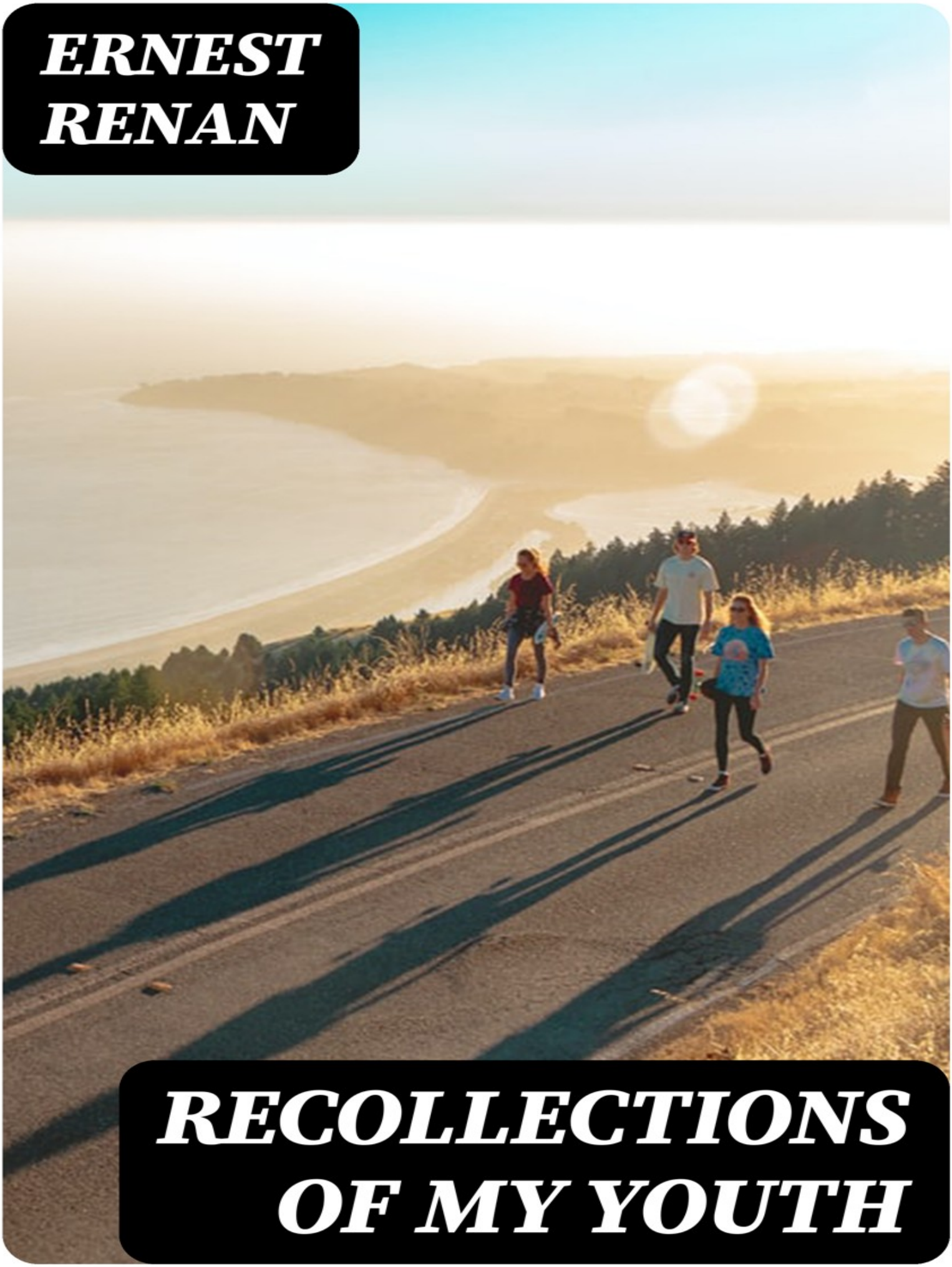
ERNEST RENAN



RECOLLECTIONS OF MY YOUTH

Ernest Renan

Recollections of My Youth

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PREFACE.

