she allows herself the use of "thou." She was at Les Rochers, in one of her sad and lonely hours when the absence of her daughter drove her out of her wits. "You say that Grignan sends his love," she writes; "thou lovest respect, my poor Grignan!—come and play a little in my game of pallmall, I

entreat thee ; it is such lovely weather—I do so long to watch you play,—you play with such gracefulness, and deliver such fine strokes. You are very cruel to refuse me only an hour's stroll. And you, my little one, come—let us chat. Oh, goodness ! what an inclination I have to weep !” Remark that it is her son-in-law she applies the “thou” to, and not her daughter; the Countess inspires respect which the Count does not impose. Madame de Grignan was so ceremonious that, one day, speaking to her mother of Baron du Chantal, she called him “his lordship (*monsieur*) your father.”—“I feared we were not relatives,” replied the elder, a little vexed ; “what are you to him, pray ?”

But, I repeat, these are but outward shows which change nothing of the basis of things. One must guard against drawing inferences too rigorous in any sense. I see persons who, enamoured of the good old times, and bent on proposing them for a model, much admire stern respect towards parents, and think it helps to preserve dignity in intimate relations. In order to undeceive them, it will be enough to read the very risky confidences made by this mother to her daughter in her stately speech upon Charles de Sévigné's conduct, his amours with Ninon de l'Enclos and the beautiful Duchess de Villeroi which had unpleasant sequels for him, and to see with what gusto the younger woman hearkens to all these tales ; it must be owned that gravity is completely absent from these light stories. As for those who pretend that the stiff personal pronoun is troublesome because it fetters

the liberty of relations and casts a chill over the expression of feelings, the entire Correspondence of Madame de Sévigné will show them that there is no need of any set form of address for men and women to love passionately and acquaint one another with the fact.

It is true that we must not judge the whole epoch by the Sévigné example ; she was an exception to her generation. Some surprise was caused around her by the effusion of feeling for her daughter, of which she is so lavish in her letters, and which in daily life she could not entirely restrain. Evidently, none were accustomed to it. The Countess de Grignan feared her mother would be blamed for these great outbursts of passion, and that she would herself become ridiculous if shallow-brains laughed at it. It is therefore certain that, ordinarily, people did not go so far as Madame de Sévigné, and that it was good taste to rein in the manifestation of sentiment with reserve. In our days, none trouble about expressing themselves as they feel ; it seems to me that, in lieu of containing themselves, some conceit is shown in making a parade of them ; what of old was discreetly concealed is, latterly, sought to be made an honour : it is a point important to notice.

But the difference goes further ; all is not limited to appearances. Whatever surprise may be experienced, it must be recognised that mothers have not always loved their children in the same way ; and that in the mode of treating them, in the care taken of them, in the place made for them, and the importance accorded them,



there are palpable changes from one epoch to another. Antiquity was not tender to the newly born. Tacitus says: "The child, soon after its birth, is handed over to a miserable Greek slave, to whom is added one or two of her companions in servitude, the vilest usually, and most incapable of any serious employment." The mother never attended to it, and as children held very scanty place in woman's life, they filled none at all in her affection. In one of his epistles, Cicero speaks of a poor little child of his daughter's which did not live; his terms are of strange coldness and hardness. He almost calls it an abortion: "*Quod quidem est natum, perimbecillum est.*" The explanation of this frigidity is to be found in the following paragraph from the *Tusculanes*: "When a child dies young, consolation is easy; if at birth, there is nothing to fret about." It is known that law and custom authorised the father of a malformed infant, or if it were one whose mother refused to nourish it, to put it out at his door to perish of cold and want, unless some passenger carried it home to do whatever he liked with it. Seneca considered this usage quite natural, and the Emperor Constantine was the first to be shocked at it and to interdict it. There existed nothing of this sort, of course, in the Seventeenth Century society; and yet it may be said that, up to a certain age, children did not enter as much as to-day into the life of a mother. Pleasures and occupations did not leave them time to take care of them. Society was so agreeable and so exacting; there were so many social duties to fulfil and so many visits to pay

and receive ; consequently, daughters were packed off to a nunnery as soon as possible to give the mothers quiet ; and they tried to keep them there, once inside. As for the boys, they would hardly arrive at the age of reason before they would be put under a tutor, with more heed to select a gentleman whose title did the pupil's family honour than a man of merit fit for the task.

All this is quite distinctly perceived in the Sévigné Letters ; only, between the lady and her daughter some divergence of opinion on the subject can be noticed, of which they may not have had full consciousness. The younger lady yielded wholly to the ruling prejudices, whilst the other withstood them. The Countess de Grignan's first pledge of affection was not well received—being a daughter, and a son had been looked for. There is sadness and disappointment in the few words written by the young mother on her sick-bed to her husband, retained by his office in Provence : “If my good health can console you for only having a daughter, I shall not ask your pardon for having given you no son. I am out of danger, and only think of going to meet you. My mother will tell you the rest.” The mother does take up the pen, but to speak in another tone. She is quickly consoled for her discomfiture, and, from the earliest words, it is clear that her good-humour is unimpaired. “Madame de Puisieux says that if you desire a son you will have to realise your desire yourself, and I rate her speech the most pat and best in the world. We let you have a daughter and you have given us another.” A few months

later, Madame de Grignan, having gone to join her husband, the child, not appearing to be strong enough to support the long journey, was left with the grandmother. She took the task seriously, and did not shift it off upon others, as was so often done around her. The amusing letter must be read in which she relates to her daughter, with a good-humour which shocked the Chevalier de Perrin, how she introduced a fresh nurse, and her pleasure in finding her grandchild recover good health. "She had never drunk at such a fount. Her wet-nurse had scanty milk; this one is a downright cow, a good rustic woman, with no nonsense, splendid teeth, black hair, sunburnt skin, and twenty-four years of age. Her four months' babe is as lovely as a cherub . . . Your little one becomes a dear thing, and we are growing fond of it. In a fortnight she will be plump and as white as snow, and will never cease laughing. What dreadful items, my darling! You will not know me, I have become such a veritable gossip; I shall be Dame Partlet the Hen over my brood!" What usually happens on such occasions came to pass: as it is a matter of course that children are endeared by the pains they cost and the cares they require, Madame de Sévigné was seized by a very lively affection for her whom she called "her own little *trail*." She wanted to take her away with her to Les Rochers, where she would have been a blithe companion and most agreeable occupation in that solitude; but Madame du Puy-du-Fou, a wise woman of experience, did not so advise. "She said that it was running a risk,

and, on that, I laid down my arms ; I do not want to imperil her little highness ; I love her every bit. I have had her hair cut and all in little curls under a cap, which is a style made for her. Her throat, complexion, all her little body, are admirable. She does a hundred little things: speaks, caresses, fights, makes the sign of the cross, begs pardon, curtsseys, kisses the hands, shrugs her shoulders dances, flatters and chucks you under the chin—in short, she is pretty every way you look at her. I amuse myself with her for entire hours. I do not wish this to die away. As I told you the other day, I do not know how there can be people who do not love their daughter.” No doubt the Countess de Grignan loved hers, but not enough to remove her from the fate attending most daughters in such great houses. The sweet and kind Marie Blanche was soon sent away from the paternal domicile ; as she was not going to live there, they would not let her acquire a desire to dwell in it. At five years of age she was put in a nunnery and out she never came ; at fifteen, she took the veil without anyone even inquiring if she liked the austere life. Her grandmother alone uttered from afar a soft remonstrance—merely a smothered sigh : “ Poor child ! may she be happy and contented ; beyond doubt she is, but you know what I mean.”

