

**FRENCH LIFE  
IN TOWN AND  
COUNTRY**

## **Table of Contents**

CHAPTER I FRENCH RURAL AND PROVINCIAL LIFE

CHAPTER II PARIS AND PARISIANISM

CHAPTER III SOCIAL DIVERSIONS AND DISTINCTIONS

CHAPTER IV THE ARMY AND THE NATION

CHAPTER V SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

CHAPTER VI NATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

CHAPTER VII HOME-LIFE IN FRANCE

CHAPTER VIII PEASANT AND ARTISAN

CHAPTER IX THE PRESS AND THE PEOPLE'S COLLEGES

CHAPTER X THE PARISIAN LECTURE AND SALON

CHAPTER XI THE "LITTLE PEOPLE" OF PARIS

CHAPTER XII ORGANISED PHILANTHROPY AND PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

# FRENCH LIFE IN TOWN AND COUNTRY



THE PEASANT AT HOME—THE CANDIDATE

*Michelena*



## **CHAPTER I**

### **FRENCH RURAL AND PROVINCIAL LIFE**

Among the nations of the earth there exists no more striking contrast than that between the people of Paris and the people of France. While the capital is a political furnace, where all sorts of conflicting ideas and opinions are continually boiling with such a rage of effervescence that the inhabitants, unaccustomed to the sense of calm and security, work, dance, and rest on the brink of an ever-menacing revolution; in the provinces town life drags through its monotonous days, absorbed in dull provincial interests, and rural life knows no other changes or menaces than those of the seasons. We distribute to each race certain broad characteristics, and trace out for them in all circumstances an ideal of conduct from which, if they will be true to their blood, they must not deviate. And so we are all decided upon the general French characteristic, excitability, forgetting the immense provincial differences that are to be found in the people of France as well as elsewhere. The heavy Flemish natives of Picardy, large eaters, deep drinkers, hard workers, slow of speech, somewhat coarse and unperverted, are as French as the natives of Latin Provence, garrulous, sober, alert, and exuberant. They are not less French than the wily, hard-bargaining Norman, who eats

and drinks as much, but brings a clearer brain into business, and may always be relied upon to get the better of his neighbour in all transactions; or the dreamy Celt of the Breton coast, the thriftless slave of superstition, with brains to spare as well as prejudices, but not intended by nature as a pillar of the Temple of Wisdom. Not less French the rich green midlands than the white and sunburnt south, the champagne vineyards eastward, and the rocky Cévennes rolling southward. Could anybody differ, more from the morose and inhospitable Lyonese, in whose eyes every outsider is the enemy against whom he sedulously barricades his doors, in whose esteem the pick of humanity is the prosperous silk-merchant, than the pushing, loud-mannered Marseillais, with what he would fain have us take for his heart so aggressively upon his sleeve, emotion so transparently transient ever on the surface, subtly disguising self-interest and calculation?

For every diversity of character equal diversity of scenery—from the Alpine grandeur of the Dauphiny land to the beautiful lagoons of the Marais; the Vendean plain washed by the long blue roll of the Atlantic; Provence, land of salt lagoons and dead old cities of Greece and Rome; the central provinces, with their lovely rivers and chestnut woods; Celtic Brittany, half English; Normandy, with its glorious capital, one of the fairest of France; the radiant cities of the Loire, French river of romance; the bright and witching little kingdom of Béarn, exquisite Roussillon, with its old hum of wars and troubadour songs, its delicate sweetness of herb and leaf and bloom, its quaint old towns breathing of Spain, and its high air of legend; the east, with its mountains and dense pine forests, up to sunnier Ardennes. And the *patois* of these so different districts are not

less distinct than the scenery, the note of town and province, and the characteristics of each race. Shelley most seriously wrote that there was nothing worth seeing in France. Even the tourist will find more to delight his eye in going from one department to another than he will find place to record in the most voluminous note-book. Let him only content himself with such a province as Touraine, with its rich and pleasant landscape, its castles of undying interest, its river of thrilling associations. Or let him wander in summer amid the cherry orchards of the Jura country, with the rampart of mountains above the pine-tops and the touch of Swiss beauty around; or dream away the present in musing upon forgotten Mediterranean glories among the ruins of dead Provençal cities between the grey-green silver of the olive and the sapphire waters beyond the broad grey river bends.