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One of the most popular legends in Brittany is that relating to an imaginary town called Is, which is supposed to have been swallowed up by the sea at some unknown time. There are several places along the coast which are pointed out as the site of this imaginary city, and the fishermen have many strange tales to tell of it. According to them, the tips of the spires of the churches may be seen in the hollow of the waves when the sea is rough, while during a calm the music of their bells, ringing out the hymn appropriate to the day, rises above the waters. I often fancy that I have at the bottom of my heart a city of Is with its bells calling to prayer a recalcitrant congregation. At times I halt to listen to these gentle vibrations which seem as if they came from immeasurable depths, like voices from another world. Since

old age began to steal over me, I have loved more especially during the repose which summer brings with it, to gather up these distant echoes of a vanished Atlantis.

This it is which has given birth to the six chapters which make up the present volume. The recollections of my childhood do not pretend to form a complete and continuous narrative. They are merely the images which arose before me and the reflections which suggested themselves to me while I was calling up a past fifty years old, written down in the order in which they came. Goethe selected as the title for his memoirs “Truth and Poetry,” thereby signifying that a man cannot write his own biography in the same way that he would that of any one else. What one says of oneself is always poetical. To fancy that the small details of one’s own life are worth recording is to be guilty of very petty vanity. A man writes such things in order to transmit to others the theory of the universe which he carries within himself. The form of the present work seemed to me a convenient one for expressing certain shades of thought which my previous writings did not convey. I had no desire to furnish information about myself for the future use of those who might wish to write essays or articles about me.

What in history is a recommendation would here have been a drawback; the whole of this small volume is true, but not true in the sense required-for a “Biographical Dictionary.” I have said several things with the intent to raise a smile, and, if such a thing had been compatible with custom, I might have used the expression *cum grano salis* as a marginal note in many cases. I have been obliged to be very careful in what I wrote. Many of the persons to whom I

refer may be still alive; and those who are not accustomed to find themselves in print have a sort of horror of publicity. I have, therefore, altered several proper names. In other cases, by means of a slight transposition of date and place, I have rendered identification impossible. The story of “the Flax-crusher” is absolutely true, with the exception that the name of the manor-house is a fictitious one. With regard to “Good Master Système,” I have been furnished by M. Duportal du Godasmeur with further details which do not confirm certain ideas entertained by my mother as to the mystery in which this aged recluse enveloped his existence. I have, however, made no change in the body of the work, thinking that it would be better to leave M. Duportal to publish the true story, known only to himself, of this enigmatic character.

The chief defect for which I should feel some apology necessary if this book had any pretension to be considered a regular memoir of my life, is that there are many gaps in it. The person who had the greatest influence on my life, my sister Henriette, is scarcely mentioned in it.[1] In September 1862, a year after the death of this invaluable friend, I wrote for the few persons who had known her well, a short notice of her life. Only a hundred copies were printed. My sister was so unassuming, and she was so averse from the stress and stir of the world that I should have fancied I could hear her reproaching me from her grave, if I had made this sketch public property. I have more than once been tempted to include it in this volume, but on second thoughts I have felt that to do so would be an act of profanation. The pamphlet in question was read and appreciated by a few

persons who were kindly disposed towards her and towards myself. It would be wrong of me to expose a memory so sacred in my eyes to the supercilious criticisms which are part and parcel of the right acquired by the purchaser of a book. It seemed to me that in placing the lines referring to her in a book for the trade I should be acting with as much impropriety as if I sent a portrait of her for sale to an auction room. The pamphlet in question will not, therefore, be reprinted until after my death, appended to it, very possibly being several of her letters selected by me beforehand. The natural sequence of this book, which is neither more nor less than the sequence in the various periods of my life, brings about a sort of contrast between the anecdotes of Brittany and those of the Seminary, the latter being the details of a darksome struggle, full of reasonings and hard scholasticism, while the recollections of my earlier years are instinct with the impressions of childlike sensitiveness, of candour, of innocence, and of affection. There is nothing surprising about this contrast. Nearly all of us are double. The more a man develops intellectually, the stronger is his attraction to the opposite pole: that is to say, to the irrational, to the repose of mind in absolute ignorance, to the woman who is merely a woman, the instinctive being who acts solely from the impulse of an obscure conscience. The fierce school of controversy, in which the mind of Europe has been involved since the time of Abélard, induces periods of mental drought and aridity. The brain, parched by reasoning, thirsts for simplicity, like the desert for spring water. When reflection has brought us up to the last limit of doubt, the spontaneous affirmation of the good and of the

