A FRENCH UTOPIA.

HE ponderous fictions of Gomberville, La Calprenède, and Mlle. de Scudéry, still held an honoured place on the tables of every boudoir, and dainty *précieuses* still traced the course of the river of *Inclination* on the map of the *Pays du Tendre*, when there appeared anonymously in Paris, the first part of a work entitled, 'Histoire des Sevarambes, peuples qui habitent une partie du troisième continent, communément appelé la Terre Australe.' This was in 1677. The author of the book was Denis Vairasse d'Alais, a nobleman of Languedoc, who, at the time of its publication, eked out the pale ghost of a patrimony by teaching English and French to foreign residents in Paris. Before settling in the capital, Vairasse had smelt powder on the fields of Piedmont, had been called to the Bar, had crossed over to England, where he made the acquaintance of Locke and the Earl of Clarendon, and had got himself hopelessly implicated in the intrigues of an intriguing age. In 1665 he served against the Dutch on the flag-ship of the Duke of York; and 1672 found him campaigning with the French army in Holland.

Besides his baptismal name Vairasse d'Alais had not a few points in common with his more famous contemporary Saint Evremond, one of the most

striking being that the brilliance of his conversational talents diverted attention from a peculiarly unprepossessing countenance. Apart from the 'Histoire des Sevarambes,' his only excursion into literature was a 'Grammaire de la Langue française,' published in 1681; this, two years later, he translated into English. In spite of his grammatical theories it must be admitted that his style is not remarkable for ease, elegance, or even for correctness. But the fatuousness of the proverb anent practising and preaching had been once for all triumphantly demonstrated by Rabelais' monk, who on being taxed with inconsistency, compared himself with the sign-post, which though it pointed out the way did not walk in it.

The 'Histoire des Sevarambes' purports to be the memoirs of Captain Siden, who was cast away with a full ship's company on the coasts of the Antipodes, in the year 1656. Perhaps the most curious fact about the book is that it made its first appearance in English under the title 'History of the Sevarites or Sevarambi, a nation inhabiting part of the third continent, commonly called Terrae Australes Incognitae, with an account of their admirable government, religion, customs, and language; written by one Captain Siden, a worthy person, who, together with many others, was cast upon those coasts, and lived many years in that country; London: printed for Henry Burne, at the Gun, at the West End of St. Paul's Churchyard, 1675'; two years before the publication of the French edition. A second part, 'more wonderful and delightful than the first,' appeared in 1679; the

licence by Roger Lestrang bearing the date 25th February, 1678⁸/₉. We give the titles in full because endless controversy has arisen as to the origin of the book, and claims to its authorship have been made on behalf of Isaac Vossius, Leibnitz, and Algernon Sidney. These claims are, however, purely conjectural, whereas all the evidence points to Vairasse as the author of the original work. For instance, it is surely due to no mere coincidence that the name of the supposed narrator 'Siden' is an anagram of 'Denis,' whilst that of 'Sevarias,' the law-giver of the Sevarambians, is as clearly an anagram of 'Vairasse." Moreover, there are traces of French construction in certain sentences which convince us that the English edition is a translation from the French.¹

A German version of the book was published in 1680, and a Dutch in 1682, both of which appear to have been taken from the French. The book soon came under the ban of the Church; though no steps seem to have been taken against its author. After a while the English version of the story seems to have been forgotten, as all the later editions were undoubtedly translations. The 'Histoire des Sevarambes' was familiar to Hume, who refers to it as an 'admirable romance'; and to Wieland, who constantly borrowed from it. There is extant a

¹ A curious parallel to the appearance of the English translation of the 'Histoire des Sevarambes' before the publication of the French original is afforded by Beckford's 'Vathek,' of which an English version, 'sufficiently idiomatic to have entirely eclipsed and to have frequently been taken for the original, was published anonymously and surreptitiously in 1784.' The original French work was published at Paris and Lausanne in 1787.

letter from William Taylor of Norwich, in which he asks Southey if he knows who wrote the book, and suggests Maurice Ashley, the translator of Xenophon, as possibly the author. To this Southey replied: "Of the Sevarambians, I know nothing." He afterwards read it, however, and pronounced it to be a remarkable work.

Not the least striking part of the book is that in which the author deals with the language and literature of the country; and here his linguistic attainments stood him in good stead. Perhaps no work of fiction has been composed with greater art or more painstaking thoroughness than this section of the '*Histoire des Sevarambes*.' A close study of this chapter gives the reader an extraordinarily clear impression of the groundwork of the tongue. Nouns are declined and verbs conjugated in the most plausible manner; and, incidentally, the grammarians of the day come in for some shrewd criticisms. In a suggestive passage, