

***MATILDA
BETHAM-
EDWARDS***



***THE ROOF
OF FRANCE; OR,
THE CAUSSES
OF THE LOZÈRE***

Matilda Betham-Edwards

The Roof of France; Or, the Causses of the Lozère

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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PART I.

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MY FIRST JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF THE CAUSSES.

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FROM LE PUY TO MENDE.

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The traveller in France will not unseldom liken his fortunes to those of Saul the son of Kish, who, setting forth in search of his father's asses, found a kingdom; or, to use a homelier parable, will compare his case to that of the donkey between two equally-tempting bundles of hay.

Such, at least, was my luck when starting for my annual French tour in 1887. I had made up my mind to see something of the Lozère and the Cantal, settling down in two charming spots respectively situated in these departments, when, fortunately for myself, I was tempted elsewhere. Instead of rusticating for a few weeks in the country nooks alluded to, there observing leisurely the condition of the peasants and of agriculture generally, I took a contrary direction, thus ultimately becoming

acquainted with one of the most romantic and least-known regions of Central France.

'Since you intend to visit the Lozère' wrote a correspondent to me, 'why not explore the Causses? The scenery is, I believe, very remarkable, and the geology deeply interesting.'

The Causses? the Causses? I had travelled east, west, north, south on French soil for upwards of thirteen years, yet the very name was new to me. Having once heard of the Causses, it was, of course, quite certain that I should hear of them twice.

Meeting by chance a fellow-countryman at Dijon, as enthusiastic a lover of French scenery as myself, and comparing our experiences, he suddenly asked:

'But the Causses? Have you seen the wonderful Causses of the Lozère?'

It was a curious and highly-characteristic fact that both my informants should be English, thus bearing out the assertion of an old French writer, author of the first real tourist's guide for his own country, that we are 'le peuple le plus curieux de l'Europe'; he adds, 'le plus observateur,' perhaps a compliment rather paid to Arthur Young than to the English as a nation. The work I refer to ('Itinéraire descriptif de la France,' by Vaysse de Villiers, 1816) was evidently written under the inspiration of our great agriculturist.

From French friends and acquaintances I could learn absolutely nothing of the Causses. The region was a *terra incognita* to one and all. I might every whit as well have asked my way to Swift's Liliputia or Cloud Cuckoo Town, and the Island of Cheese of his precursor, the witty Lucian.

People *had* heard of l'Ecosse; oh yes! but why an Englishwoman should seek information about Scotland in the heart of France, they could not quite make out.

There was nothing for me to do but trust to happy chance and the guide-book, and set out; and as a stray swallow is the precursor of myriads, so no sooner had I got an inkling of one marvel than I was destined to hear of half a dozen.

Wonderful the scenery of the Causses, still more wonderful the cañon or gorge of the Tarn and the dolomite city of Montpellier-le-Vieux, so I now learned.

There were difficulties in the way of seeing all these. I had been unexpectedly detained at Dijon. It was the second week in September, and the Roof of France—in other words, the department of the Lozère—is oftentimes covered with snow before that month is out. My travelling companion was a young French lady, permitted by her parents to travel with me, and for whose health, comfort and safety I felt responsible. It seemed doubtful whether this year at least I should be able to realize my new-formed project, and penetrate into the solitudes of the Causses. However, I determined to try.

My journey begins at the ancient town of Le Puy, former capital of the Vivarais, chef-lieu of the department of the Haute Loire, and, it is unnecessary to say, one of the most curious towns in the world. We had journeyed thither by way of St. Étienne, and were bound for Mende, the little mountain-girt bishopric and capital of the Lozère.

We had to be up betimes, as our train for Langogne, corresponding with the Mende diligence, started at five in the morning. It might have been midnight when we quitted

the Hôtel Gamier—would that I could say a single word in its favour!—so blue black the frosty heavens, so brilliant the stars, the keen September air biting sharply.

More fortunate than a friend whose pocket was lately picked of twenty-five pounds at the railway-station here, I waited whilst the terribly slow business of ticket-taking and registration was got over, thankful enough that I had breakfasted overnight—that is to say, had made tea at three o'clock in the morning. Not a cup of milk, not a crust of bread, would that inhospitable inn offer its over-charged guests before setting out. As I have nothing but praise to bestow upon the hostelries of the Lozère and the Cantal, I must give vent to a well-deserved malediction here.

By slow degrees the perfect day dawned, a glorious sun rising in a cloudless sky. We now discovered that our travelling companions were two sisters—the one, an admirable specimen of the belle villageoise, in her charming lace coiffe; the other, equally good-looking, but as much vulgarized by her Parisian costume as Lamartine's sea-heroine, Graziella, when she had exchanged her contadine's dress for modern millinery. These pretty and becoming head-dresses of Auvergne, made often of the richest lace and ribbon, may now be described as survivals, the bonnet, as well as the chimney-pot hat, making the round of the civilized world.

