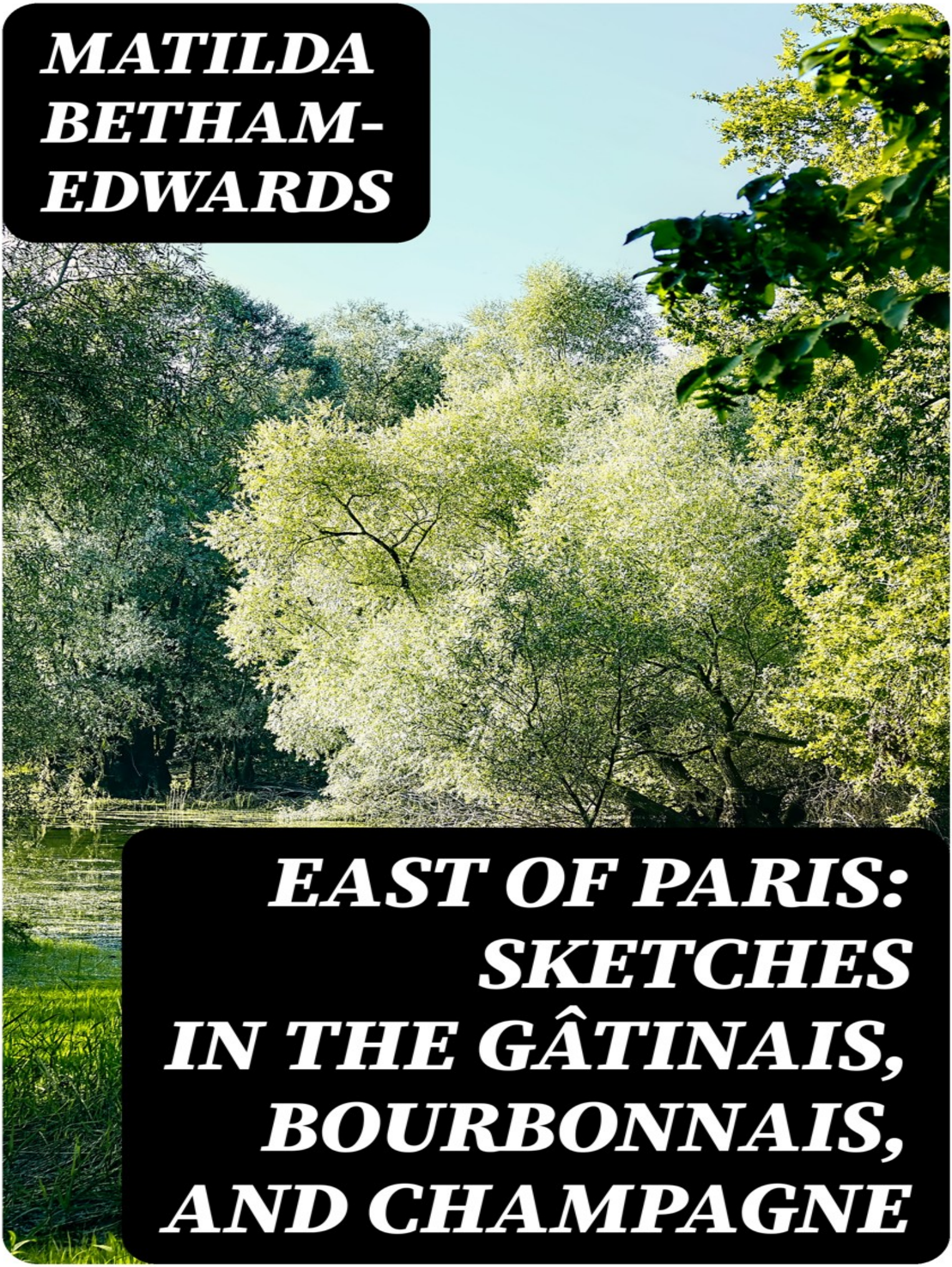

MATILDA BETHAM-EDWARDS

EAST OF PARIS: SKETCHES IN THE GÂTINAIS, BOURBONNAIS, AND CHAMPAGNE

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East of Paris: Sketches in the Gâtinais, Bourbonnais, and Champagne

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INTRODUCTORY.