beautiful which is to be found in the female conscience delights us and settles the question for us. This is why religion is preserved to the world by woman alone. A beautiful and a virtuous woman is the mirage which peoples with lakes and green avenues our great moral desert. The superiority of modern science consists in the fact that each step forward it takes is a step further in the order of abstractions. We make chemistry from chemistry, algebra from algebra; the very indefatigability with which we fathom nature removes us further from her. This is as it should be, and let no one fear to prosecute his researches, for out of this merciless dissection comes life. But we need not be surprised at the feverish heat which, after these orgies of dialectics, can only be calmed by the kisses of the artless creature in whom nature lives and smiles. Woman restores us to communication with the eternal spring in which God reflects Himself. The candour of a child, unconscious of its own beauty and seeing God clear as the daylight, is the great revelation of the ideal, just as the unconscious coquetry of the flower is a proof that Nature adorns herself for a husband.

One should never write except upon that which one loves. Oblivion and silence are the proper punishments to be inflicted upon all that we meet with in the way of what is ungainly or vulgar in the course of our journey through life. Referring to a past which is dear to me, I have spoken of it with kindly sympathy; but I should be sorry to create any misapprehension, and to be taken for an uncompromising reactionist. I love the past, but I envy the future. It would have been very pleasant to have lived upon this planet at as

late a period as possible. Descartes would be delighted if he could read some trivial work on natural philosophy and cosmography written in the present day. The fourth form school boy of our age is acquainted with truths to know which Archimedes would have laid down his life. What would we not give to be able to get a glimpse of some book which will be used as a school-primer a hundred years hence?

We must not, because of our personal tastes, our prejudices perhaps, set ourselves to oppose the action of our time. This action goes on without regard to us, and probably it is right. The world is moving in the direction of what I may call a kind of Americanism, which shocks our refined ideas, but which, when once the crisis of the present hour is over, may very possibly not be more inimical than the ancient *régime* to the only thing which is of any real importance; viz. the emancipation and progress of the human mind. A society in which personal distinction is of little account, in which talent and wit are not marketable commodities, in which exalted functions do not ennoble, in which politics are left to men devoid of standing or ability, in which the recompenses of life are accorded by preference to intrigue, to vulgarity, to the charlatans who cultivate the art of puffing, and to the smart people who just keep without the clutches of the law, would never suit us. We have been accustomed to a more protective system, and to the government patronizing what is noble and worthy. But we have not secured this patronage for nothing. Richelieu and Louis XIV. looked upon it as their duty to provide pensions for men of merit all the world over; how much better it would have been, if the spirit of the time had admitted of it,

that they should have left the men of merit to themselves! The period of the Restoration has the credit of being a liberal one; yet we should certainly not like to live now under a *régime* which warped such a genius as Cuvier, stifled with paltry compromises the keen mind of M. Cousin, and retarded the growth of criticism by half a century. The concessions which had to be made to the court, to society, and to the clergy, were far worse than the petty annoyances which a democracy can inflict upon us.

The eighteen years of the monarchy of July were in reality a period of liberty, but the official direction given to things of the mind was often superficial and no better than would be expected of the average shopkeeper. With regard to the second empire, if the ten last years of its duration in some measure repaired the mischief done in the first eight, it must never be forgotten how strong this government was when it was a question of crushing the intelligence, and how feeble when it came to raising it up. The present hour is a gloomy one, and the immediate outlook is not cheerful. Our unfortunate country is ever threatened with heart disease, and all Europe is a prey to some deep-rooted malady. But by way of consolation, let us reflect upon what we have suffered. The evil to come must be grevious indeed if we cannot say:
“O passi graviora, dabit deus his quoque finem.”

The one object in life is the development of the mind, and the first condition for the development of the mind is that it should have liberty. The worst social state, from this point of view, is the theocratic state, like Islamism or the ancient Pontifical state, in which dogma reigns supreme.

Nations with an exclusive state religion, like Spain, are not much better off. Nations in which a religion of the majority is recognized are also exposed to serious drawbacks. In behalf of the real or assumed beliefs of the greatest number, the state considers itself bound to impose upon thought terms which it cannot accept. The belief or the opinion of the one side should not be a fetter upon the other side. As long as the masses were believers, that is to say, as long as the same sentiments were almost universally professed by a people, freedom of research and discussion was impossible. A colossal weight of stupidity pressed down upon the human mind. The terrible catastrophe of the middle ages, that break of a thousand years in the history of civilization, is due less to the barbarians than to the triumph of the dogmatic spirit among the masses.