It is true that the townsman all over the land is largely governed by a need for excitement, and having, as a rule, no personal initiative to enable him to minister to it, he contents himself with looking toward the capital with envy, and devours the newspapers from Paris in eager expectation of the "something" he is in daily hope of happening. But whatever does happen in Paris rarely makes itself felt in the intellectually sleepy, industrious provinces; thanks to which wide-spread spirit of commercial and bucolic denseness to the inflammatory influences of the capital, France thrives now as she thrived before the war, when at a word she could produce funds to pay off an enormous indemnity, without flinching or hesitating.

When you travel in the country or through small French towns, you are struck with the gaiety, intelligence, and good-will of the people and of the little shopkeepers, and with a certain unintelligent stiffness, pretension, and moroseness of the middle class, whose ambition it is to pass for the aristocracy, or at least for *des gens de bonne famille*. As these pretensions are rarely in keeping with their actual fortunes, these ambitious provincials, the victims of the political follies born of hostility to the Third Republic, think fit to garb themselves in the unbecoming vices of ill-humour, rancour, and idle pride. These they conceive to be the adjuncts of noble birth. If the fathers have refrained, the sons are certain to announce themselves, sooner or later, by titles of their own choosing. The general preference runs to count and viscount, though baron is not despised. I have known of a respectable middle-class family in the provinces, where the eldest son, a lawyer, is content to remain a republican, and the second son, an officer, a gentleman of aristocratic instincts, eager to profit by the present enthusiasm for the army in anti-governmental circles, calls himself a count. The humorous part of the situation lies in the fact that the wife of the plain Monsieur is not satisfied with her lot, since destiny, ruled by her brother-in-law's will, has given the latter a title; and so at the recent marriage of that military worthy, the newspapers spoke of M. le Comte giving his arm to his sister-in-law, Madame la Comtesse, while the disgusted republican elder brother stayed in the country, indifferent to the self-appointed glories of his relatives.

Within late years, tennis parties are beginning to introduce a little stir in certain select circles of small provincial towns, where these entertainments are still regarded as novel; but,

speaking generally, the dulness of such centres in France cannot be surpassed anywhere. Social life is at as low a level as intellectual life. Few books are read, fewer still are discussed. The very aspect of the streets—with their sealed doors, shut persiennes, sullen absence of neighbourly trust and geniality, high-walled gardens—is morose and incommunicative. They wear, however, as compensation, a look of distinction, not infrequently accompanied by a picturesque charm. Should a river roll in view, or a little street slope down to a busy quay, where the washerwomen kneel and lend mirth and colour to the scene, while above, an old historic castle, high against the sky, on a dusty square, or the grey of Gothic stone and delicate spire add a hieratic note to the quaint picture you forget the unfriendly reserve of those barred and blinded houses, you forget the somewhat aggressive coldness and inhospitality of their front, in recognition of the tempered brilliance, the graceful and distinguished effects around you. Mingle then with the market-folk, and listen to their speech—pleasant vocables, rendered pleasanter still by vivacity of gesture and vividness of gaze; neat peasant women, in spotless caps and sabots, who look all the merrier because they are so hard-worked; tanned, wrinkled faces, that smile as they did in youth, hard-set, but not unkindly, in the rapacity of commerce; responsive to a joke, unflinching in the teeth of trouble, not destitute of a promise of comfort in life's softer hours—though softness is the very last quality they betray. A genial hardness is, perhaps, the dominating character of the French peasant woman's expression: it would never be safe to trust in the hope of finding her head napping and her heart too wide awake. But if she is not soft to others, she is implacably hard to herself. Her



industry is amazing, and only less amazing is her resourcefulness. A more competent woman does not exist anywhere. Nothing of a dreamer, she is contented with her lot, provided only there is neither thriftlessness, waste, nor idleness about her. She will willingly work for four, if the men will honestly work for one. And while the men loiter and squander substance and health in the wineshops, this gallant creature continues to labour and save and scold, to deprive herself of small comforts in favour of others—a son, a daughter, as the case may be; and, thanks to her, the country ever prospers.