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I here propose to zig-zag with my readers through regions of Eastern France not described in any of my former works. The marvels of French travel, no more than the *chefs-d'oeuvre* of French literature, are unlimited. Short of saluting the tricolour on Mont Blanc, or of echoing the Marseillaise four hundred and odd feet underground in the cave of Padirac, I think I may fairly say that I have exhausted France as a wonder-horn. But quiet beauties and homely graces have also their seduction, just as we turn with a sense of relief from "Notre Dame de Paris" or "Le Père Goriot," to a domestic story by Rod or Theuriet, so the sweet little valley of the Loing refreshes after the awful Pass of Gavarni, and soothing to the ear is the gentle flow of its waters after the thundering Rhône. Majestic is the panorama spread before our eyes as we pic-nic on the Puy de Dôme. More fondly still my memory clings to many a narrower perspective, the view of my beloved Dijon from its vine-clad hills or of Autun as approached from Pré Charmoy, to me, the so familiar home of the late Philip Gilbert Hamerton. If, however, the natural marvels of France, like those of any other country, can be catalogued, French scenery itself offers inexhaustible variety. And so, having visited, re-visited, and re-visited again this splendid hexagon on the European map, I yet find in the choice of holiday resorts a veritable *embarras de richesses*. And many of the spots here described will, I have no doubt, be as new to my readers as they have been to myself—*Larchant* with

its noble tower rising from the plain, recalling the still nobler ruin of Tclemcen on the borders of the Sahara—*Recloses* with its pictorial interiors and grand promontory overlooking a panorama of forest, sombre purplish green ocean unflecked by a single sail—*Moret* with its twin water-ways, one hardly knows which of the two being the more attractive—*Nemours*, favourite haunt of Balzac, memoralized in “Ursule Mirouët”—*La Charité*, from whose old-world dwellings you may throw pebbles into the broad blue Loire—*Pougues*, the prettiest place with the ugliest name, frequented by Mme. de Sévigné and valetudinarians of the Valois race generations before her time—*Souvigny*, cradle of the Bourbons, now one vast congeries of abbatial ruins—*Arcis-sur-Aube*, the sweet riverside home of Danton—its near neighbour, *Bar-sur-Aube*, connected with a bitterer enemy of Marie Antoinette than the great revolutionary himself, the infamous machinator of the Diamond Necklace. These are a few of the sweet nooks and corners to which of late years I have returned again and again, ever finding “harbour and good company.” And these journeys, I should rather say visits, East of Paris led me once more to that sad yearning France beyond the frontier, to homes as French, to hearts as devoted to the motherland as when I first visited the annexed provinces twenty years ago!

EAST OF PARIS

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CHAPTER I. — MELUN

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Scores upon scores of times had I steamed past Melun in the Dijon express, ever eyeing the place wistfully, ever too hurried, perhaps too lazy, to make a halt. Not until September last did I carry out a long cherished intention. It is unpardonable to pass and re-pass any French town without alighting for at least an hour's stroll!

Melun, capital of the ancient Gatinais, now chef-lieu of the Department of Seine and Marne, well deserves a visit. Pretty as Melun looks from the railway it is prettier still on nearer approach. The Seine here makes a loop, twice curling round the town with loving embrace, its walls and old world houses to-day mirrored in the crystal-clear river. Like every other French town, small or great, Melun possesses its outer ring of shady walks, boulevards lying beyond the river-side quarters. The place has a busy, prosperous, almost metropolitan look, after the village just left. {Footnote: For symmetry's sake I begin these records at Melun, although I halted at the place on my way from my third sojourn at Bourron.} The big, bustling Hotel du Grand Monarque too, with its brisk, obliging landlady, invited a stay. Dr. Johnson, perhaps the wittiest if the completest John Bull who ever lived, was not far wrong when he glorified the inn. "Nothing contrived by man," he said, "has produced so much happiness (relaxation were surely the better word?) as a good tavern." Do we not all, to quote Falstaff, "take our ease at our inn," under its roof throwing off daily cares, assuming a holiday mood?

A survey of the yard awoke another train of reflections. It really seems as if the invention of the motor car were bringing back ante-railway days for the tourist and the travelling world, recalling family coach and post-chaise. The place was crowded with motor cars of all shapes and sizes, some of these were plain, shabby gigs and carts of commercial travellers, others, landaus, waggonettes and victorias of rich folks seeing the world in their own carriage as their ancestors had done generations before; one turn-out suggested royalty or a Rothschild, I was about to say, rather I should name a Chicago store-keeper, since American millionaires are the Haroun-el-Raschids of the twentieth century. This last was a sumptuously fitted up carriage having a seat behind for servants, accommodating eight persons in all. There was also a huge box for luggage. It would be interesting to know how much petroleum, electricity, or alcohol such a vehicle would consume in a day. The manufacture of motor cars must be a very flourishing business in France, next, I should say, to that of bicycles. Of these also there was a goodly supply in the entrance hall of the inn, and the impetus given to travel by both motor car and bicycle was here self-evident. The Hotel du Grand Monarque literally swarmed with tourists, one and all French folks taking their ease at their inn. And our neighbours do not take their pleasure solemnly after the manner of the less impressionable English. Stay-at-home as they have hitherto been, home-loving as they essentially are, the atmosphere of an inn, the aroma of a holiday, fill the Frenchman’s cup of hilarity to overflowing, rendering gayer the gayest.

