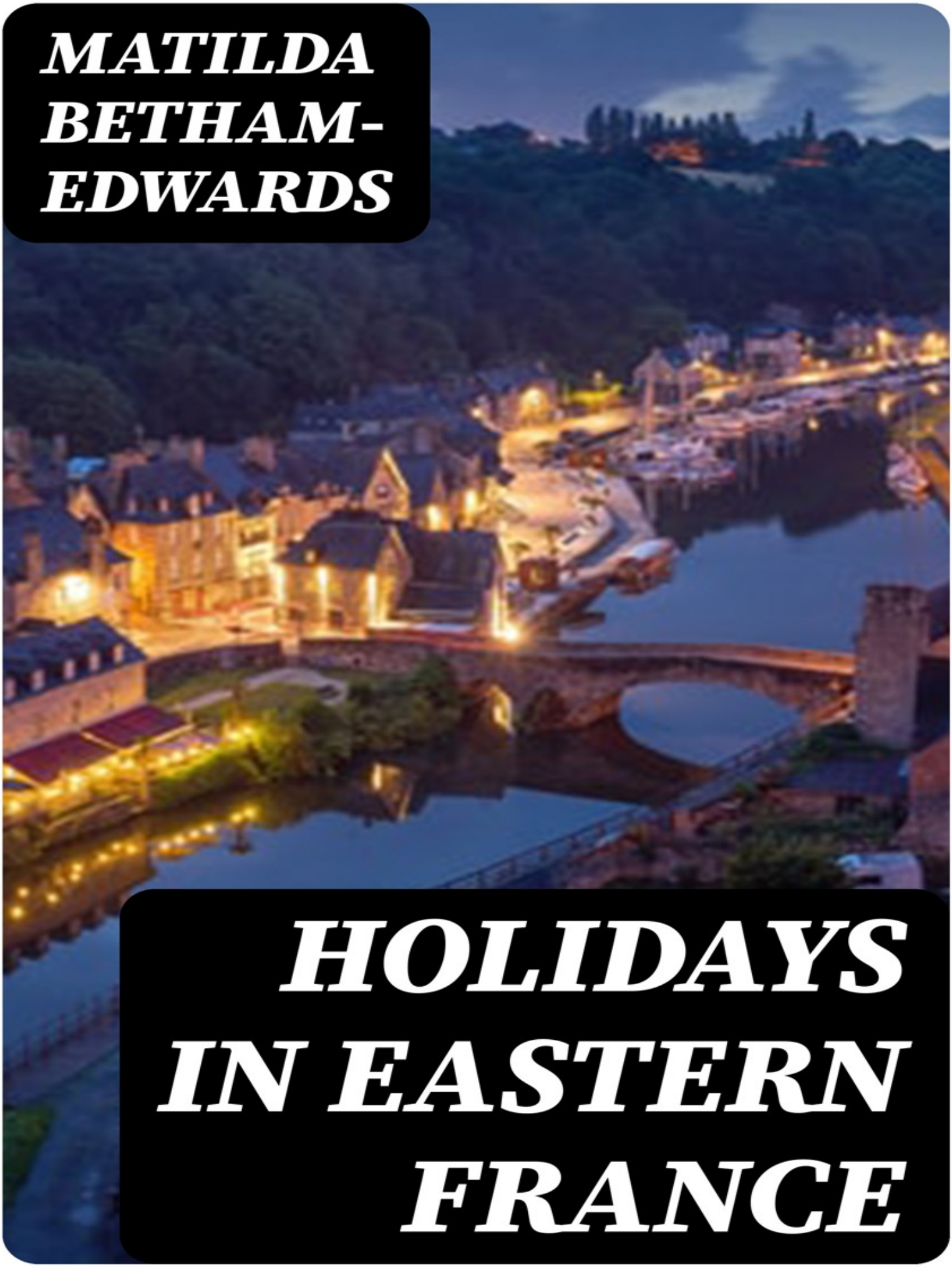
MATILDA BETHAM-EDWARDS



HOLIDAYS IN EASTERN FRANCE

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Holidays in Eastern France

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PREFACE.