Country life is, of course, far less dull than provincial town life; less unneighbourly, and less destitute of all the charities of existence. For one thing, nature is the eternal friend, benefactor, and instructor of man. The thousand vulgarities of towns are forgotten in the midst of her bounties. A man who lives in bucolic silence, watching the seasons and counting new-born things, dreaming of oats, of crops, of fruit, is essentially the superior of his fellows who dwell amid the sordid details of small towns, commerce, and rivalries, the gossip and drivel which make a spurious animation in the circles of the provinces. There are diversities among the type *hobereau* (a kind of French squire), as among all other types in France and elsewhere. Many years ago I travelled through a charming south-western province, furnished amply with letters of introduction. I well remember the extraordinary contrast between two families of *hobereaux* I once visited. A relative of the small squire, who lived in a dull, quaint little town, drove me out to see her bucolic son-in-law and his bucolic parents. The family was described to me as

“exceedingly rich.” We entered a brilliant bit of park and avenue on a hot afternoon in July, drenched with the dews of heat, athirst from the dust of the broad, long white road. On the *perron* stood the young couple and their parents to receive us. The bride was gaudily and hideously attired in yellow and brown satin and silk; the groom in grey, with straw hat and leggings, more appropriately adorned the landscape. He was a heavy-eyed, high-complexioned, silent youth, who seemed at ease and happy only in the society of his most beautiful dogs. To them alone did he sometimes discourse in heavy undertones, while he surveyed me furtively under his lashes in unmistakable awe, but addressed me no word. His father-in-law looked like a farmer or a yeoman, and cracked small jokes. He quizzed his son, who blushed the hues of fire, and his son’s mother-in-law, who ingeniously strove to make me believe that she did not understand him, and he nudged his daughter-in-law in a way she must have resented. Without exaggeration, I have never met a more peasant type of country gentleman in my life. His wife was a simple, ill-mannered person, who talked chiefly about the weather. The grounds were lovely, the orchard a splendid dream, but the floors of the “château,” as every country-house in France is pretentiously called, were mere unvarnished planks; not a rug anywhere, not a hint of beeswax, and even the drawing-room was disfigured with ugly presses. When liquid refreshment was called for—chartreuse and iced water—we were served in coarse glasses, and the iced water was brought in in a kitchen jug. There was not even a flower in a vase, not a pretty window curtain, and the drawing-room chairs were of horsehair. Whatever occult advantages their wealth may have procured them, it cannot be said that

beauty, comfort, the joy of living, were amongst them, for a more undecorated interior and duller persons I have never met, and yet, with so much comfortlessness, there was not a touch of vulgarity. The squireen was a rough son of the soil, but you accepted him as the animals of the field; you felt he belonged to the land, and, as such, claimed indulgence. You would not elect to pass your days in his society, any more than you would care to have a bear prancing about your drawing-room, but you instinctively felt his superiority to the town fop, who thinks himself a very fine fellow, with a little tailoring and a vast amount of pretension.

The second *hobereau* dwelt in the same department, but I visited him with very different results. I was invited to lunch, and my host drove me seven miles in a pony-cart. Here, also, were an imposing park and avenue, and an immense manor, which seemed all windows. There was among the guests a magistrate from Poitiers, who was witty as only a Frenchman can be witty. Our host was a charming, bright-eyed, lean little old man, full of vivacity, of charm, and intellectual alertness. He was voluble, and avid for information, and walked me up and down a delightful *berceau* to obtain my views of the woman's question and the relative positions of the young French and English girl. He even pressed me to contrast the French and English novel, and said he greatly preferred Scott to Zola—an opinion I endorsed with fervour. People drove over from neighbouring places, and we were quite a large party at lunch. The talk was capital—local, but interesting; no cheap gossip, but plenty of genial wit, anecdote, and repartee. The women were dowdily dressed, as provincial Frenchwomen frequently are. I judged them as dense, impervious to ideas, utterly