The Countess’s second daughter, Pauline, was not born in Paris like Marie Blanche, and Madame de Sévigné did not see her for a long time. It looks as though she had made some effort not to become attached to her. “ Is it love that thing ? ” she says, defending herself for this

affection as though it were robbery against her daughter. "I am yours above all others. You know how far I am from that dotage which makes women pass from maternal love to that for grandchildren. My love has remained on the first storey, and I only love these ground-floor people out of love for you." But stoutly as she resisted, her affectionate disposition was too strong for her, and she perceived it with surprise: "Is it really possible that I can still find room for love and new attachments?" But at the same time she confessed with sadness that her feelings were not entirely her daughter's. "Meseems that I love her, and you do not love her enough," she tells her straight. Indeed, they began to find faults in Pauline which require redressing in convents, and parts, at the same time, which appear at the commencement of a religious vocation. Upon this hint, Madame de Sévigné became uneasy, and next, irritated; she must be kept out of the cell, even if she has to be married in Béarn, or if never married at all, we must have the pleasure of bringing her up and making a perfect woman of her. She keeps on repeating this exhortation, so strange to us, addressed to a mother: "Love, oh, love Pauline!" Then the Countess had a son, and, pursuant to the rule in high families, everything was sacrificed to him. But here arises something still more extraordinary: this son—while he is a boy, is never attended to, is neglected, in fact, and reared badly. Although they were so proud of him, and *La Provence* stood as his godmother, and he had, as soon as he appeared, taken the foremost place in

his parents' affection, and for his sake it was thought to send Pauline to keep company with Marie Blanche in her nunnery at Aubenas, his mother left him at Grignon during her journeys to Paris, and passed years without seeing him ; even when she is with him, she leaves him to underlings, and friends inform Madame de Sévigné that "he is getting spoiled by the lacqueys." In sending good advice to her daughter, the Marchioness feels the necessity of appending these significant words : "You do not yet fully understand motherly love ; so much the better for you, as it is violent."

Perhaps we must not be too severe upon Madame de Grignan, who only did as others do. Things have much changed in our days ; children are no longer sacrificed one to another, but parents offer self-sacrifice to them. They are no longer left to the footmen in antechamber and stablemen, but enthroned in the drawing-room there to reign ; they have become the masters, often the tyrants of the family. Although there is sometimes a little exaggeration in this importance given them, and they are tempted to abuse it, on the whole this excess is preferable to the other way ; and in this, at least, our society is better than our forefathers'.

## II.

It is likely enough that if some power allowed us to open one of the mail-bags carried in all directions on the rail nowadays, we should find less entertainment in reading

the letters than anticipated, and be struck with the monotonous basis of all we saw. Life in our society imposing the same burdens on everybody and rolling round the same circle, it follows that we all have about the same things to say. Speaking or writing, eighty times out of a hundred, news is asked of the health, or business is discussed : these are the ordinary subjects of letters as of conversation ; and we shall see that Madame de Sévigné, despite her originality of mind, was no more exempt than the rest of us.

As she was for a long while in sound health she is not uneasy about herself at the commencement of her correspondence, but she is about others. Causes of distress are not lacking ; at whiles it really seems as if a pestilential wind were passing over those dear to her. Her letters are full of sad news : now Cardinal de Retz is dying at Commercy ; or Madame de La Fayette is consumed by slow fever beside La Rochefoucauld, nailed by gout to his armchair ; or Corbinelli, suffering from headaches which “ threaten his reason,” and can only be borne by his taking potable gold. Beyond the familiar circle with which Madame de Sévigné is always busy, there are less intimate friends among whom ailments make much ravage. Fever sits in permanency at Versailles and Saint-Germain, where the ground is being continually upturned for building palaces and terraces and excavating fountain basins. The King himself and his family do not escape it, and the courtiers are decimated ; those who resist it are overcome by small-pox, rheu-

matism, and apoplexy. Then come "the numerous troop of the *Vaporeux*"—fashionable folk, used up with pleasure-making, ill from disappointed ambition and baffled hopes, suffering for their blunders and from the success of others, fidgeting without motive, agitating without aim, tainted with vague ills, with effects the more poignant as the symptoms appear more slight. Amid all these weaklings stands out the robust German Princess, come from the Palatinate to take the place of Henriette d'Orléans at the Palais Royal. Broad-shouldered, stout, high-coloured, she forms a curious contrast to all these frail and lymphatic creatures who lived upon physic. "When her physician was presented to her, she said that she did not know what to do with him as she had never been bled or purged; when she felt ill, she went out on foot over a couple of leagues and walked it off."

After having long worried about her friends, Madame de Sévigné was brought to be alarmed about herself. At fifty years, her triumphant health, as she styled it, received the first attack. At Les Rochers she was seized by severe rheumatism. During three months she "cried out with pain," but she did nothing but cheer her daughter. In every letter dictated to her son or her friends, she speaks of a palpable improvement and promises a speedy cure; but it always was coming; and when she had exhausted all remedies she resigned herself to go and take the waters at Vichy.

By her letters from that place and Bourbon, an interesting picture might be drawn of the life led at these



watering resorts at that period. It was not pleasant and brilliant as it is to-day. It was not the habit to go there for pleasure indeed. "It is drink or be *ennui'd!*" says our patient. The great object was to be healed. In the morning the waters were drunk. "At one we go to the spring, where we all meet and drink and make ugly faces, for you must imagine that they are boiling waters with a highly nasty salpetrous flavour. We turn round and go away, we come back and saunter about, we hear mass, and render unto Terra the brine which was Terra's, and we confidentially acquaint each other with this welcome fact; nothing else is talked about up to noon." Then comes the *douches*—a much more terrible matter. "I commenced the *douche* this day; it is not a bad rehearsal of purgatory. They put you stripped into a little underground place where there is a spout of warm water which a woman directs over you wherever you like to have it. . . . At first, you have it all over you to wake you up generally, and then the hose plays on the joints particularly attacked; but when it comes to the nape of the neck, there's a kind of fire and surprise not to be understood without experience. Yet this is the key of the business. You have to undergo it all, and you do suffer it all, but you are not scalded, and then you are put in a warm bed to perspire freely, and you are cured." In the intervals there would be visiting and social gatherings. Madame de Sévigné had such a wide circle of acquaintances that it was not hard for her to find some at Vichy and Bourbon whom she was pleased to see and hear. In the number were also

several ridiculous persons who were butts on occasion, which helped to pass away the time. "I would never believe that I could see at Vichy such dogs of faces," she remarks. One belonged to Madame de Péquigny, "the Cumæan Sybil," who "endeavoured to cure herself of her seventy-six years of age, very burdensome upon her"; another that of one Madame de La Barois, "her tongue partly palsied from apoplexy so she splutters"; the poor woman, after twenty years' widowhood, had fallen in love with a young blade who deceived her after having obtained all her property. "It is a huge blessing," Madame de Sévigné had said upon a similar conjunction, "not to be strung to such geese; they had better be sent out to pasture than be led thither by ourselves." There was also the Duchess de Brissac, a very pretty coquette, whose vanity it was to be always courted and attended. Vichy did not offer her such a wide choice of devotees as Paris or Versailles, but necessity rendered her less hard to please. For want of better conquests, she contented herself with quite paltry ones, taking up abbés and even monks at a pinch. "You ought to see," writes Madame de Sévigné, "how she shoots at all game, without picking out any sort. The other day with mine own eyes I saw her set fire to a poor Celestine." To the pleasure of friendly chat and pulling the neighbours to pieces, were joined that of strolls in the environs when one was strong enough, and of the local dances (*bourrées*) by the maids in the evenings to the music of the fiddle and the tambourine with wiggles and twists—"in which the curates

could find matter for censure." These were nearly all the distractions offered by the spas to those who, whilst being cured of ails, did not seek to perish of nothing-to-do.