The invention and rapidly spreading use of the motor car in France shows the French character under its revolutionary aspect, yet no people on the face of the earth are in many respects so conservative. We English folks want a new “Where is it?” for social purposes every year, the majority of our friends and acquaintances changing their houses almost as often as milliners and tailors change the fashion in bonnets and coats. A single address book for France supplies a life-time. The explanation is obvious. For the most part we live in other folks’ houses whilst French folks, the military and official world excepted, occupy their own. Revisit provincial gentry or well-to-do bourgeoisie after an interval of a quarter of a century, you always find them where they were. Interiors show no more change than the pyramids of Egypt. Not so much as sixpence has been laid out upon new carpets or curtains. Could grandsires and granddames return to life like the Sleeping Beauty, they would find that the world had stood still during their slumber.

Melun possesses perhaps one of the few statues that may not be called superfluous, and I confess I had been attracted thither rather by memories of its greatest son than by its picturesque scenery and fine old churches. The first translator of Plutarch into his native tongue was born here, and as we should expect, has been worthily commemorated by his fellow citizens. A most charming statue of Amyot stands in front of the grey, turreted Hôtel de Ville. In sixteenth century doctoral dress, loose flowing robes and square flat cap, sits the great scholiast, as intently absorbed

in his book as St. Jerome in the exquisite canvas of our own National Gallery.

Behind the Hôtel de Ville an opening shows a small, beautifully kept flower garden, just now a blaze of petunias, zinnias, and a second crop of roses. Long I lingered before this noble monument, one only of the many raised to Amyot's memory, of whom Montaigne wrote:—

"Ignoramuses that we are, we should all have been lost, had not this book (the translation of Plutarch) dragged us out of the mire; thanks to it, we now venture to write and to discourse."

And musing on the scholar and his kindred, a favourite line of Browning's came into my mind—

"This man decided not to live but to know."

Indeed the whole of "A Grammarian's Funeral" were here appropriate. Is it not men after this type of whom we feel

"Our low life was the level's and the night's.
He's for the morning"?

To my surprise I found the church of St. Aspais locked. A courteous hair-dresser thereupon told me that all churches in Melun were closed from noon till half past one, but that, as noon had only just struck, if I were brisk I might possibly catch the sacristan. After a pretty hot chase I succeeded in finding a deaf, decrepit, dingy old man who showed me round the church, although evidently very impatient for his mid-day meal. He informed me that this closing of churches at Melun had been necessitated of late years by a series of robberies. From twelve till half past one o'clock no worshippers are present as a rule, hence the thieves' opportunity. Unfortunately marauders do not strip beautiful interiors of the tinselly gew-gaws that so often deface them;

in this respect, however, St. Aspais being comparatively an exception. Alike within and without the proportions are magnificent, and the old stained glass is not marred by modern crudities. I do not here by any means exhaust the sights of this ancient town, from which, by the way, Barbizon is now reached in twenty minutes, an electric tramway plying regularly between Melun and that famous art pilgrimage.

CHAPTER II. — MORET-SUR-LOING.

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The valley of the Loing abounds in captivating spots, Moret-sur-Loing bearing the palm. Over the ancient town, bird-like broods a majestic church, as out-spread wings its wide expanse of roof, while below by translucent depths and foliage richly varied, stretch quarters old and new, the canal intersecting the river at right angles. Lovely as is the river on which all who choose may spend long summer days, the canal to my thinking is lovelier still. Straight as an arrow it saunters between avenues of poplar, the lights and shadows of wood and water, the sunburnt, stalwart barge folk, their huge gondoliers affording endless pictures. Hard as is undoubtedly the life of the rope tower, rude as may appear this amphibious existence, there are cheerful sides to the picture. Many of these floating habitations possess a fireside nook cosy as that of a Parisian concierge, I was never tired of strolling along the canal and watching the barge folk. One day a friend and myself found a large barge laden with coal at the head of the canal, the huge dark framework and its sombre burden lighted up with touches of grace and colour. At the farther end of the vessel was hung a cage of canaries, at the other end was a stand of pot-flowers, geraniums and petunias in full bloom and all the more brilliant by virtue of contrast. A neighbour of the bargeman, a bright, intelligent woman, brown as a gipsy but well-spoken and of tidy appearance, invited us to enter. Imagine the neatest, prettiest little room in the world, parlour, bedchamber and kitchen in one, every object so placed as

to make the most of available space. On a small side-table—and of course under such circumstances each article must be sizable—stood a sewing machine, in the corner was a bedstead with exquisitely clean bedding, in another a tiny cooking stove. Vases of flowers, framed pictures and ornamental quicksilver balls had been found place for, this bargewoman's home aptly illustrating Shakespeare's adage—"Order gives all things view." The brisk, weather-beaten mistress now came up, no little gratified by our interest and our praises.