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"Travelling in France without hotels, or guide-books," might, with very little exaggeration, be chosen as a title to this volume, which is, indeed, the record of one visit after another among charming French people, and in delightful places, out of the ordinary track of the tourist. Alike in the valley of the Marne—amongst French Protestants at Montbéliard—at Besançon amid the beautiful scenery of the Doubs—at Lons-le-Saunier, from whence so many interesting excursions were made into the Jura—in the very heart of the Jura highlands—at Champagnole, Morez, and St. Claude, it was my good fortune to see everything under unique and most favourable auspices, to be no tourist indeed, but a guest, welcomed at every stage, and pioneered from place to place by educated ladies and gentlemen delighted to do the honours of their native place. Thus it came about that I saw, not only places, but people, and not only one class, but all, peasant and proprietor, Protestant and Catholic, the *bourgeoisie* of the towns, the mountaineers of the highlands, the schoolmaster, the pastor, the curé. Wherever I went, moreover, I felt that I was breaking new ground, the most interesting country I visited being wholly unfamiliar to the general run of tourists, for instance, the charming pastoral scenery of Seine and Marne,

the picturesque valleys of the Doubs and the Loue, and the environs of Montbéliard and Besançon, the grand mountain fastnesses, close-shut valleys, or *combes*, the solitary lakes, cascades, and torrent rivers of the Jura.

Many of the most striking spots described in these pages are not even mentioned in Murray, whilst the difficulty of communication renders them comparatively unknown to the French themselves, only a few artists having as yet found them out. Ornans—Courbet's birth and favourite abiding place, in the valley of the Loue—is one of these. St. Hippolyte, near Montbéliard, is another, and a dozen more might be named equally beautiful, and, as yet, equally unknown. New lines of railway, however, are to be opened within the next few years in several directions, and thus the delightful scenery of Franche-Comté will, ere long, be rendered accessible to all. For the benefit of those travellers who are undaunted by difficulties, and prefer to go off the beaten track even at the risk of encountering discomforts, I have reprinted, with many additions, the following notes of visits and travel in the most interesting part of Eastern France, which, in part, originally appeared in "Frazer's Magazine," 1878.

In a former work, "Western France," I treated of a part of France which was ultra-Catholic; in this one I was chiefly among the more Protestant districts of the whole country, and it may be interesting to many to compare the two.

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CHAPTER I.

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THE VALLEY OF THE MARNE.

How delicious to escape from the fever heat and turmoil of Paris during the Exhibition to the green banks and sheltered ways of the gently undulating Marne! With what delight we wake up in the morning to the noise, if noise it can be called, of the mower's scythe, the rustle of acacia leaves, and the notes of the stock-dove, looking back as upon a nightmare to the horn of the tramway conductor, and the perpetual grind of the stone-mason's saw. Yes! to quit Paris at a time of tropic heat, and nestle down in some country resort is, indeed, like exchanging Dante's lower circle for Paradise. The heat has followed us here, but with a screen of luxuriant foliage ever between us and the burning blue sky, and with a breeze rippling the leaves always, no one need complain.

With the cocks and the hens, and the birds and the bees, we are all up and stirring betimes; there are dozens of cool nooks and corners if we like to spend the morning out of doors, and do not feel enterprising enough to set out on an exploring expedition by diligence or rail. After the midday meal everyone takes a siesta, as a matter of course, waking up between four and five o'clock for a ramble; wherever we

go we find lovely prospects. Quiet little rivers and canals winding in between lofty lines of poplars, undulating pastures and amber cornfields, picturesque villages crowned by a church spire here and there, wide sweeps of highly cultivated land interspersed with rich woods, vineyards, orchards and gardens—all these make up the scenery familiarized to us by some of the most characteristic of French painters.

Just such tranquil rural pictures have been portrayed over and over again by Millet, Corot, Daubigny, and in this very simplicity often lies their charm. No costume or grandiose outline is here as in Brittany, no picturesque poverty, no poetic archaisms; all is rustic and pastoral, but with the rusticity and pastoralness of every day.