Nobody will be surprised that Madame de Sévigné, who declared that she mocked at the doctor when she was well, should speak in another tone as soon as she saw her daughter unwell and herself attacked by rheumatism. Such changes are natural. Thenceforward, her letters are full of advice she gives or receives, reasoning upon maladies and medical consultations. On any head the two descant and discuss and make dissertations, mother and daughter not being of the same mind. The latter is fond of chocolate—the other has her doubts of it, and she quotes frightful examples of the damage it does: "The Marchioness de Coëtlogan took so much that her little baby was black as an imp, and it died." Coffee raises still more disputes. Doctors were not in agreement upon the effects it produces. "Du Chesne hates it, Brother Ange does not cry it down; it fattens one and makes another lean." What was to be done in this quandary? Attempt was made to make it inoffensive by cream or sweetening it with honey; but, as it was still found pernicious, a great resolution was taken and it was shamefully expelled from their abode. Tea, then making its *début*, was better welcomed. "The Princess takes twelve cups a day, saying it cures her of all her ails, and she assures me that the Landgrave took forty cups every morning." "Come, come, Madame; perhaps it was only

thirty!" "No, no, forty; he was dying, and this brought him round, so you could see the progress!" At the least ill in her daughter, Madame de Sévigné's imagination flew about all over the fields. She ran around to all the medical lights she knew, and, after them, to quacks and charlatans. These swarmed at that period. Everybody, women included, battled with one another to possess marvellous secrets to overcome obstinate complaints. Madame Fouquet applied a plaster to the dying Queen which cured her, to the great scandal of the Faculty, unable to save her; and the Princess de Tarente served out drugs to all her people at Vitré. "She is the best doctor in the upper classes; she has rare and valuable compounds of which she gave us three pinches with a prodigious effect." Nothing is more amusing than to hear Madame de Sévigné discoursing with Fagon or Du Chesne. She is full of her subject and speaks learnedly in the proper terms, like a physician in Molière's plays. "He tells me that you are letting yourself die of inanition. When your digestion is rapid, you must eat; the residuum is then consumed which would otherwise only decay and exhale fumes, if you do not raise the heat by aliments." More than all she entreats her daughter to take care of herself, and she sets her the example. She announces her taking medicine to please her, and adds, in a supplicatory tone: "Do as much for me." She sends her new panaceas by every post. Some are rather mild, for instance the cherry water to which France owes Minister Colbert's preservation; "or the extract of peri-

winkles, which endowed Madame de Grignan with a second youth. When you reappear so fair, people will cry : ‘ O’er what blessed flower can she have walked ? ’ and I will answer : ‘ On the periwinkle. ’ ” Others have a more gruesome aspect, to wit—the viper broth, the uric acid and the powdered crabs’-eyes. But here comes in something yet more startling. The Capuchins, who also meddled with the healing art, treated Madame de Sévigné’s leg with plants bruised and applied twice a day; taken away wet they were buried and, in proportion to their rotting away, the place of application grew less in pain as it perspired. The patient does not doubt the efficacy of the remedy. “ It’s a pity you ran and told the surgeons of this,” she writes to her daughter ; “ for they roar with laughter at it ; but I do not care a fig for them. ” There is something better still in Bussy’s correspondence. “ There’s an abbé here,” Madame de Scudéry tells him, “ who is making a great pother by curing by sympathy. For fever of all kinds, so they say, he takes the patient’s spittle and mingles it with egg and gives it to a dog—the dog dies and the patient recovers ; so it is averred. ” She adds with entire confidence : “ They say he has cured a quantity of people. ” I certainly am not going to assert that we have arrived at the point of unbelief in quacksalvers, and that quaint recipes find no more credit in us ; yet our ladies of sense and understanding, like Madame de Scudéry and Madame de Sévigné, would show more distrust than they did for the Capuchins’ plants and the priest who cured by sympathy.

## III.

NEXT to health, which occupies most space in the Sévigné Letters, comes business. All through, there is mention of monetary troubles and the means sought to escape from them. The French nobility, never very saving, were then at the climax of ruin. "Nobody has a penny, and nobody has anything to borrow upon," says Madame de Sévigné. This was the common situation. The high lords, attracted to the court by the King, found they had to go to enormous expense there. The mischief was that they acquired luxurious habits which they carried down upon their estates and communicated to all the petty lordlings and country squires. From high to low, from Versailles Palace to the humblest manor house, all the aristocracy made an effort each to eclipse peers, and to rival their superiors, which fortunes, already impaired, could not resist.

There was only one resource to uphold themselves; they solely relied on royal bounty. Except for this, all this propertyless nobility would be reduced to eating "bread made of leaves and fern." Consequently, all this famished army dreamt to obtain a government, a court office, or at least some pension or gratification. These were fought for greedily and begged for without shame. Bussy wrote to Madame de Sévigné apropos of the King: "I will hug his knees and fawn upon him so often that I shall finally peradventure reach his purse."

His daughter, a little ashamed, had struck out the finish of the sentence and put "to his heart," but Bussy was not so timid—he had the impudence of such a beggar.

Sometimes this baseness, greediness, and solicitation succeeded. There were favourites who made immense fortunes at this trade. It is incalculable what was gained by ministers, the royal mistresses and their hangers-on, fawners and friends, and those Saint-Simon calls "familiar varlets" (*valets intérieurs*). Shall we recall in what manner Coulanges speaks to his cousin of the boundless domains possessed in Lower Brittany by the Duchess de Louvois, the Prime Minister's wife, who was rustivating at the time? "We are making some long journeys now, in this temptingly fine weather, to know the vastness of our kingdom, and whenever curiosity pricks us to ask the name of a village, as 'Whose is this?' upon my word, they answer, 'The Duchess's!' 'And that yonder?' 'The Duchess's.' 'But I mean, that one over there?' 'The Duchess's.' 'And these woods?' 'The Duchess's.' 'What a tremendous stretch of plain!' 'It's the Duchess's.' 'But I spy a handsome house on it!' 'That's Nicei, the Duchess's, a large estate that used to belong to the old counts of that name.' 'Whose is that other château on a height?' 'That's Pacy, the Duchess's, coming from the Mandelot family, to which her great-grandmother belonged.' In one word, Madame, everything in the country is the Duchess's; I never saw so much real estate in one ring fence." But this was the exception. Others waited long and had to sue long

before they were even poorly paid for their services and assiduity. But this did not dishearten them ; they continued to lounge through the grand halls of the palace, and glide into the King's way to remind him of their existence ; as they had no other means of winning their prize, they wished to dwell ever in the beams of the royal munificence from which they expected fortune and relief. Upon each new act of liberality from the King to his favourites, they would recover courage and say, with Madame de Sévigné : " We must not despair ; although we are not even his footmen, we may find what crumbs they cast away by paying court to them."

Madame de Sévigné herself was rich. One day she reckoned up to her daughter that she had 530,000 livres of property, about two millions of francs at this day. This handsome amount would not have resisted the Marquis de Sévigné's attacks, if he had lived longer, for money melted in the hands of that libertine and prodigal husband ; when he died, after six years' wedded life, the poor widow was half ruined. She happily had, for extrication from this strait, her uncle's skill and devotion ; the Abbé de Coulanges who had been her tutor, remaining her steward.