This is a state of things which is coming to an end in our time, and we cannot be surprised if some disturbance ensues. There are no longer masses which believe; a great number of the people decline to recognise the supernatural, and the day is not far distant, when beliefs of this kind will die out altogether in the masses, just as the belief in familiar spirits and ghosts have disappeared. Even if, as is probable, we are to have a temporary Catholic reaction, the people will not revert to the Church. Religion has become for once and all a matter of personal taste. Now beliefs are only dangerous when they represent something like unanimity, or an unquestionable majority. When they are merely individual, there is not a word to be said against them, and it is our duty to treat them with the respect which they do

not always exhibit for their adversaries, when they feel that they have force at their back.

There can be no denying that it will take time for the liberty, which is the aim and object of human society, to take root in France as it has in America. French democracy has several essential principles to acquire, before it can become a liberal *régime*. It will be above all things necessary that we should have laws as to associations, charitable foundations, and the right of legacy, analogous to those which are in force in England and America. Supposing this progress to be effected (if it is Utopian to count upon it in France, it is not so for the rest of Europe, in which the aspirations for English liberty become every day more intense), we should really not have much cause to look regretfully upon the favours conferred by the ancient *régime* upon things of the mind. I quite think that if democratic ideas were to secure a definitive triumph, science and scientific teaching would soon find the modest subsidies now accorded them cut off. This is an eventuality which would have to be accepted as philosophically as may be. The free foundations would take the place of the state institutes, the slight drawbacks being more than compensated for by the advantage of having no longer to make to the supposed prejudices of the majority concessions which the state exacted in return for its pittance. The waste of power in state institutes is enormous. It may safely be said that not 50 per cent of a credit voted in favour of science, art, or literature, is expended to any effect. Private foundations would not be exposed to nearly so much waste. It is true that spurious science would, in

these conditions, flourish side by side with real science, enjoying the same privileges, and that there would be no official criterion, as there still is to a certain extent now, to distinguish the one from the other. But this criterion becomes every day less reliable. Reason has to submit to the indignity of taking second place behind those who have a loud voice, and who speak with a tone of command. The plaudits and favour of the public will, for a long time to come, be at the service of what is false. But the true has great power, when it is free; the true endures; the false is ever changing and decays. Thus it is that the true, though only understood by a select few, always rises to the surface, and in the end prevails.

In short, it is very possible that the American-like social condition towards which we are advancing, independently of any particular form of government, will not be more intolerable for persons of intelligence than the better guaranteed social conditions which we have already been subject to. In such a world as this will be, it will be no difficult matter to create very quiet and snug retreats for oneself. “The era of mediocrity in all things is about to begin,” remarked a short time ago that distinguished thinker, M. Arniel of Geneva. “Equality begets uniformity, and it is by the sacrifice of the excellent, the remarkable, the extraordinary that we extirpate what is bad. The whole becomes less coarse; but the whole becomes more vulgar.” We may at least hope that vulgarity will not yet a while persecute freedom of mind. Descartes, living in the brilliant seventeenth century, was nowhere so well off as at Amsterdam, because, as “every one was engaged in trade

there," no one paid any heed to him. It may be that general vulgarity will one day be the condition of happiness, for the worst American vulgarity would not send Giordano Bruno to the stake or persecute Galileo. We have no right to be very fastidious. In the past we were never more than tolerated. This tolerance, if nothing more, we are assured of in the future. A narrow-minded, democratic *régime* is often, as we know, very troublesome. But for all that men of intelligence find that they can live in America, as long as they are not too exacting. *Noli me tangere is* the most one can ask for from democracy. We shall pass through several alternatives of anarchy and despotism before we find repose in this happy medium. But liberty is like truth; scarcely any one loves it on its own account, and yet, owing to the impossibility of extremes, one always comes back to it.

We may as well, therefore, allow the destinies of this planet to work themselves out without undue concern. We should gain nothing by exclaiming against them, and a display of temper would be very much out of place. It is by no means certain that the earth is not falling short of its destiny, as has probably happened to countless worlds; it is even possible that our age may one day be regarded as the culminating point since which humanity has been steadily deteriorating; but the universe does not know the meaning of the word discouragement; it will commence anew the work which has come to naught; each fresh check leaves it young, alert, and full of illusions. Be of good cheer, Nature! Pursue, like the deaf and blind star-fish which vegetates in the bed of the ocean, thy obscure task of life; persevere; mend for the millionth time the broken meshes of the net;

repair the boring-machine which sinks to the last limits of the attainable the well from which living water will spring up. Sight and sight again the aim which thou hast failed to hit throughout the ages; try to struggle through the scarcely perceptible opening which leads to another firmament. Thou hast the infinity of time and space to try the experiment. He who can commit blunders with impunity is always certain to succeed.