We are in the midst of one of the wealthiest and best cultivated regions of France moreover, and, when we penetrate below the surface, we find that in manner and customs, as well as dress and outward appearance, the peasant and agricultural population, generally, differ no little from their remote country-people, the Bretons. In this famous cheese-making country, the "Fromage de Brie" being the speciality of these rich dairy farms, there is no superstition, hardly a trace of poverty, and little that can be called poetic. The people are wealthy, laborious, and progressive. The farmers' wives, however hard they may work at home, wear the smartest of Parisian bonnets and gowns when paying visits. I was going to say when at church, but nobody does go here!

It is a significant fact that in the fairly well to do educated district, where newspapers are read by the poorest, where

well-being is the rule, poverty the exception, the church is empty on Sunday, and the priest's authority is *nil*. The priests may preach against abstinence from church in the pulpits, and may lecture their congregation in private, no effect is thereby produced. Church-going has become out of date among the manufacturers of Brie cheese. They amuse themselves on Sundays by taking walks with their children, the *pater-familias* bathes in the river, the ladies put on their gala dresses and pay visits, but they omit their devotions.

Some of these tenant-farmers, many of the farms being hired on lease, possessors of small farms hiring more land, are very rich, and one of our neighbours whose wealth had been made by the manufacture of Brie cheese lately gave his daughter a 100,000 francs, £40,000, as a dowry. The wedding breakfast took place at the Grand Hotel, Paris, and a hundred guests were invited to partake of a sumptuous collation. But in spite of fine clothes and large dowries, farmers' wives and daughters still attend to the dairies, and, when they cease to do so, doubtless farming in Seine et Marne will no longer be the prosperous business we find it. It is delightful to witness the wide-spread well-being of this highly-farmed region.

"There is no poverty here," my host tells me, "and this is why life is so pleasant."

True enough, wherever you go, you find well-dressed, contented-looking people, no rags, no squalor, no pinched want. Poverty is an accident of rare occurrence, and not a normal condition, everyone being able to get plenty of work and good pay. The habitual look of content written upon every face is very striking. It seems as if in this land of

Goshen, life were no burden, but matter of satisfaction only, if not of thankfulness. Class distinction can hardly be said to exist; there are employers and employed, masters and servants, of course, but the line of demarcation is lightly drawn, and we find an easy familiarity wholly free from impoliteness, much less vulgarity, existing between them.

That automatic demureness characterizing English servants in the presence of their employers, is wholly unknown here. There are households with us where the servants might all be mutes for any signs of animation they give, but here they take part in what is going on, and exchange a word and a smile with every member of the household, never dreaming that it should be otherwise. One is struck too here by the good looks, intelligence, and trim appearance of the children, who, it is plain, are well cared for. The houses have vines and sweet peas on the wall, flowers in the window, and altogether a look of comfort and ease found nowhere in Western France. The Breton villages are composed of mere hovels, where pigs, cows, and poultry live in close proximity to their owners, a dung-hill stands before every front door, and, to get indoors and out, you have always to cross a pool of liquid manure. Here order and cleanliness prevail, with a diffusion of well-being, hardly, I should say, to be matched out of America.

Travellers who visit France again and again, as much out of sympathy with its people's institutions as from a desire to see its monuments and outward features, will find ample to reward them in Seine et Marne. On every side we have evidence of the tremendous natural resources and indefatigable laboriousness of the people. There is one point

here, as elsewhere in France, which strikes an agriculturist with astonishment, and that is the abundance of trees standing amid cornfields and miscellaneous crops, also the interminable plantation of poplars that can be seen on every side, apparently without any object. But the truth is, the planting of apple and pear trees in fields is no extravagance, rather an economy, the fruit they produce exceeding in value the corn they damage, whilst the puzzling line of poplars growing beside canals and rivers is the work of the Government, every spare bit of ground belonging to the State being planted with them for the sake of the timber. The crops are splendid partly owing to the soil, and partly to the advanced system of agriculture. You may see exposed for sale, in little towns, the newest American agricultural implements, whilst the great diversity of products speaks volumes for the enterprise of the farmers.