uncultivated, never, in all probability, having read anything except the thin religious literature on which the virtuous ladies of France nourish their minds; but they could well hold their own in conversation, could cap a phrase with elegant neatness, and the hostess deserved well of her kind for the evidence she furnished of a perfectly ordered household. It would, however, be a mistake to credit them with grace because they are Frenchwomen. Nothing comes with such a shock upon the traveller in France, used to the feminine grace and charm and witchery of dress in Paris, as the dowdiness and want of ease, the total lack of taste in dress, the heavy figures and unexpressive faces of many of the women of the provinces. They dress shabbily, will even wear cotton gloves and badly cut boots when they consider themselves extremely exclusive, and carry off these defects of costume with a singular and unmistakable air of distinction. The commoner kind prefer to shine in fashions and colours unfamiliar to the eye of Paris; and, as a rule, look clumsy and obtrusive in their fine feathers. The same applies to the men. These, when they prefer to be shabby and roughly arrayed, look far better than the pretentious gallants who, by means of obvious tailoring, offer destruction to the susceptible dames around them. There can be no doubt that an elegant male costume is out of place and a vulgar blot along a sleepy little street where men in blouses pass and bonneted girls and women wheel barrows before them.

The farmer's life has undoubtedly a larger share of natural interests than that of the *hobereau*. It is more purely animal, without any attachments to a world unconnected with the land. Ask a farmer what he thinks of politics, and he will tell you that he has nothing on earth to do with idiots or tricksters. He who

must warily watch the humours of the seasons cannot trouble himself with the humours of electors and the ravings of voluble deputies. He walks his dew-washed meadows at dawn in wide-leafed felt; and, as he surveys the produce of his labour, his long hours of sweating travail, can he feel other than contempt of the highly remunerative and windy profession of the politician? The superiority of the lord of the soil to whom he pays tribute, he will readily acknowledge, but none other. In the west he will speak of his family as "my sons and the creatures," meaning his daughters. In the land of the Cévennes, his children are *les drôles*, and the same unquestioning obedience is expected from both sexes by this rough and silent tyrant of the soil. Outside his farm he has little esteem to waste upon his fellows; within, is far from prodigal of tenderness to his women-folk. These he expects to stand at meals in a corner of the kitchen, while he and his sons sit to eat. He governs haughtily, with few words; but in his rude heart he knows that the real, the silent, and unobtrusive government lies in the hands of his wife, who, with the tact and watchfulness of affection, corrects the errors of his harsh temper, and smooths out the asperities of home-life. It would be difficult to find a people to whom modern feminism is more repugnant than the French, and hard to name one that owes more to the intelligence, good-will, and incessant labour of women. Frenchmen object to women in the liberal professions, and make a desperate hue and cry the day a talented lady seeks leave to wear the lawyer's toque and gown. Yet the fields are tended by women; flags are waved at railway gates by them; in the lower ranks they bravely do all the rougher work of men, and nobody lifts a voice in protest. Woman may leave her home

to make money in the humbler walks of labour, and cause no flutter in male bosoms; but let her elect to do so in paths where ambition lures and pay is higher, and instantly a howl of dismay runs through the ranks of her oppressors and slaves. And yet, if common sense and logic were general instead of rare virtues, even in France, it would be understood that the abandonment of the homes by peasant women is of much more serious consequence to a nation than the infrequent flight into legal and medical circles. The woman lawyer will always be the exception, and if she makes a good thing of her venture nobody is a penny the worse. But examine the home where the wife and mother spends her day in a factory, in the field, whose occupation requires no talent or ambition, and their physical and moral effects are of a very different nature from those that follow the winning of diplomas. The woman works as hard and as long as her husband, and is paid less. They return home to a cold hearth, an uncooked dinner. The man, never an angel where his stomach is concerned, swears and threatens, then sulks and goes off to the wine-shop. There is no compensation for the missing comfort in the few miserable francs earned. No women are more admirably adapted for making the home happy than Frenchwomen. Their general competence is matched only by their industry; and it is a pity to see these fine domestic qualities wasted on outdoor work. Of course, in the case of widows nothing can be said. When the bread-winner is taken away, the woman must perforce shut the house door, and go abroad in quest of the right to live. Girls are in their proper sphere, too, in working manfully on their father's farm until their marriage, and fatherless girls, without that most useful of national institutions, the *dot*, must needs find bread

wherever they can. But the outside labour of the wife and mother can never be too deeply deplored, above all in the case of the best of wives or mothers, such as Frenchwomen, taking them as an average, usually are.