Happy they who shall have had a part in this great final triumph which will be the complete advent of God! A Paradise lost is always, for him who wills it so, a Paradise regained. Often as Adam must have mourned the loss of Eden, I fancy that if he lived, as we are told, 930 years after his fall, he must often have exclaimed: *Felix culpa!* Truth is, whatever may be said to the contrary, superior to all fictions. One ought never to regret seeing clearer into the depths. By endeavouring to increase the treasure of the truths which form the paid-up capital of humanity, we shall be carrying on the work of our pious ancestors, who loved the good and the true as it was understood in their time. The most fatal error is to believe that one serves one’s country by calumniating those who founded it. All ages of a nation are leaves of the self-same book. The true men of progress are those who profess as their starting-point a profound respect for the past. All that we do, all that we are, is the outcome of ages of labour. For my own part, I never feel my liberal faith more firmly rooted in me than when I ponder over the miracles of the ancient creed, nor more ardent for the work of the future than when I have been listening for hours to the bells of the city of Is.

THE FLAX-CRUSHER.

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PART I.

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Tréguier, my native place, has grown into a town out of an ancient monastery founded at the close of the fifth century by St. Tudwal (or Tual), one of the religious leaders of those great migratory movements which introduced into the Armorican peninsula the name, the race, and the religious institutions of the island of Britain. The predominating characteristic of early British Christianity was its monastic tendency, and there were no bishops, at all events among the immigrants, whose first step, after landing in Brittany, the north coast of which must at that time have been very sparsely inhabited, was to build large monasteries, the abbots of which had the cure of souls. A circle of from three to five miles in circumference, called the *minihi*, was drawn around each monastery, and the territory within it was invested with special privileges.

The monasteries were called in the Breton dialect *pabu* after the monks (*papae*), and in this way the monastery of Tréguier was known as *Pabu Tual*.

It was the religious centre of all that part of the peninsula which stretches northward. Monasteries of a similar kind at St. Pol de Léon, St. Brieuc, St. Malo, and St. Samson, near Dol, held a like position upon the coast. They possessed, if one may so speak, their diocese, for in these regions separated from the rest of Christianity nothing was known of the power of Rome and of the religious institutions which prevailed in the Latin world, or even in the Gallo-Roman towns of Rennes and Nantes, hard by.

When Noménoé, in the ninth century, reduced to something like a regular organisation this half savage society of emigrants and created the Duchy of Brittany by annexing to the territory in which the Breton tongue was spoken, the Marches of Brittany, established by the Carlovingians to hold in respect the forayers of the west, he found it advisable to assimilate its religious organisation to that of the rest of the world. He determined, therefore, that there should be bishops on the northern coast, as there were at Rennes, Nantes, and Vannes, and he accordingly converted into bishoprics the monasteries of St. Pol de Léon, Tréguier, St. Brieuc, St. Malo, and Dol. He would have liked to have had an archbishop as well and so form a separate ecclesiastical province, but, despite the well-intentioned devices employed to prove that St. Samson had been a metropolitan prelate, the grades of the Church universal were already apportioned, and the new bishoprics were perforce compelled to attach themselves to the nearest Gallo-Roman province at Tours.

The meaning of these obscure beginnings gradually faded away, and from the name of *Pabu Tual, Papa Tual*, found, as was reported, upon some old stained-glass windows, it was inferred that St. Tudwal had been Pope. The explanation seemed a very simple one, for St. Tudwal, it was well known, had been to Rome, and he was so holy a man that what could be more natural than that the cardinals, when they became acquainted with him, should have selected him for the vacant See. Such things were always happening, and the godly persons of Tréguier were very proud of the pontifical reign of their patron saint. The more

reasonable ecclesiastics, however, admitted that it was no easy matter to discover among the list, of popes the pontiff who previous to his election was known as Tudwal.