From Le Puy to Langogne, viâ Langeac, we traversed a region familiar to many a tourist as he has journeyed from Clermont-Ferrand to Nîmes. The shifting scenes of gorge and ravine are truly of Alpine grandeur, whilst the railway is one of those triumphs of engineering skill to which Alpine travellers are also accustomed.

One remark only I make by the way. The sarcasms levelled against the system of peasant proprietorship, that would be cruel were they not silly, are here silenced for once and for all. Nothing can be more self-evident than the beneficial result of small holdings to the State, wholly setting aside the superiority of the peasant-owner's position, moral, social and material, to that of the English farm labourer. Even a prejudiced observer must surely be touched by the indomitable perseverance, the passionate love of the soil, evinced by the small cultivators in the valley of the Allier, and, indeed, witnessed throughout every stage of our day's journey.

Wherever exists a patch of cultivable soil, we see crops of rye, buckwheat and potatoes, some of these plots being only a few yards square, and to all appearances inaccessible. In many places earth has been carried by the basketful to narrow, lofty ledges of rock, an astounding instance of toil, hopefulness and patience. No matter the barrenness of the spot, no matter its isolation or the difficulty of approach, wherever root or seed will grow, there the French peasant owner plies hoe and spade, and gradually causes the wilderness to blossom as the rose.

So true it is, as Arthur Young wrote a hundred years ago, 'Give a man secure possession of a black rock, and he will turn it into a garden.' A considerable proportion of the land hereabouts has been quite recently laid under cultivation, and on every side we see bits of waste being ploughed up.

At Langeac, a little junction between Le Puy and St. Georges d'Aurac, we had a halt of over two hours, easily spent amid charming scenery. The air is sweet and fresh, everyone is busy in the fields, and as we saunter here and there, people look up from their work to greet us with a smile of contentment and bonhomie. It is a scene of peace

and homely prosperity. A short railway jaunt to Langogne; a bustling breakfast at the little restaurant; then begins the final packing of the diligence. The crazy old berline looks as full as it can be before our four boxes and numerous small packages are taken from the railway van, and the group of bag and basket laden folks standing round, priests, nuns, and commis-voyageurs, evidently waiting for a place. Surely room can never be found for all these! Just then a French tourist came up and accosted us, smiling ruefully.

'Ah!' he said, shaking his head with affected malice, 'just like you English—you have secured the best places.'

True enough, the English when they travel are as the wise virgins, and secure the best places. The French are as the foolish virgins, and trust oftentimes to chance.

I had, of course, telegraphed from Le Puy the day before for two seats in the coupé. Our interlocutor, an army surgeon, making a holiday trip with his wife, was obliged to relinquish the third good place to madame, placing himself beside the driver on the banquette. The little disappointment over, we became the best of friends, a highly desirable contingency in such terribly close quarters.

Once securely packed, we stood no more chance of being unpacked than potted anchovies on their way from Nantes to Southampton. There we were, and there perforce we must remain till we reached our destination. To move a finger, to stir an inch, was out of the question. Nothing short of physical torture for the space of six hours seemed in store for us—for the three occupants of that narrow coupé, like fashionable ladies of old,

'Close mewed in their sedans for fear of air.'

We could at least enjoy the selfish satisfaction of faring better than our neighbours. The unlucky occupants inside were as short of elbow-room as ourselves, and had not the enjoyment of the view; the passengers of the banquette were literally perched on a knife-board, whilst one old man, a cheery old fellow, supernumerary of the service, hung mid-air on one side of the vehicle, literally sitting on nothing. Like the Indian jugglers and the Light Princess of George Macdonald's wonderful fairy-tale, he had found means to set at nought the law of gravity.

There he hung, and as the sturdy horses set off at a fast trot, and we were whirled round one sharp corner after another, I at first expected to see him lose balance and fall with terrible risk to life and limb. But we soon discovered that he had mastered the accomplishment of sitting on air, and was as safe on his invisible seat as we on our hard benches; old as he was, he seemed to glory in the exploit—exploit, it must be allowed, of the first water.

Once fairly off, our own bodily discomforts were entirely forgotten, so splendid the sunshine, so exhilarating the air, so romantic the scenery. The forty miles' drive passed like a dream.

Our companion, like her husband, was full of health, spirits and information. She could see nothing of the military surgeon but a pair of neat, well-polished boots, as he sat aloft beside the driver; every now and then she craned forward her neck with wifely solicitude and interrogated the boots:

'Well, love, how do you get on?'

And the boots would make affectionate reply:

'As well as possible, my angel—and you?'

'We couldn't be better off,' answered the enthusiastic little lady cheerily. Nor in one sense could we; earth could hardly show fairer or more striking scenes than these highlands of the Lozère.