As you stroll along, now climbing, now descending this pleasantly undulated country, you may see growing in less than an acre, a patch of potatoes here, a vineyard there, on one side a bit of wheat, oats, rye, and barley, with fruit-trees casting abundant shadow over all; on the other Indian corn, clover and mangel-wurzel in the green state, recently planted for autumn fodder; further on a poppy field, three weeks ago in full flower, now having full pods ready for gathering—the opium poppy being cultivated for commerce here—all these and many more are found close together, and near them many a lovely little glen, copse, and ravine, recalling Scotland and Wales, while the open hill-sides show broad belts of pasture, corn and vineyard. You may walk for miles through what seems one vast orchard, only, instead of

turf, rich crops are growing under the trees. This is indeed the orchard of France, on which we English folk largely depend for our summer fruits. A few days ago the black-currant trees were being stripped for the benefit of Parisian lovers of *cassis*, a liqueur in high repute.

We encounter on our walks carts laden with plums packed in baskets and barrels on their way to Covent Garden. Later on, it will be the peach and apricot crops that are gathered for exportation. Later still, apples, walnuts, and pears; the village not far from our own sends fruit to the Paris markets valued at 1,000,000 francs annually, and the entire valley of the Marne is unequalled throughout France for fruitfulness and abundance. But the traveller must settle down in some delicious retreat in the valley of the Marne to realize the interest and charm of such a country as this. And he must above all things be a fairly good pedestrian, for, though a land of Goshen flowing with milk and honey, it is not a land of luxuries, and carriages, good, bad, or indifferent, are difficult to be got. A countless succession of delightful prospects is offered to the persevering explorer, who, each day, strikes out in an entirely different direction. I have always been of opinion that the best way to see a country is to make a halt in some good central point for weeks at a time, and from thence "excursionize." By these means, much fatigue is avoided, and the two chief drawbacks to the pleasure of travel, namely, hotels and perpetual railway travel, are avoided as much as possible.

Seine et Marne, if not one of the most picturesque regions in France, abounds in those quiet charms that grow upon the sympathetic traveller. It is not a land of marvels

and pictorial attractions like Brittany. There is no costume, no legendary romance, no stone array of Carnac to entice the stranger, but, on the other hand, the lover of nature, in her more subdued aspects, and the archaeologist also, will find ample to repay them. It is not my intention to give a history of the ancient cities and towns visited during my stay, or, indeed, to offer an itinerary, or any other kind of information so amply provided for us in English and foreign Handbooks. My object is merely to relate my own experiences in this and other Eastern regions of France, for, if these are not worth having, no réchauffé_ of facts, gleaned here and there, can be so; and I also intend only to quote other authors when they are inaccessible to the general reader.

With regard, therefore, to the history of the *département* of Seine et Marne, constructed, in 1790, from the province of Brie, also from the Ile de France, and the so called Gâtinois Français, I will say a few words. Although it only boasts of two important historical monuments, namely, the Cathedral of Meaux and the Château of Fontainebleau; scattered about the country are noteworthy remains of different epochs, Celtic, Roman, Merovingian, mediaeval; none, perhaps, of paramount importance, but all interesting to the archaeologist and the artist. Such remains as those of the Merovingian crypt at Jouarre, and the various monuments of Provins, well repay the traveller who visits these places on purpose, whilst, as he zig-zags here and there, he will find many a village church of quaint exterior and rich Gothic decoration within. Fontainebleau, being generally included in a visit to Paris, I do not attempt to

describe, but prefer to lead the traveller a little off the ordinary track, on which, indeed, he wants no guide but Murray and Joanne.

My rallying point was a pleasant country-house at Couilly, offering easy opportunity of studying agriculture and rural life, as well as of making excursions by road and rail. Couilly itself is charming. The canal, winding its way between thick lines of poplar trees towards Meaux, you may follow in the hottest day of summer without fatigue. The river, narrow and sleepy, yet so picturesquely curling amid green slopes and tangled woods, is another delightful stroll; then there are broad, richly wooded hills rising above these, and shady side-paths leading from hill to valley, with alternating vineyards, orchards, pastures, and cornfields on either side. Couilly lies in the heart of the cheese-making country, part of the ancient province of Brie from which this famous cheese is named.