The " really good " gentleman, as his niece called him, is an amusing figure. Although he did not often say mass, and he accuses himself with humility, in his will, of " having disgraced and profaned the holiness of his calling by a life too much diverted from the duties to which it should have been solely consecrated " ; he was a pious



man of regular manners, a devotee and believer, who “wept copiously every time he received the sacrament.” It is certain that the profession given to him suited him but slightly; it was his family thrust him into it when nature intended him for a business man. To keep his accounts in order, which many look upon as rather a stern duty, was a pleasure and recreation for him. His greatest pastime was to handle the counters “so good and true,” used in his calculations. He had no equal for order and economy; he did all kinds of service in the household; he drew up the leases, managed the law processes, oversaw the farmers, and settled all bills. When he dealt with the tradesfolk, he obtained better terms than others, which naturally made him vain. It was he who found for the Countess de Grignan a suite of rooms most reasonable, horses for a coach and a six-stall stable, all for 500 livres per annum. On another occasion, when Charles de Sévigné meddled with the haggling about a boat to carry his mother to Nantes, the Abbé had only one word to say to have it for a pistole less than his nephew offered. With so many good parts, he had some flaws, which are merrily hit off by Madame de Sévigné, who saw them clearly through her affection. Primarily, he sometimes got out of humour, but this was chiefly against men who reasoned falsely and badly calculated. When arithmetic is offended, and the rule of “twice two makes four” is wounded in any way, the good Abbé is a man beside himself. His was not a sharp mind. His niece, travelling with him to Les Rochers, foresaw that it would not do to

rely too much on the charms of his conversation, and supplied herself with a good book—Fléquier's translation of "*Life of Cardinal Commendon.*" "I am glad I am of the thinking and reading mould; or otherwise our good Abbé would little entertain me; you know he is busy with the shining orbs in his money-box? But whilst he is looking at it on all sides, *Cardinal Commendon* keeps me company very well." He was fond of good cheer, and lingered at table without being pressed; he used as cover the toasting of Madame de Grignan, and when the wine was good, expatiated lengthily in her laudation. In going through Burgundy to escort his niece to Vichy, he was so well entertained in the house of the good Guitauts, and was given such long and excellent repasts, that his fair charge made him take the waters "to clear out the bag he had filled too full at Epoisses." But these jests did not prevent her doing him all the justice she was bound to give for what she owed him. Upon his death, she wrote to Bussy, who never liked him: "There is no good deed that he did not do for me. He drew me out of the abysm in which I was at M. de Sévigné's death; he won lawsuits, put my lands into good condition again, paid my debts, and found mates for my children—in a word, it was to his perpetual care that I owe the peace and repose of my life." Two months later, returning to the same subject, she renews the eulogy to Bussy, and finishes it in these terms: "He lived honourably and died Christianly. May God serve us likewise."

For that matter, the niece of the Abbé de Coulanges

was truly worthy of him. Her taste for mental pleasures did not impair her business sense. To that, as to everything else, she brought a sharpness of which she was proud. We see her rejoicing one day at having found a skilful expedient in an embarrassing case, of which "the Really Good" steward was not advised. Racine, writing to one of his sons who played the gentleman, and threw away coin without counting it, observed with charming kindness: "We plain folk go about more simply, and believe that to know clearly how one stands is not beneath an honest man." On this side, the Countess was as a citizen's wife, and there is shown at her Les Rochers house the book where she put down every item of the household expenses. I do not know if she could, at a pinch, do her own cooking, but she was capable of overseeing those who did it, and she analyses their merits with a precision showing an expert. Her daughter having charged her to engage a cook for Grignan, her answer was: "We dined on his dishes—the Chevalier, the Abbé, Corbinelli, and I—and tried master cook properly: the fricassée was good, the tart excellent; we had to give him a hint to improve the crust; the fry was a pale golden colour. I really believe this man will be your mark." It is a pleasure to see so distinguished a fashionable lady fit for domestic matters.

It may be asserted that she never injured her fine fortune; her children undertook that. She had to buy her son a cornet's post, and subsequently a sub-lieutenant's, in the Dauphin's gendarmes—a very costly purchase.

Moreover, she had to equip him afresh at every campaign. At some moments the outlay struck her as heavy, for Charles de Sévigné had recourse to Madame de La Fayette's intervention to soften his mother. On this subject comes her following letter, which Madame de Sévigné must have found a trifle harsh (*séchet*). "Your son has just left me. He came to bid me good-bye, and to beg me to write you his plea about cash. His reasoning is so good that I have no need to explain them at length, for you must see how the expenses of a campaign are endless. Everybody is in desperation and ruin, it is impossible your son should not have acted in some degree like others ; besides, the great affection you have for Madame de Grignan requires you to show the same to her brother." It was not only the war that ruined Charles de Sévigné, for he had mad freaks at whiles : he could not be acquainted with La Champmeslé the actress and Ninon de l'Enclos, and keep up his good and bad ties in the world without some outlay. Once when pressed for ready money and fearful to have recourse to his mother, he sold the timber of his Buron property which belonged to him. Madame de Sévigné was very angry when she heard about it, and her ill-humour brought out a whole torrent of mythology from her pen : "I went to Buron yesterday," she writes to her daughter ; "and returned in the evening. I thought I should weep to see such destruction on the estate. There were the oldest trees in the world, to which my son, ere his last going away, gave a farewell cut with his

axe. He received four hundred pistoles for the timber, of which he has not a penny left. My darling, you should see those afflicted dryads whom I saw yesterday, all those olden *Sylvans* puzzled where to betake themselves, all those aged rooks settled two hundred years in the horror of these woods, those owls which, in the gloom, foretold woes to man by their fateful screeches—all this, I say, uttered lamentations to me yesterday, which sensibly touched my heart.”

But it was her daughter cost her most dearly. The high noble whom she had espoused was Lieutenant-General over La Provence, where he was deputy for the Governor, the Duke de Vendôme, who never went there. As he had a lofty spirit which he liked to exhibit, and spent without reckoning, his grand office cost him more than its income. His fortune was deeply injured when he made a third alliance with Mdle. de Sévigné, for, unfortunately, she was not of the kind to repair it. More vain than her husband and prouder of her rank, she only precipitated his ruin.

When one visits what is left of the Château de Grignan, it is easy to form an idea of the grand life led in such sumptuous dwellings, and the expenses of every description which are the inevitable sequel. Grignan is built on an eminence rising in the midst of a vast plain. The rock has been hewn, built up, and encompassed by walls, to form an inaccessible substructure on which towers the castle. Narrow streets wind down the rugged sides, along which straggle the houses of a miserable hamlet

seemingly hung up there to live under the wing of a powerful protector. The castle entrance is defended by a massive fortification pierced with loopholes, and flanked by two crenelated towers. Once the gates are opened and the interior is reached, the aspect changes: the fortress becomes a palace. Unfortunately it is in ruins now, on the ground, there being left only pieces of wall and remnants of halls; but these fragments have a rare stamp of grandeur and elegance. The walls contain broad windows enframed in delicate columns reminding one of the Renaissance; within can be seen the binding of vaulted ceilings, finely sculptured friezes and fragments of monumental mantelpieces. The importance of the rubbish gives us an idea of the extent of the edifice. When, in thought, they are reared up and the castle imagined as it was, it is impossible not to be struck by the broad development of the fronts and the great number of halls and rooms it comprised. All around a paved, raised walk gives the enjoyment of one of the fairest views obtainable: a rich plain strewn with villages, country seats and mansions, closed in on all sides by high mountains, the Lance, the saw-edged chain of the Alpines, and the snowy Ventoux on the skyline.

In this splendid abode all was made to feed the master's pride, and give him a great idea of himself. Everything apparently made it a duty to uphold his rank and not to sink below the magnificence of his ancestors. To people these high halls, and animate this immense building, the company had need to be numerous and

brilliant. The masters and their family, with their kinsfolk and bosom friends, the officers and nobles, and the pages attached to the deputy-governor, formed a considerable body for a beginning, upwards of a hundred persons who lived here and never quitted the bounds. Join to them the guests coming from all the county or the neighbouring ones to receive unstinted hospitality. Friends, or even mere acquaintances, were lodged under this roof with their servants and paraphernalia. It was a hostelry never empty. Three tables had to be set up in the grand gallery and they were always full: this is what Madame de Sévigné called "the continual and cruel cheer of Grignan," which no income could withstand. After feeding this throng, they had to be entertained mentally, for which all kinds of distractions were offered them—even the opera, and some pride was shown in having the newest airs of Lulli played. Above all, card play was carried on; gaming was one of the scourges of this society of the great nobles unemployed. The example came from above: at Versailles gambling was always going on heavily, and the majority of players were ruined, although a few skilled hands, like Dangeau or Langlée, owed fortunes to it. The Marchioness de Montespan lost four hundred thousand pistoles in one night at basset, and the King's brother, who owed a hundred and fifty thousand crowns, was obliged to pawn his gold plate. From Versailles the mania overran Paris and the provinces. Play was heavy at Grignan, and the hosts, being bound to surpass the guests, thus completed the dispersal of their fortune.