"You ladies would perhaps like to make a little journey with me?" she asked, "nothing easier, we start to-morrow morning at six o'clock for Nevers, you could take the train back."

Never perhaps in our lives had myself and my companion received an invitation so out of the way, so bewilderingly tempting! And we felt too, with a pang, that never again in all probability should we receive such another. But on this especial day we were not staying at Moret, only running over for the afternoon from our headquarters at Bourron. Acceptance was thus hemmed round with small impediments. And by way of consolation, next morning the glorious weather broke. A downpour recalling our own lakeland would anyhow have kept us ashore.

"Another time then!" had said the kind hostess of the barge at parting. She seemed as sorry as ourselves that the little project she had mooted so cordially could not be carried out.

The Loing canal joins the Seine at Saint Mammes, a few kilomètres lower down, continuing its course of thirty

kilomètres to Bleneau in the Nièvre. Canal life in Eastern France is a characteristic feature, the whole region being intersected by a network of waterways, those *chemins qui marchent*, or walking roads as Michelet picturesquely calls them. And strolling on the banks of the canal here you may be startled by an astonishing sight, you see folks walking, or apparently walking, on water. Standing bolt upright on a tiny raft, carefully maintaining their balance, country people are towed from one side to the other.

These suburban and riverside quarters are full of charm. The soft reds and browns of the houses, the old-world architecture and romantic sites, tempt an artist at every turn. And all in love with a Venetian existence may here find it nearer home.

A few villas let furnished during the summer months have little lawns winding down to the water’s edge and a boat moored alongside. Thus their happy inmates can spend hot, lazy days on the river.

Turning our backs on the canal, by way of ivy-mantled walls, ancient mills and tumbledown houses, we reach the Porte du Pont or Gate of the Bridge. With other towns of the period, Moret was fortified. The girdle of walls is broken and dilapidated, whilst firm as when erected in the fourteenth century still stand the city gates.

Of the two the Porte du Pont is the least imposing and ornamental, but it possesses a horrifying interest. In an upper storey is preserved one of those man-cages said to have been invented for the gratification of Louis XI, that strange tyrant to whose ears were equally acceptable the

shrieks of his tortured victims and the apt repartee of ready-witted subjects.

“How much do you earn a day?” he once asked a little scullion, as incognito he entered the royal kitchen.

“By God’s grace as much as the King,” replied the lad; “I earn my bread and he can do no more.”

So pleased was the King with this saying that it made the speaker’s fortune.

We climb two flights of dark, narrow stone stairs reaching a bare chamber having small apertures, enlargements of the mere slits formerly admitting light and air. The man-cage occupies one corner. It is made of stout oaken ribs strongly bound together with iron, its proportions just allowing the captive to lie down at full length and take a turn of two or three steps. De Commines tells us that the cage invented by Cardinal Balue, and in which he languished for eleven years, was narrower still. An average sized man could not stand therein upright.

The bolts and bars are still in perfect order. Nothing more brings home to us the abomination of the whole thing than to see the official draw these Brobdingnagian bolts and turn these gigantic keys. The locksmith’s art was but too well understood in those days. By whom and for whom this living tomb was made or brought hither local records do not say.

From a stage higher up a magnificent panorama is obtained, Moret, old and new, set round with the green and the blue, its greenery and bright river, far away its noble aqueduct, further still looking eastward the valley of the Loing spread out as a map, the dark ramparts of Fontainebleau forest half framing the scene.

The town itself is a trifle unsavoury and unswept. Municipal authorities seem particularly stingy in the matter of brooms, brushes and water-carts. Such little disagreeables must not prevent the traveller from exploring every corner. But the real, the primary attraction of Moret lies less in its historic monuments and antiquated streets than in its *chemins qui marchent*, its ever reposeful water-ways. Like most French towns Moret is linked with English history. Its fine old church was consecrated by Thomas à-Becket in 1166. Three hundred years later the town was taken by Henry V., and re-taken by Charles VII. a decade after. Not long since five hundred skulls supposed to have been those of English prisoners were unearthed here; as they were all found massed together, the theory is that the entire number had surrendered and been summarily decapitated, methods of warfare that have apparently found advocates in our own day.

Most visitors to Paris will have had pointed out to them the so-called “Maison François Premier” on the Cour La Reine. This richly ornate and graceful specimen of Renaissance architecture formerly stood at Moret, and bit by bit was removed to the capital in 1820. A spiral stone staircase and several fragments of heraldic sculpture were left behind. Badly placed as the house was here, it seems a thousand pities that Moret should have thus been robbed of an architectural gem Paris could well have spared.

My first stay at Moret three years ago lasted several weeks. I had joined friends occupying a pretty little furnished house belonging to the officiating Mayor. We lived after simplest fashion but to our hearts’ content. One of