The Comté of Brie became part of the French kingdom on the occasion of the marriage of Jeanne of Navarre with Philip-le-Bel in 1361, and is as prosperous as it is picturesque. It also possesses historic interest. Within a stone's throw of our garden wall once stood a famous convent of Bernardines, called Pont-aux-Dames. Here Madame du Barry, the favourite of Louis XV., was exiled after his death; on the outbreak of the Revolution, she flew to England, having first concealed, somewhere in the Abbey grounds, a valuable case of diamonds. The Revolution went on its way, and Madame du Barry might have ended her unworthy career in peace had not a sudden fit of cupidity induced her to return to Couilly when the Terror was at its

acmé, in quest of her diamonds. The Committee of Public Safety got hold of Madame du Barry, and she mounted the guillotine in company of her betters, showing a pusillanimity that befitted such a career. What became of the diamonds, history does not say. The Abbey of Pont-aux-Dames has long since been turned to other purposes, but the beautiful old-fashioned garden still remains as it was.

Couilly, like most of the ancient villages in Seine et Marne, possesses a church of an early period, though unequal in interest to those of its neighbours. It is also full of reminiscences of the last Franco-German war. My friend's house was occupied by the German commander and his staff, who, however, committed no depredations beyond carrying off the bed-quilts and blankets, a pardonable offence considering the excessive cold of that terrible winter.

Not far off, on a high hill, is a farm-house, known as the Maison Blanche, in which Jules Favre gave utterance to the memorable words: "Not an inch of our territory—not a stone of our fortresses," when in conference with Bismarck and Moltke in 1870. It is said that a peasant who showed them the way meditated assassinating all three, and was only prevented by the fear of his village being made the scene of vengeance. Already, German tourists are finding their way back to these country resorts, and the sound of the German tongue is no longer unbearable to French ears. It is to be hoped that this outward reconciliation of the two nationalities may mean something deeper, and that the good feeling may increase.

The diligence passes our garden gate early in the morning, and in an hour and a half takes us to Meaux, former capital of the province of La Brie, bishopric of the famous Bossuet, and one of the early strongholds of the Reformation. The neighbouring country, *pays Meldois* as it is called, is one vast fruit and vegetable garden, bringing in enormous returns. From our vantage ground, for, of course, we get outside the vehicle, we survey the shifting landscape, wood and valley and plain, soon seeing the city with its imposing Cathedral, flashing like marble, high above the winding river and fields of green and gold on either side. I know nothing that gives the mind an idea of fertility and wealth more than this scene, and it is no wonder that the Prussians, in 1871, here levied a heavy toll; their sojourn at Meaux having cost the inhabitants not less than a million and a half of francs. All now is peace and prosperity, and here, as in the neighbouring towns, rags, want, and beggary are not found. The evident well-being of all classes is delightful to behold.

Meaux, with its shady boulevards and pleasant public gardens, must be an agreeable place to live in, nor would intellectual resources be wanting. We strolled into the spacious town library, open, of course, to all strangers, and could wish for no better occupation than to con the curious old books and the manuscripts that it contains. One incident amused me greatly. The employé, having shown me the busts adorning the walls of the principal rooms, took me into a side closet, where, ignominiously put out of sight, were the busts of Charles the Tenth and Louis-Philippe.

"But," said our informant, "we have more busts in the garret. The
Emperor Napoleon III., the Empress and the Prince Imperial!"

Naturally enough, on the proclamation of the Republic, these busts were considered at least supererogatory, and it is to be hoped they will stay where they are. The Evêché, or Bishop's Palace, is the principal sight at Meaux. It is full of historic associations, besides being very curious in itself. Here have slept many noteworthy personages, Louis XVI. and Marie Antoinette when on their return from Varennes, June 24th, 1791, Napoleon in 1814, Charles X. in 1828, later, General Moltke in 1870, who said upon that occasion,

"In three days, or a week at most, we shall be in Paris;" not counting on the possibilities of a siege.

The room occupied by the unfortunate Louis XVI and his little son, still bears the name of "La Chambre du Roi," and cannot be entered without sadness. The gardens, designed by Le Nôtre, are magnificent and very quaint, as quaint and characteristic, perhaps, as any of the same period; a broad, open, sunny flower-garden below, above terraced walks so shaded with closely-planted plane trees that the sun can hardly penetrate them on this July day. These green walks, where the nightingale and the oriole were singing, were otherwise as quiet as the Evêché itself; but the acmé of quiet and solitude was only to be found in the avenue of yews, called Bossuet's Walk. Here it is said the great orator used to pace backwards and forwards when composing his famous discourses, like another celebrated French writer, Balzac, wholly secluding himself from the world whilst thus

occupied. A little garden-house in which he ate and slept leads out of this delightful walk, a cloister of greenery, the high square-cut walls of yew shutting out everything but the sky. What would some of us give for such a retreat as this! an ideal of perfect tranquillity and isolation from the outer world that might have satisfied the soul of Schopenhauer himself.