On the subject of this ruinous splendour, Madame de Sévigné was divided between contrary sentiments. She could not entirely prevent maternal pride when told of the lustre of receptions at Grignan. It pleased her to picture the lovely Countess enthroned like a queen of Provence "in her castle of Apolidon." But common-sense soon overrode that weakness. She foresaw with terror the disasters these wild extravagancies were sure to bring. To her daughter, who sought to calm her by lessening the amount of her gaming losses, she replied with much wisdom that "little showers spoil many roads"; to her son-in-law, always bent on appearances, and who wanted to transport some of his Grignan pomp to Paris, she wrote that six footmen were adequate for his wife and himself, with six horses and one valet-de-chambre; above all, he was not to bring any pages: "they are a provincial production, no good here." When she found herself scarcely listened to and the expenditure going on, she finally broke out. It was her son-in-law she first accused: "The mania of M. de Grignan to borrow money for pictures and furniture is a thing entirely incredible, if one did not see it. How can he reconcile it with his birth, his pride, and the love he ought to bear you? Can he not believe he abuses your patience, and that it is not inexhaustible? has he no pity on you? to think that we believed he loved you! oh, what pretty love!" Next she was enraged at the pair: "There is no limit to ye—two spendthrifts leashed—one wishing everything and the other approving—enough to wreck the world."



(But was it not their world—the grandeur and power of that house?) “I have no words to tell you what I think—my heart is too full. But what will you do? I cannot understand a bit of it. On what do you base your present and future? what can one do when at such a point? In short, it is death to those who have their heart in it, and all the more because there is no remedy.”

As one proceeds in the reading of the Correspondence, the times are seen to become gloomier for everybody. The wars never come to an end and they are less profitable; money grows scarcer, and public poverty augments; all the grand nobility are at the last gasp. Bussy, who boasted when his exile began of having paid a hundred thousand crowns of debt, could no longer meet his expenses, and his unpaid creditors seized his revenues. When Madame de La Roche drew a picture for him of the general distress at Paris, he answered with cutting bitterness: “I think matters are much better regulated than a dozen years ago, madame: then there were thousands and thousands who fared as well as the King and had as much sport as he. Now everything is reserved for the master’s mouth; nobody has coin or tid-bits, but is reduced to his wife and a slice of beef. Is it not fair?”

For a long time since, the Count de Grignan had been living on expedients. The loans had been compounding upon one another, with more and more onerous charges for renewals. The creditors waxed wrathful and made dreadful exposures. There was even one Parisian tradeswoman, Madame Rénié, who had the courage to go a

hundred and fifty leagues to claim her dues, and fell suddenly upon Grignan like a fury. These painful incidents did not prevent things continuing as usual ; they led a merry life and picnicked over all Provence; companies were raised for the son of the house who was off to the wars. It is ever a subject of amazement to us to see entirely ruined persons find the means to keep themselves up in a vacuum for several years, and persist in living showily and figuring well in society in some unknown manner, though without money or credit. Madame de Sévigné makes the remark about what she calls the beggarliness of courtiers : “They never have a penny, yet they go upon all the travelling tours, keep up with the fashions, go to all the balls, running at the ring, lotteries, and everywhere, though ruined.” But in such delicate situations, the least little event suffices to discover the ruin, and it becomes irreparable. “It is a machine which must not be touched lest all come down by the run.” What overturned the Grignan castle of cards was the bankruptcy of the Treasurer of Provence. As he had an interest in keeping on good terms with the acting-governor he had advanced him three years’ salary. All had to be repaid forthwith, and the unfortunate Count de Grignan, pressed by his creditors and finding no more credit, was obliged to make an avowal of his distress to the Prime Minister Pontchartrain, in a letter concluding with these words : “I remain without any subsistence.”

## IV.

WHAT did the poor mother do to relieve this distress? After having given much useless advice in time, she did not content herself with sending commonplace consolation in pressing cases; she came to her daughter's assistance as well as circumstances allowed, and to make that succour more plentiful, she quitted town, notwithstanding her attachments and friends wishful to retain her, and bravely retired to make economies on her estate.

The reasons then for taking the nobility to their country seats were not the same as now, at fixed periods, to make the upper classes leave the capital. Our habit is to make two parts of the year: we pass the winter in town and the summer in the fields. It is a means of introducing a trifle more variety into our life, which would be too monotonous if spent in the same spot. We go to the country to repose from social fatigue, enjoy a purer air and find other sights and pleasures. But formerly such changes were not possible because of the difficulties of travel. Only those who possessed rustic property around Paris could so delight themselves. Madame de Sévigné had this rare good fortune. Thanks to her "Really Good" uncle who was Abbé of Livry, she could dispose of a place of repose and retreat attainable in a few hours. Everything at Livry pleased her: beauty of days, coolness of nights, the pure and wholesome air "doing me as much good as

milk," the music of birds which counteracted the vile cries of the city street-vendors, the delights of gardens balmy with woodbine, and the view of the "sweet little landscape" enframing them. In other places rain was a misery. "It is always raining here," she writes out of Burgundy, "it makes me angered." At Livry there was not a thing disagreeable, and the rains themselves were welcome. Hence she was happy every time she could go there. She took her daughter and her dearest friends there to enjoy their undivided company, but she was not displeased when wholly by herself there. In all seasons she went there—during Passion Week, to collect her thoughts and prepare to go through her devotions; in spring and summer, to enjoy the fine days. It was the remedy for all her sorrows and lassitude. "When I am vexed, I must have Livry," she says. Nothing was easier than to get there, as it is a few leagues from Paris, and she could go there for only a day or two; but when she went to her Burgundian estate, it was a long, costly, and painful journey, not to be undertaken every year and for a few weeks' sojourn only. Other motives than to change her residence had to arise to decide her upon it; and, as such travel was not to be renewed often for little gain, once it was reached a long stay would be made.

Madame de Sévigné did not, therefore, cross the hundred leagues separating her from Les Rochers, for pleasures taken alone, no doubt thinking it payable too dearly. It was duty took her there, to survey the

property closely, conclude some piece of business, and, in chief, repair the breaches Paris life made in her wealth. "I do not know how you find yourself progressing with your land," she wrote one day to Bussy, "but for my part, cousin, my property of Bourbilly amounts to next to nothing by the allowances to tenants and the scanty sale for wheat and other grain. We cannot keep out of poverty unless we live upon it." To which Bussy makes answer: "Get yourself exiled, madame; it is not so difficult as is thought; and eat up your own produce at Bourbilly." She exiled herself, without waiting for a royal order; when the necessity arose, she departed courageously for some distant estate and sometimes lived a whole year there, collecting moneys owed her and living on the manor. She was often deceived, as we see by the following anecdote related to her daughter: "This morning, a peasant trudged in with bags all over him; one under each arm, some in his pockets and in his breeches. Our good Abbé, who goes straight to the point, believed we were rich for ever. 'Heigho, friend, you are indeed well laden. How much are you bringing?' 'Master,' said he, breathing hard, 'I believe there's up'ards o' thirty francs!' My dear, the coins were farthings (*doubles*), which had fled for refuge into this country along with conical hats, to worry us out of all patience." Nevertheless, with her ordinary skill, she finally arranged everything, raised the rents of her tenants, settled accounts with her debtors, and returned to town richer than she had set out. All

admired her wise conduct, for, according to the lines of her friend Lenet :

“There are pat reasons, heaven sent,  
To be afield to double rent.”