The first part of our way lay amid wild mountain passes, deep ravines, dusky with pine and fir, lofty granite peaks shining like blocks of diamond against an amethyst heaven. Alternating with such scenes of savage magnificence are idyllic pictures, verdant dells and glades, rivers bordered by alder-trees wending even course through emerald pastures, or making cascade after cascade over a rocky bed. On little lawny spaces about the sharp spurs of the Alps, we see cattle browsing, high above, as if in cloudland. Excepting an occasional cantonnier at work by the roadside, or a peasant woman minding her cows, the region is utterly deserted. Tiny hamlets lie half hidden in the folds of the hills or skirting the edges of the lower mountain slopes; none border the way.

During the long winter these fine roads, winding between steep precipices and abrupt rocks, are abandoned on account of the snow. The diligence ceases to run, and letters and newspapers are distributed occasionally by experienced horsemen familiar with the country and able to trust to short cuts.

What the icy blasts of January are like on these stupendous heights we can well conceive. At one point of our journey we reach an altitude above the sea equal to that of the Puy de Dôme. This is the lofty plateau of granitic formation called Le Palais du Roi, a portion of the Margéride chain, and as the old writer before mentioned writes, 'la partie la plus neigeuse de la route'—the snowiest bit of the road. On this superb September day, although winter might be at hand, the temperature was of an English

July. As we travelled on, amid scenes of truly Alpine grandeur and loveliness, the thought arose to my mind, how little even the much-travelled English dream of the wealth of scenery in France! Our cumbersome old diligence carried only French passengers. Nowhere else in Europe does the English tourist find himself more isolated from the common-place of travel.

Many of the landscapes now passed recall scenes in Algeria, especially as we get within sight of the purple, porphyritic chain of the Lozère. We gaze on undulations of delicate violet and gray, as in Kabylia, whilst deep down below lie oases of valley and pasture, the dazzling golden green contrasting, with the aerial hues of distant mountain and cloud.

Nothing under heaven could be more beautiful than the shifting lights and shadows on the remoter hills, or the crimson and rosy flush of sunset on the nearer rocks; at our feet we see well-watered dales and luxuriant meadows, whilst on the higher ground, here as in the valley of the Allier, we have proofs of the astounding, the unimaginable patience and laboriousness of peasant owners.

In many places rings of land have been cleared round huge blocks of granite, the smaller stones, wrenched up, forming a fence or border, whilst between the immovable, columnar masses of rock, potatoes, rye, or other hardy crops, have been planted. Not an inch of available soil is wasted. These scenes of mingled sternness and grace are not marred by any eyesore: no hideous chimney of factory with its column of black smoke, as in the delicious valleys of the Jura; no roar of millwheel or of steam-engine breaks the silence of forest depths. The very genius of solitude, the very spirit of beauty, broods over the woods and mountains of the Lozère. The atmospheric effects are very varied and

lovely, owing to the purity of the air. As evening approaches, the vast porphyry range before us is a cloud of purple and ruddy gold against the sky. And what a sky! That warm, ambered glow recalls Sorrento. By the time we wind down into the valley of the Lot night has overtaken us. We dash into the little city too hungry and too tired, it must be confessed, to think of anything else but of beds and dinner; both of which, and of excellent quality, awaited us at the old-fashioned Hôtel Chabert.

CHAPTER II.

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MENDE.

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Mende was the last but one of French bishoprics and chef-lieux to be connected with the great highroads of railway.

That tardy piece of justice only remained due to St. Claude in the Jura when, owing to the Republic, Mende obtained its first iron road. Much time and fatigue will henceforth be spared the traveller by these new lines of railway, now spreading like a network over every part of France; yet who can but regret the supersession of the diligence—that antiquated vehicle recalling the good old days of travel, when folks journeyed at a jog-trot pace,

seeing not only places, but people, and being brought into contact with wholly new ideas and modes of life?

The benefits of the railway in the Lozère and the Jura are incalculable from an economic point of view, to say nothing of the convenience and comfort thereby placed within reach of all classes. It is an English habit to rail at the lavish expenditure of the French Government. Cavillers of this kind wholly lose sight of the tremendous strides made during the last fifteen years in the matter of communication. Surely money thus laid out is a justifiable expenditure on the part of any State?

I lately revisited the Vendée after twelve years' absence. I found the country absolutely transformed—new lines of railway intersecting every part, increased commercial activity in the towns, improved agriculture in rural districts, schools opened, buildings of public utility erected on all sides—evidences of an almost incredible progress. In Anjou the same rapid advance, social, intellectual, material, strikes the traveller whose first acquaintance with that province was made, say, fifteen years ago. Take Segré by way of example; compare its condition in 1888 with the state of things before the Franco-Prussian War. And this little town is one instance out of hundreds.