In course of time a small town grew up around the bishop’s palace, but the lay town, dependent entirely upon the Church, increased very slowly. The port failed to acquire any importance, and no wealthy trading class came into existence. A very fine cathedral was built towards the close of the thirteenth century, and from the beginning of the seventeenth the monasteries became so numerous that they formed whole streets to themselves. The bishop’s palace, a handsome building of the seventeenth century, and a few canons’ residences were the only houses inhabited by people of civilized habits. In the lower part of the town, at the end of the High Street, which was flanked by several turreted buildings, were a few inns for the accommodation of the sailors.

It was only just before the Revolution that a petty nobility, recruited for the most part from the country around, sprang up under the shadow of the bishop’s palace. Brittany contained two distinct orders of nobility. The first derived its titles from the King of France and displayed in a very marked degree the defects and the qualities which characterised the French nobility. The other was of Celtic origin and thoroughly Breton. This latter nobility comprised, from the period of the invasion, the chief men of the parish, the leaders of the people, of the same race as them, possessing by inheritance the right of marching at their head and representing them. No one was more deserving of respect than this country nobleman when he remained a

peasant, innocent of all intrigues or of any effort to grow rich: but when he came to reside in town he lost nearly all his good qualities and contributed but little to the moral and intellectual progress of the country.

The Revolution seemed for this agglomeration of priests and monks neither more nor less than a death warrant. The last of the bishops of Tréguier left one evening by a back door leading into the wood behind his palace and fled to England. The concordat abolished the bishopric, and the unfortunate town was not even given a sub-prefect, Lannion and Guingamp, which are larger and busier, being selected in preference. But large buildings, fitted up so as to fulfil only one object, nearly always lead to the reconstitution of the object to which they were destined. We may say morally what is not true physically: when the hollows of a shell are very deep, these hollows have the power of re-forming the animal moulded in them. The vast monastic edifices of Tréguier were once more peopled, and the former seminary served for the establishment of an ecclesiastical college, very highly esteemed throughout the province. Tréguier again became in a few years' time what St. Tudwal had made it thirteen centuries before, a town of priests, cut off from all trade and industry, a vast monastery within whose walls no sounds from the outer world ever penetrated, where ordinary human pursuits were looked upon as vanity and vexation of spirit, while those things which laymen treated as chimerical were regarded as the only realities.

It was amid associations like these that I passed my childhood, and it gave a bent to my character which has never been removed. The cathedral, a masterpiece of airy

lightness, a hopeless effort to realise in granite an impossible ideal, first of all warped my judgment. The long hours which I spent there are responsible for my utter lack of practical knowledge. That architectural paradox made me a man of chimeras, a disciple of St. Tudwal, St. Iltud, and St. Cadoc, in an age when their teaching is no longer of any practical use. When I went to the more secular town of Guingamp, where I had some relatives of the middle class, I felt very ill at ease, and the only pleasant companion I had there was an aged servant to whom I used to read fairy tales. I longed to be back in the sombre old place, overshadowed by its cathedral, but a living protest, so to speak, against all that is mean and commonplace. I felt myself again when I got back to the lofty steeple, the pointed nave, and the cloisters with their fifteenth century tombs, being always at my ease when in the company of the dead, by the side of the cavaliers and proud dames, sleeping peacefully with their hound at their feet, and a massive stone torch in their grasp. The outskirts of the town had the same religious and idealistic aspect, and were enveloped in an atmosphere of mythology as dense as Benares or Juggernaut. The church of St. Michael, from which the open sea could be discerned, had been destroyed by lightning and was the scene of many prodigies. Upon Maunday Thursday the children of Tréguier were taken there to see the bells go off to Rome. We were blindfolded, and much we then enjoyed seeing all the bells in the peal, beginning with the largest and ending with the smallest, arrayed in the embroidered lace robes which they had been

dressed in upon their baptismal day, cleaving the air on their way to Rome for the Pope’s benediction.

Upon the opposite side of the river there was the beautiful valley of the Tromeur, watered by a sacred fountain which Christianity had hallowed by connecting it with the worship of the Virgin. The chapel was burnt down in 1828, but it was at once rebuilt, and the statue of the Virgin was replaced by a much more handsome one. That fidelity to the traditions of the past which is the chief trait in the Breton character was very strikingly illustrated in this connection, for the new statue, which was radiant with white and gold over the high altar, received but few devotions, the prayers of the faithful being said to the black and calcined trunk of the old statue which was relegated to a corner of the chapel. The Bretons would have thought that to pay their devotions to the new Virgin was tantamount to turning their backs upon their predecessor.