At present, you can run down to Vitry from Paris in seven hours. Madame de Sévigné required eight or nine days, sometimes more, when she paused on her way at some friendly house. Ten leagues per day was the outside work. The equipage was worthy of the Marchioness's rank. “I go in two vehicles,” she describes it to her daughter. “I have seven coach-horses, a led horse carrying my bed, and three or four mounted men. I shall be in my calash, drawn by my best pair ; sometimes the Abbé will be with me ; in the other, my son, La Mousse, and Hélène. That has four horses with a postillion.” As is plain, this turn-out is seemly, but often better was seen. The Marchioness de Montespan travelled as follows, when going to take the waters at Vichy : “She is in a three-pair coach with little De Thianges as maid ; more attendants came in another coach with the same arrangement as to horses. Then are six baggage waggons, six mules and a dozen horsemen, not including her chief servants ; her whole train numbers forty-five persons.” As the road was long, precautions were taken against being idle. Madame de Sévigné took care to select agreeable companions : in her carriage she had books she liked ; so she chatted, or read Corneille or Nicole over again, and looked out on the scenery now and anon.

These beautiful banks of the River Loire had been often followed by her in very different moods: first, with her husband when he took her down into Brittany as a novelty, in the gladness and brightness of youth, then with her son and her daughter, of whom she was so proud. Long after, on seeing them by herself, she discovered fresh beauties never noticed before. "There are periods in life when one only sees oneself," she says. On the whole, the journey is finished without weariness, and Madame de Sévigné gives us such pleasant descriptions that we, who no longer know such spun-out travels, are sometimes tempted to regret them.

At length Vitry is reached, and thence the Château des Rochers, only some six miles off. I imagine that the lady's heart beat when her coach lumbered upon the broad square extending in front of the residence. There she would behold her servants and vassals gathered to hail her. Once, she says, her bailiff Vaillant had prepared a kind of triumphant reception to her son: more than fifteen hundred men were marshalled under arms, all neatly dressed and a new ribbon around the neck. This olden nobility, so reduced and humiliated at Versailles, sacrificed to lawyers and financiers, cringing to cabinet ministers' clerks—rose on re-entering its own gates and reassumed the feeling of its ancient grandeur.

The Château des Rochers still stands, and has not very much altered in appearance since the time when the Marchioness de Sévigné inhabited it. It is a building composed of two living portions in a square shape, sup-

porting a central tower of the Fifteenth Century. The aspect is simple and noble ; no useless ornaments are upon it ; the tower alone, with elegant roof, belfry, and turrets, has a rather proud mien. On the left is an isolated rotunda which the garden wall and gate link to the main building ; it is the chapel built by Abbé de Coulanges. Poor abbé ! notwithstanding his taste for saving, he was possessed of an innocent craze : the building fever. " His hands itched at bricks and mortar," says his niece ; " and now and then when one could not help it, one let him have a wall, to tinker at." It must be confessed that he did not presume upon the permission : his round house is quite modest and, from afar, might be taken for a dovecote.

Between chapel and château a door opens on the parterre. We may suppose without any strain that, after having scantily rested after her journey, the mistress of the castle hastened to run hither. What she most liked was not the château—finer places were familiar to her—but the parterre and park. She had no livelier pleasure than to busy about them, modifying them without cessation, ornamenting and embellishing them, and bringing them down to the reigning mode. She hastened first to remove the box borders of the lawn, pleasing to the courtiers of Louis XIII ; she multiplied the lawn and filled it up with jessamine and orange-trees, so that when the evening air was scented with them, she believed herself in Provence. As soon as Le Notre had won a reputation in ornamental gardening, she applied to him



for designs and plans. When they were executed, and Les Rochers had donned the air of a miniature Versailles, she contemplated her work and felicitated herself upon it. "Our heath has become what none ever would have believed in its power to become," she cries to her daughter, in a tone of triumph. From the parterre she went into the park, which has preserved her memory better than elsewhere. The walks planted by her still exist, and the very names given by her are cited. Yonder is the Solitary; the Infinite, which winds so that the end cannot be seen; the Mall, broad and straight on the contrary, ends in a wide expanse whence all the environs are included in the view. Les Rochers are situated amid a rather extensive table-land, rising a little at the extremities, with no variety of aspect, or that grandeur or abruptness of perspective liked in our day; no stream crossing the level; no steep mountain closing the scenes. It is a quiet landscape which the eye placidly enjoys, and it reposes the mind. The principal characteristic arises from the trees being so crowded and leafy that nothing else is seen up to the horizon, and it makes one believe it the middle of a forest. Madame de Sévigné, who knows how to use her eyes and observes with care, is not struck by the abundance of trees alone; but she admires the sombre intensity of the verdure. "The green of this wood is handsomer than that of Livry," is a remark which can be verified by visiting the pretty park of Vitry, or contemplating the country surrounding Rennes from the height of the Thabor promenade.

The life led at Les Rochers was dull. In one of her latter visits to her old castle, Madame de Sévigné, after her son's marriage, described how she employed her days to her daughter. It was one day when she was alone with her daughter-in-law, and "the little friend" was absent. "We rise at eight ; very often I go—about nine, when the mass-bell rings—to take the freshness of the wood ; after mass, we dress, wish one another good-morning, go about picking orange-flowers, and dine ; till five, we work or read ; since we have no son now, I read to spare the weak lungs of his wife. At five, I leave her and go into the pleasant walks, followed by a footman ; I have books, and change my seat and vary the turns of my strolls ; it makes a diversion to change from a devotional to a historical work ; we muse a little on God and His providence, on the soul and the future ; and, at length, about eight, I hear a bell—it's for supper. . . . My dear child, there is nothing but you that I prefer to the sad and tranquil repose I am enjoying here." This is a downright monotonous life ; it is true that it was enlivened from time to time by some unforeseen gay incident. Visits were often received and not all agreeable. "You who never have budged from Paris," said Bussy, "cannot know what the rusticity of the provinces is." Yet some in the number were welcome ; everywhere people of mind can be met, with whom a few moments can be agreeably passed. Sometimes there were very great personages who did honour to the Marchioness by stopping at her house ; the Princess de Tarente, the Duke de Chaulnes,

and the Marquis de Lavardin, the Lieutenant-General for Brittany. In the governor's absence this nobleman was glad enough to display all the paraphernalia of his power ; he came accompanied by his officers and guards, preceded by his trumpeters, followed by an escort of twenty gentlemen ; they stirred up the peaceful château. The Marchioness was obliged to return the compliments by paying visits all about the neighbourhood. Sometimes she even let herself be attracted, against her friends' wishes, to the Parliament of Brittany ; it was such a journey ; she had to leave home and live at Vitry, or Rennes, or Vannes. She was received there with a heartiness which ultimately fatigued her a little ; she met too much noise and bustle, feasts and dinners, "of a magnificence that made one die of hunger"; she durst not repeat the items to her daughter for fear of giving her indigestion. After a few days, when she could decently break away, she would leave the whirlpool and return to Les Rochers, "hungry for fasting and silence." How could a woman of fashion, accustomed to live amid the best company of Paris, please herself to this point in her Brittany castle, and remain there without *ennui* for entire years ? It is natural that we should be surprised, for she was so herself. "It is a strange thing," she observes, "how the days fly and escape us in this sad and insipid life." It was because she possessed a marvellous suppleness of character and knew how to bow to circumstances as she did to accommodate herself without effort to everybody. She says of her son, "he takes in the spirit of the

surrounding place." It is evidently a characteristic he inherited from his mother. This most worldly of women when in the world, becomes countrified in the fields. Solitude does not alarm her; on the contrary, she often seeks it. One day she wrote to her daughter from her retreat at Livry: "Here I am, my dear daughter, quite all alone. I did not wish to burden myself with any dullness save my own. No company tempts me. I wish to be able to vaunt of having been all the afternoon out in this meadow, communing with our cows and sheep."