It was high time that something should be done for Mende. No town ever suffered more from wolves and wolf-like enemies in human shape. Down almost to our own day the depredations of wolves were frightful. The old French traveller before cited, writing in 1816, speaks of the large number of children annually devoured by these animals in the Lozère. The notorious 'Bête du Gévaudan,' at an earlier period, was the terror of the country. It is an exciting narrative, that of the gigantic four-footed demon of mischief, how, after proving the scourge of the country for

years, desolating home after home, in all devouring no less than a hundred old men, women, and children, he was at last caught in 1767 by a brave monster-destroying baron, the Hercules and the Perseus of local story. The ravages of wild beasts were a trifle compared to the enormities committed by human foes.

It is not my intention to do more than touch upon the religious wars of the Cévennes. Those blood-stained chronicles have been given again and again elsewhere. No one, however, can make a sojourn at Mende without recalling the atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion, and compared to which the excesses of the Jacquerie and the Terror sink into insignificance. If any of my readers doubt this, let them turn to the impartial pages of the eminent French historian, the late M. Henri Martin; or, to take a shorter road to conviction, get up the history of the Gévaudan, or of this same little town of Mende.

On a smaller scale, the horrors of the siege of Magdeburgh were here repeated, the Tilly of the campaign being the Calvinist leader Merle.

Devastated in turn by Catholic and Protestant, Royalist and Huguenot, Mende was taken by assault on Christmas Day, 1579, and during three days given up to fire, pillage, and slaughter. A general massacre took place; the cathedral was fired and partially destroyed, the bells, thirteen in number—one of these called the 'Nonpareil,' and reputed the most sonorous in Christendom—being melted down for cannon. All that fiendish cruelty and the demon of destruction could do was done. In vain Henry of Navarre tried to put down atrocities committed in his name. A second time Merle possessed himself of Mende, only consenting to go forth on payment of a large sum in gold.

The history of Mende is the history of Marvéjols, of one town after another visited by the traveller in the Cévennes; and in the wake of the burnings, pillagings and massacres of that horrible period follows the more horrible period still of the guerilla warfare of the Camisards, quelled by means of the rack, the stake, and the wheel.

The Revolution, be it ever remembered, abolished all these; torture ended with the Ancien Régime; and, although M. Taine seems of opinion that the new state of things could have been brought about by a few gentlemen quietly discussing affairs in dress-coats and white gloves, we read of no great social upheaval being thus bloodlessly effected. At such times a spirit of lawlessness and vengeance will break loose beyond the power of leaders to hold in check.

The approach to Mende is very fine, and the little city is most romantically placed; above gray spires, slated roofs and verdant valley, framing it in on all sides, rise bare, brown and purple mountains.

The cathedral presents an incongruity. Its twin-towers, each crowned with a spire, recall two roses on a single stem, the one full-blown, beautiful, a floral paragon, the other withered, dwarfed, abortive.

The first towers over its brother by a third, and is a lovely specimen of Gothic architecture in the period of later efflorescence. The second is altogether unbeautiful, and we wonder why such a work should ever have been undertaken at all. Far better to have left the cathedral one-towered, as those of Sens and Auxerre.

The town itself would be pleasant enough if its ædiles were more alive to the importance of sanitation. It never

seems to occur to the authorities in these regions to have the streets scoured and swept. Just outside Mende is a delicious little mountain-path, commanding a wondrous panorama: although this walk to the hermitage of St. Privât is evidently the holiday-stroll of the inhabitants, accumulations of filth lie on either side. [Footnote: The same remark might be made by a Frenchman of the lanes near Hastings!] No one takes any notice. As Mende has without doubt an important future before it, let us hope that these drawbacks will not afflict travellers in years to come. The little capital of the Lozère must by virtue of position become a tourist centre; surely the townsfolk will at last wake up to the importance of making their streets clean and wholesome.

To obtain the prettiest view of this charming, albeit tatterdemalion, little city, we follow a walk bordered with venerable willows to the railway station. Here is seen a belt of beautifully kept vegetable gardens and orchards, all fresh and green as if just washed by April showers. These are the property of peasant-owners, who dispose of their crops here and at Langogne. As yet the good townsfolk are hardly alive to the benefits of a railway. One of our drivers complained that it ruined the trades alike of carriage proprietor, conductor, and carter; another averred that the local manufacture of woollen goods, formerly of considerable account, was at a standstill owing to the importations of cheaper cloths. These grumblers will doubtless ere long take a different tone, as the glorious scenery of the Lozère becomes more widely known and Mende is made the tourists' headquarters. Our hotel, situated in the middle of the town, offers good beds, good food, dirty floors, charges low enough to please Mr. Joseph Pennell, and a total absence of anything in the shape of modern ideas. The people are charming, and the house is a mousy, ratty, ramshackle place hundreds of years old.