St. Yves was the object of even deeper popular devotion, the patron saint of the lawyers having been born in the *minihi* of Tréguier, where the church dedicated to him is held in great veneration. This champion of the poor, the widows and the orphans, is looked upon as the grand justiciary and avenger of wrong. Those who have been badly used have only to repair to the solemn little chapel of *Saint Yves de la Vérité*, and to repeat the words: “Thou wert just in thy lifetime, prove that thou art so still,” to ensure that their oppressor will die within the year. He becomes the protector of all those who are left friendless, and at my father’s death my mother took me to his chapel and placed me under his tutelary care. I cannot say that the good St. Yves managed

our affairs very successfully, or gave me a very clear understanding of my worldly interests, but I nevertheless have much to thank him for, as he endowed me with a spirit of content which passeth riches, and a native good humour which has never left me.

The month of May, during which the festival of St. Yves fell, was one long round of processions to the *minihi*, and as the different parishes, preceded by their processional crucifixes, met in the roads, the crucifixes were pressed one against the other in token of friendship. Upon the eve of the festival the people assembled in the church, and on the stroke of midnight the saint stretched out his arms to bless the kneeling congregation. But if among them all there was one doubting soul who raised his eyes to see if the miracle really did take place, the saint, taking just offence at such a suspicion did not move, and by the misconduct of this incredulous person, no benediction was given.

The clergy of the place, disinterested and honest to the core, contrived to steer a middle course between not doing anything to weaken these ideas and not compromising themselves. These worthy men were my first spiritual guides, and I have them to thank for whatever may be good in me. Their every word was my law, and I had so much respect for them that I never thought to doubt anything they told me until I was sixteen years of age, when I came to Paris. Since that time I have studied under many teachers far more brilliant and learned, but none have inspired such feelings of veneration, and this has often led to differences of opinion between some of my friends and myself. It has been my good fortune to know what absolute virtue is. I

know what faith is, and though I have since discovered how deep a fund of irony there is in the most sacred of our illusions, yet the experience derived from the days of old is very precious to me. I feel that in reality my existence is still governed by a faith which I no longer possess, for one of the peculiarities of faith is that its action does not cease with its disappearance. Grace survives by mere force of habit the living sensation of it which we have felt. In a mechanical kind of way we go on doing what we had before been doing in spirit and in truth. After Orpheus, when he had lost his ideal, was torn to pieces by the Thracian women, his lyre still repeated Eurydice's name.

The point to which the priests attached the highest importance was moral conduct, and their own spotless lives entitled them to be severe in this respect, while their sermons made such an impression upon me that during the whole of my youth I never once forgot their injunctions. These sermons were so awe-inspiring, and many of the remarks which they contained are so engraved upon my memory, that I cannot even now recall them without a sort of tremor. For instance, the preacher once referred to the case of Jonathan, who died for having eaten a little honey. "*Gustans gustavi paululum mellis, et ecce morior*." I lost myself in wonderment as to what this small quantity of honey could have been which was so fatal in its effects. The preacher said nothing to explain this, but heightened the effect of his mysterious allusion with the words—pronounced in a very hollow and lugubrious tone—*tetigisse periisse*. At other times the text would be the passage from Jeremiah, "*Mors ascendit per fenestras*" This puzzled me still

more, for what could be this death which came up through the windows, these butterfly wings which the lightest touch polluted? The preacher pronounced the words with knitted brow and uplifted eyes. But what perplexed me most of all was a passage in the life of some saintly person of the seventeenth century who compared women to firearms which wound from afar. This was quite beyond me, and I made all manner of guesses as to how a woman could resemble a pistol. It seemed so inconsistent to be told in one breath that a woman wounds from afar, and in another that to touch her is perdition. All this was so incomprehensible that I immersed myself in study, and so contrived to clear my brain of it.