BLESSING THE WHEAT

*J. A. Breton*

Connected with rural and provincial life are some quaint and pretty religious ceremonies. I need not refer to the *Fête-Dieu*, familiar to all travellers in Catholic countries. The sight of this well-known procession will please or repel you according as it appeals to your head or your imagination. But a far more picturesque procession, and one containing an element of poetry not at all discoverable in the *Fête-Dieu*, is the blessing of the fields and orchards between dawn and sunrise. What a novel and peaceful treat I used to find this ceremony in my far-off French schooldays, whereas the Corpus Christi procession was but a scorching misery! To rise in the blue crepuscular light, with the early birds just stirring in their nests and heard behind the unshuttered windows, and emerge from the deep convent porch into the dew-washed country, following and

followed by all the town, walking in two long lines, widely apart, behind the priests in their stoles and surplices, and chanting solemn Latin hymns! It was a rich Norman land we wandered along, now by glittering rills, with the smell of violets in the air, by narrow green paths through the newly ploughed earth, while the mounting sun cast joy into our faces, warming the chill spring wind, and provoking the birds to rival our hymns with their clearer and sweeter notes; then through continents of apple bloom, whole lakes above of pink-white blossoms on either side, with rivulets of upper blue seen through the tracery of foamy waves. Who, watching that solemn procession of amiable enthusiasts, chanting hymns to God and beseeching Him with confidence and fervour to bless the earth and all its produce,—wheat, wine, fruit, and flower, the water we drink, and the grass we tread upon,—could smile or carp at the sprinkling of the ground, of trees, of river-bed with holy water? There was something deeply impressive in the hymns sung at that early hour, while the towns still slept and the woods were scarce awake. As a superstition it seemed to carry us back to the great primal superstitions that have run through the earlier religions. It remains ever upon memory as a large and noble and beautiful form of belief, where Pagan and Christian of all time meet in their fear of inclement nature. Religion has ever associated itself with the rural dread of disaster. Priests say masses for sick cattle, and if the cattle do not benefit by this harmless custom, the peasants are thereby greatly comforted; they have the satisfaction of knowing, at any rate, that should the cattle so prayed for die, it was in the design of Providence, against which even the prayer of devout man was inefficacious. If religion never made more injurious



concessions than these to ignorance, the wildest freethinker that ever unsheathed a sword against it must be shamed into laughter at his bellicose attitude. Indeed, it is not only the Catholics of France who expect their ministers to stand between them and rural misfortunes by prayer and holy water; in the Protestant Cévennes a pastor of the Reformed Church has been known to exorcise a field of evil spirits, or tackle by prayers the devils in a poor beast, and even in an entire herd of cattle; and the peasants dread even more than the devil a mysterious god called the *Aversier*.<sup>[1]</sup> An apologist for these peculiar customs maintains that since Christianity cannot prevent superstition it is wise in directing it,—sending it thus into a right and beneficial channel. This is surely debatable ground. Superstition is by no means the appanage of ignorance only, and we must be grateful when we find it inoffensive and poetical.

In Paris to-day, you will meet educated Frenchwomen who are convinced that St. Anthony of Padua went to heaven and was canonised in the exclusive interest of their lost property. A friend of mine, witty, cultivated, a wide reader and traveller, accompanying me on a walk, dropped one of her gloves just outside the avenue door. She perceived her loss when we had gone a few paces ahead. “Oh, dear good St. Anthony,” she exclaimed fervently, “make me find my glove, and I will light a candle in your honour. And now I am reminded, dear St. Anthony, that I owe you already a candle for my note-book which I lost and found last week; I will pay both on the recovery of my glove.” I listened to the prayer in stupefaction. We turned on our heel, and there at the *porte-cochère* lay her glove. She pounced upon it, and cried, “Thanks, thanks, good St.

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