When, to the pleasure of being alone to read and meditate, and to chat with cattle, is added that of sauntering over a flowery mead or under tall trees and gazing on a fine landscape, she took so much delight in it that it was with great difficulty she was enticed back to society.

It has been said that Madame de Sévigné was one of the Seventeenth Century writers best understanding and most loving Nature. It is a just observation, provided nothing is exaggerated. It must be remarked that first she has never made any of the long descriptions to which we are habituated; she paints with a sweep of the pencil, and that trait is generally not her own and has no novelty. Let us remember that she said: "I invent nothing." This is the truth, and she must have an outward impulse in any case. She began to see nature through her favourite poets; she first admired it in the "Jerusalem Delivered," "Aminta," and the "Pastor Fido," and as these poems are full of mythology, she has made a great use of it after

their example. In the most natural tone she says, "she has been staying a couple of hours with the hamadryads," or "strolling in the evening under the glances of Endymion's fair mistress." Thus they spoke around her; only her contemporaries restricted themselves to the conventional paintings; when they alluded to sunrises and sunsets, or spoke of spring or winter, they seem to have never seen them but in poets' verses. Madame de Sévigné looked on nature directly; this was almost a novelty, and she found quicker and more complete the impression given her by the pictures of Tasso, Guarini, and others. She repeats the terms they used, employs their imagery and metaphors, but personal emotion rejuvenates the whole. What she says with others' words, we feel she has beheld with her own eyes; the expression is often commonplace, but the feeling is always genuine. I repeat that this is her true originality. Remark how she catches up her daughter, who has never looked out on the country except from the windows at Grignan, and who only knows about nightingales from poetical descriptions: "Where did you learn that nightingales were to be heard on the thirteenth of June? Tut! they are too busy in caring for their little home arrangements. They are no longer singing or lovemaking, but bent on more substantial thoughts." She is not the one to commit such a blunder. She assumes some pride in knowing about rural matters. When the spring opens, she goes about every day to see by what scarcely perceptible transitions and delicate shades the leaves change from brown to green;

she goes from one tree to another ; when the hornbeams are scanned, she passes to the beeches, and thence to the oaks ; and when she has observed and noted everything in the inspection, she says : “ It seems to me that, in case of need, I could make a spring myself.”

Thus did time pass away at Les Rochers without her noticing it. Every season had its pleasures for her. Happy is she, no doubt, “to hear the nightingale, the cuckoo, and the warbler open the spring-tide in the woods,” but she finds pleasure as well in “those lovely crystalline days of autumn, which are ’twixt cold and hot.” And winter itself is not without attractions when the sun shines during sharp frost “and the trees are adorned with pearls and crystals.” Time came, however, for her to quit this solitude ; she returned to Paris without eagerness, carrying to her daughter the important savings she had garnered, which once rose above sixteen thousand livres, and, I daresay, when she was congratulated on her courage, she thought in her heart that it was money gained without hardship.

## V.

THE enchanting conversation filling the Sévigné Letters is not limited, as one may reasonably imagine, to family affairs. Many other things are treated of. During five-and-twenty years she kept her daughter “in the swim” as to what was said and done at Paris and Versailles. Madame de Grignan was very eager for such news in her

exile in Provence. The *Mercure* and the *Gazette de France*, official newspapers watched over by authority, took care not to say the very things people wanted to know. The privately-circulating gazettes of Abbé Bigorré and others only raised a corner of the veil. Madame de Sévigné, who wrote for her daughter alone, was not obliged to be careful. She narrates everything she knows; and, as she had grand relations and goes about in the good quarters, she knows nearly everything that is done or is on the eve of accomplishment. There is no intrigue, or political or military event to which she does not allude, so that if we wished to follow her in all her statements, we should have to relate the whole history of the period. This is work already done many times, and it appears useless to give a repetition. In concluding, I shall only make a few rapid observations.

It is not the same thing, by far, to study the Seventeenth Century in histories as to seek to know it by contemporaneous letters. The impression from the two is very different. Historians, who judge an epoch from distance, represent it by its most general character; they set forth the dominant points alone, and, sacrificing all the rest, trace pictures with precision and simplicity which charm the mind. The reader becomes habituated to see it as it was thus painted, and cannot suppose that there was anything else in it than the features attributed to it. But when the correspondences are read which report events as they are occurring, without changing them or choosing them, the opinion formed from histories upon men

and things is greatly modified. Then we perceive that good and evil have been mingled as in all ages, and even that the proportions of the mixture vary less than might be surmised. Cousin says : " All is grand in a great age." Just the reverse is the truth ; there is no era so great that it had not a myriad of littlenesses, and this must be expected if disappointment would be avoided when one undertakes to study it. No epoch has been more admired and celebrated than the reign of Louis XIV ; but the Sévigné Letters risk deeply diluting our admiration. At every moment they bring up strange stories to make us consider. When, in a society painted as so noble, dainty, and regular, we meet such a many scandalous adventures, shameful disorders, ill-united couples, fortunes maintained by dishonest proceedings, great lords who buy without paying, promise without keeping their words, and borrow without returning, who are at the feet of the ministers and their mistresses, who cheat at cards like M. de Cessac, live on a great lady's purse like Caderousse, sell their wives to the monarch like Soubise, or offer their nieces like Villarceaux, or who uphold—like Bussy—" that the most punctilious about honour ought to be delighted when such an honour befalls their house,"—then, it seems to me, we have the right to conclude that there is not much difference between them and ourselves, that we may be better than they on some points, and that, all things considered, it is not worth the pains to use their example to misguide our times.

In this they differed from us, to wit : then there were



certain things on which there was general agreement, the very ones which have given place amongst us to the greatest divisions—religion and politics. Everybody, then, was not devout, though many were ; but almost all were believers, and scarcely anyone contested the divine right of kings. Nowadays religious faith and monarchical faith are all but died out, and there are next to no common opinions imposing upon all, breathed like the air, impregnating without one's knowledge, and found at the bottom of one's soul at an emergency, despite all the changes due to experience. Is it good or evil? must we rejoice or lament? each will answer according to his temper and disposition. Bold spirits, feeling strong enough to hold personal convictions, applaud themselves on being delivered of those prejudices which fettered the independence of opinion, and on having free space before them. But the others, the bulk with no high views, and whose life, besides, is occupied by other cares, are uneasy, troubled, and unfixed when they have to solve these great problems ; they regret they have not the key with the riddles, and sadly say with Lamartine's Jocelyn :

“ Oh, why was I born\* in these days of storm-throes,  
When no man ever sees where his head shall repose,  
Where the road comes to end, and the spirit of man  
Is groping for issue with never a plan ;  
Unable to dwell 'neath the down-crumbling past,  
Or leap in the shades o'er the future forecast.”

Behold a whirl of thought, unknown in the Seventeenth

\* “ Oh ! pourquoi suis-je né,” etc.

Century, as Madame de Sévigné's Letters clearly show.