Coming from persons in whom I felt unbounded confidence, these absurdities carried conviction to my very soul, and even now, after fifty years' hard experience of the world[2] the impression has not quite worn off. The comparison between women and firearms made me very cautious, and not until age began to creep over me did I see that this also was vanity, and that the Preacher was right when he said: "Go thy way, eat thy bread joyfully ... with the woman whom thou lovest." My ideas upon this head outlived my ideas upon religion, and this is why I have enjoyed immunity from the opprobrium which I should not unreasonably have been subjected to if it could have been said that I left the seminary for other reasons than those derived from philology. The commonplace interrogation, "Where is the woman?" in which laymen invariably look for an explanation of all such cases cannot but seem a paltry attempt at humour to those who see things as they really

are. My early days were passed in this high school of faith and of respect. The liberty in which so many giddy youths find themselves suddenly landed was in my case acquired very gradually; and I did not attain the degree of emancipation which so many Parisians reach without any effort of their own, until I had gone through the German exegesis. It took me six years of meditation and hard study to discover that my teachers were not infallible. What caused me more grief than anything else when I entered upon this new path was the thought of distressing my revered masters; but I am absolutely certain that I was right, and that the sorrow which they felt was the consequence of their narrow views as to the economy of the universe.

PART II.

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The education which these worthy priests gave me was not a very literary one. We turned out a good deal of Latin verse, but they would not recognize any French poetry later than the *Religion* of Racine the younger. The name of Lamartine was pronounced only with a sneer, and the existence of M. Hugo was not so much as known. To compose French verse was regarded as a very dangerous habit, and would have been sufficient to get a pupil expelled. I attribute partly to this my inability to express thoughts in rhyme, and this inability has often caused me great regret, for I have frequently felt a sort of inspiration to do so, but have invariably been checked by the association of ideas which has led me to regard versification as a defect. Our studies of history and of the natural sciences were not carried far, but, on the other hand, we went deep into mathematics, to which I applied myself with the utmost zest, these abstract combinations exercising a wonderful fascination over me. Our professor, the good Abbé Duchesne, was particularly attentive in his lessons to me and to my close friend and fellow-student Guyomar, who displayed a great aptitude for this branch of study. We always returned together from the college. Our shortest cut was by the square, and we were too conscientious to deviate from the most direct route; but when we had had to work out some problem more intricate than usual our discussion of it lasted far beyond class-time, and on those occasions we made our way home by the hospital. This road

took us past several large doors which were always shut, and upon which we worked out our calculations and drew our figures in chalk. Traces of them are perhaps visible there still, for these were the doors of large monasteries, where nothing ever changes.

The hospital-general, so called because it was the trysting-place alike of disease, old age, and poverty, was a very large structure, standing, like all old buildings, upon a good deal of ground, and having very little accommodation. Just in front of the entrance there was a small screen, where the inmates who were either well or recovering from illness used to meet when the weather was fine, for the hospital contained not only the sick, but the paupers, and even persons who paid a small sum for board and lodging. At the first glimpse of sunshine they all came to sit out beneath the shade of the screen upon old cane chairs, and it was the most animated place in the town. Guyomar and myself always exchanged the time of day with these good people as we passed, and we were greeted with no little respect, for though young we were regarded as already clerks of the Church. This seemed quite natural, but there was one thing which excited our astonishment, though we were too inexperienced to know much of the world.

Among the paupers in the hospital was a person whom we never passed without surprise. This was an old maid of about five-and-forty, who always wore over her head a hood of the most singular shape; as a rule she was almost motionless, with a sombre and lost expression of countenance, and with her eyes glazed and hard-set. When we went by her countenance became animated, and she

cast strange looks at us, sometimes tender and melancholy, sometimes hard and almost ferocious. If we looked back at her she seemed to be very much put out. We could not understand all this, but it had the effect of checking our conversation and any inclination to merriment. We were not exactly afraid of her, for though she was supposed to be out of her mind, the insane were not treated with the cruelty which has since been imported into the conduct of asylums. So far from being sequestered they were allowed to wander about all day long. There is as a rule a good deal of insanity at Tréguier, for, like all dreamy races, which exhaust their mental energies in pursuit of the ideal, the Bretons of this district only too readily allow themselves to sink, when they are not supported by a powerful will, into a condition half way between intoxication and folly, and in many cases brought about by the unsatisfied aspirations of the heart. These harmless lunatics, whose insanity differed very much in degree, were looked upon as part and parcel of the town, and people spoke about “our lunatics” just as at Venice people say “*nostre carampane*.” One was constantly meeting them, and they passed the time of day with us and made some joke, at which, sickly as it was, we could not help smiling. They were treated with kindness, and they often did a service in their turn. I shall never forget a poor fellow called Brian, who believed that he was a priest, and who passed part of the day in church, going through the ceremonies of mass. There was a nasal drone to be heard in the cathedral every afternoon, and this was Brian reciting prayers which were doubtless not less acceptable than those of other people. The cathedral officials had the good