But the good things of life are not equally divided. The present Bishop, an octogenarian, who has long been quite blind, would perhaps prefer to hear more echoes from without. It happened that in one party was a little child of six, who, with the inquisitiveness of childhood, followed the servant in-doors, whilst the rest waited at the door for permission to visit the palace. "I hear the footsteps of a child" said the old man, and bidding his young visitor approach, he gave him sugar-plums, kisses, and finally his blessing. Very likely the innocent prattling of the child was as welcome to the old man as the sweetmeats to the little one on his knee.

The terraces of the Episcopal garden cross the ancient walls of the city, and underneath the boulevards afford a promenade almost as pleasant. It must be admitted that much more pains are taken in France to embellish provincial towns with shady walks and promenades than in England. The tiniest little town in Seine et Marne has its promenades, that is to say, an open green space and avenues with benches for the convenience of passers-by. We cannot, certainly, sit out of doors as much as our French neighbours in consequence of our more changeable climate, but might not pleasant public squares and gardens, with bands playing

gratuitously on certain evenings in the week in country towns, entice customers from the public-house? The traveller is shown the handsome private residences of rich Meldois, where in the second week of September, 1870, were lodged the Emperor of Germany, the Prince Frederick Charles, and Prince Bismarck. Meaux, if one of the most prosperous, is also one of the most liberal of French cities, and has been renowned for its charity from early times. In the thirteenth century there were no fewer than sixty Hôtels-Dieu, as well as hospitals for lepers in the diocese, and at the present day it is true to its ancient traditions, being abundantly supplied with hospitals, &c.

Half-an-hour from Meaux by railway is the pretty little town of La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, coquettishly perched on the Marne, and not yet rendered unpoetic by the hum and bustle of commerce. Here, even more than at Meaux, the material well-being of all classes is especially striking. You see the women sitting in their little gardens at needle-work, the children trotting off to school, the men busied in their respective callings, but all as it should be, no poverty, no dirt, no drunkenness, no discontent; cheerfulness, cleanliness, and good clothes are evidently everybody's portion. Yet it is eminently a working population; there are no fashionable ladies in the streets, no nursery-maids with over-dressed charges on the public walks; the men wear blue blouses, the women cotton gowns, all belonging to one class, and have no need to envy any others.

Close to the railway-station is a little house, where I saw an instance of the comfort enjoyed by these unpretentious citizens of this thrifty little town. The landlord, a particularly

intelligent and well-mannered person, was waiting upon his customers in a blue cotton coat, and the landlady was as busy as could be in the kitchen. Both were evidently accustomed to plenty of hard work, yet when she took me over the house in order to show her accommodation for tourists, I found their own rooms furnished with Parisian elegance. There were velvet sofas and chairs, white-lace curtains, polished floors, mirrors, hanging wardrobes, a sumptuous little bassinette for baby, and adjoining, as charming a room for their elder daughter—a teacher in a day-school—as any heiress to a large fortune could desire. This love of good furniture and in-door comfort generally, seemed to me to speak much, not only for the taste, but the moral tone of the family. Evidently to these good people the home meant everything dearest to their hearts. You would not find extravagance in food or dress among them, or most likely any other but this: they work hard, they live frugally, but, when the day's toil is done, they like to have pretty things around them, and not only to repose but to enjoy.

La Ferté-sous-Jouarre is the seat of a large manufacture of millstones, which are exported to all parts of the world, and it is a very thriving little place. Large numbers of Germans are brought hither by commerce, and now live again among their French neighbours as peacefully as before the war. The attraction for tourists is, however, the twin-town of Jouarre, reached by a lovely drive of about an hour from the little town. Leaving the river, you ascend gradually, gaining at every step a richer and wider prospect; below the blue river, winding between green banks, above a lofty ridge of wooded hill, with hamlets dotted here and