Though she was very deeply moved and highly gratified when the King addressed her, and was, one day in her youth, inclined to believe him a very great prince because he came to persuade her to dance, she was not one of those fanatics who made it a superstition to worship him and award him almost divine honours. She saw the ridiculousness of such overdone flattery, and derided it on occasion. "We are informed," she writes to her daughter, "that the Minims of your own Provence have dedicated a thesis to the King in which they compare him to God, but in such a way that it is readily seen that they think the King of kings merely a copy. Too much overdoes it—I never would have suspected the Minims to have come to this extreme." In this lady, once a Frondeuse, there is always a spark of independence and a secret yearning for opposition, which gives the more value to her testimony when she shows to what a point France was then enamoured of its sovereign. "What do they not do to please their master?" she says of courtiers. "With what joy and zeal would they not run to the hospital on his service? Do they reckon their health, their pleasures, their lives as anything when he is to be obeyed and pleased?" Elsewhere: "If we acted thus unto our God, we should be great saints!" The King inspired such a vast respect that the very persons he had most cruelly treated did not hold him responsible for his rigour. During his seventeen years' exile, Bussy

could not prevent some outbreaks of impatience ; he inveighs against friends who forgot him, and reviles those who seem to be in his place ; but choler never is aimed at the sole and principal author of his woes. To the King he is always respectful, submissive, tender, and impassioned. Even when he strikes, he is a kind master, and he does not utter his name but with tears. "It is natural," he says to his cousin, "to hate those who do us evil ; but yet I love the King and wish him well, and pray God with all my heart for him." This was really being very generous. So the very critics who found the most ill in this rule, did not conceive of a better one. They would wish for the disgrace of a favourite or the fall of a minister when they believed they had cause to complain, but their desires went no further, and we do not see them ever imagining any other government over France than that they have lived under.

On religion minds were a shade more divided. There were some incredulous men, a fairly good number. "You must know," says Nicole, "that the great heresy is no longer Calvinism or Lutherism, but atheism." Madame de Sévigné speaks of some of these atheists, Saint-Germain, Ninon de l'Enclos, who laboured to pervert young men, etc. "How dangerous this Ninon is ! You would be horrified if you only knew how she dogmatizes upon religion." But do not let us forget that many of these incredulous people were nothing more or less than perverted believers. In connection with the odd anecdote showing us Condé and the Prince Palatine trying with

Doctor Bourdelot to burn a fragment of the true Cross, Sainte-Beuve points out that this budding incredulity, slenderly sure of itself in attempting sacrilege, is far from the tranquil indifference which needs no proof not to believe. "After all," he adds, "these strong-minded men, who made so much ado over burning the true Cross, were of the same period as the other great minds believing in healing by the Holy Thorn." Many of these *libertines*, as they styled them, were only so from braggadocia, to astonish good folk and be talked of them by them. At the siege of Leridas Bussy went and had dinner in a church with some madcaps, and dug up a corpse to dance with it to the violins; in reality he dreads spirits, and he confesses that he put his head under the coverlet when he went to bed, "so as not to be able to hear anything that might have frightened him." During a fire which threatened his country house, he hastened to throw a scapulary into the flames, and, the fire being stayed at that nick, he could never say whether he owed the fortune to the blessed token or to the wind having shifted its direction at the critical moment. There need be no surprise at the impiety of such pretended strong-minded men not being very firm. Most of them became devout when the age for "libertinism" passed. The others did not want to raise any scandal, and, like everybody else, called in the priest at their last moments; one of them, Guy Patin, termed this dying *more majorum*. These rare and timid rebellions were swallowed up in the great uniformity of beliefs, and they ought not

to prevent us saying that, taken altogether, the age was Christian.

But all were not Christian in the same fashion. Some were so by habit, tradition, or conservatism, without their belief much influencing their behaviour. Recall the amusing tale told by Madame de Sévigné about the Little Goodfellow (*Petit Bon*, the Count de Fiesque) and the Mousetrap (Madame de Lyonne), who were close friends. In an appointment she gave him, after two long hours of parley to which devotion had been a perfect stranger, she suddenly blurted out: "Petit Bon, I have something on my heart against you." "What is that, lady?" "You are not devout to the Virgin, and that pains me dreadfully." Madame de Sévigné's piety was not as accommodating. She came to religious matters, as to all the rest, with a great freedom of mind. She was driven out of patience by the theatrical devotion of the people of Provence, and their processions of pilgrims and penitents. She speaks without much respect about the reliquary of the good Saint Marceau and that of Saint Geneviève being carried through Paris streets to bring fine weather or rain, and nodding amiably to one another when they came together. She is prone to make very compromising concessions to the Protestants when she discusses with them. Her friend, La Mousse the Cartésian, having explained to her some opinions of Origen which the Church condemned, she does not shrink from saying they are very reasonable, and writes on the subject: "You will have trouble to insert an eternity

of torments into our heads, unless you get an order from the King and Holy Writ." At the risk of embroiling herself with all the saints, she had these words written over the master-altar of her chapel : "*Soli Dei honor et gloria.*" Thus there will be none jealous, she comments. Do not conclude that she was a "freethinker," for we have seen that strong-minded people horrified her. In her youth, Port Royal had attracted her by its austere morality and the severities of its doctrines. When she came to converse with some of its doctors, or read their works, she was seized with such a spell of piety that her cousin Bussy, to whom she had preached as to others, grew alarmed, and felt the necessity of moderating her zeal. "Do not take matters so to heart," he said ; "it much injures your chance of long life. In my opinion, it is almost being damned to believe too strongly that you are ; but there's reason in everything ; let us live well and we shall rejoice. In matters of conscience, too much nicety makes heretics. I only want to go to Paradise and no higher." But Bussy was alarmed unfoundedly ; Madame de Sévigné's devotion was not as disquieting as he supposed ; she had numerous intermittances, and, in her letters, we see them successively die out and flare up. It is mainly when she is alone at Livry or at Les Rochers during the wintry days that she becomes once more sad and serious, and has regulated returns to piety. She reads Nicole and Pascal over again, and recalls the many friends she has lost. "Alas !" she says, "how this death comes running everywhere and snatches on every side !" and, naturally, the death of

lovers makes her think of her own. On her garden sundial she had had graven the device: "*Unam time.*" She often pondered over that dread and uncertain hour, and the fear she had of it sometimes inspired eloquent plaints: "I find myself under an engagement which embarrasses me. I was launched upon life without my consent, and I must sail out of it—it overwhelms me. How am I to leave it? which way is out? by what door? when will it be? in what state of mind? how will I stand before God? what will I have to offer Him? what can I hope? am I worthy of Paradise? or of hell? what an alternative—what tribulation! it would have been better had I died in my nurse's arms!" Then she promises to live more seriously, and better prepare herself for the awful moment; she makes good resolutions for the future; but ere long "a breath—a sunbeam carries away all the evening's resolutions." She sees her friends again, and takes part in their lively and slanderous chats. Like the others, she laughs, ay, more than the others, at the spiteful tales she hears, and she cannot resist repeating them with a relish which is admired. She bears herself resentment for this and scolds herself, but is not corrected. "I am neither God's nor the devil's," she says. "This state of things annoys me, although, between ourselves, I find it to be the most natural that can be." It was so natural to her that, in truth, she never stepped out of it. Spite of all her good resolves, she lived in this perpetual alternation of piety and relapse until the malady which carried her off. But then she was firm and determined; her son-in-law, wit-

ness of her last moments, tells us that "she culled the fruit of the good reading for which she had so much craving, and faced death with astonishing steadiness and submission." So they generally met it at this period. Many persons of intellect agreed with Madame de Rambures, that "it was irksome to live in the grace of God," but all wished to die in it.

When Madame de Sévigné departed this life at the age of seventy, she had not overmuch felt the strokes of old age. Bussy's friend, Madame de Scudéry, who saw her a few years before, was startled to find she was still lovely; she seemed always young to her friends. We have her latest letters; nothing betrays her years; they are as graceful, witty, piquant and lively as the others. In the one written a fortnight before dying, she deplores the death of the young Marquis de Blanchefort, son of the Marshal de Créquy, with a touching tenderness proving that her heart had not, for all her years, taken a wrinkle. This is rare good fortune, and she must have appreciated it better than anyone. Never assuredly had her persistent optimism been better justified, and it was then that she might say with reason that "she was contented with her fate." To last without aging, to feel whole and alive to the end, to preserve into maturity what is best in youth—its vivacity and freshness of feelings; and then, when cometh the end, to find anew in the soul the belief of early years and sink softly into sleep with a firm hope—is not this for those who dwell, like us, amid uncertainty and obscurity, a fate worthy of envy?

THE END.



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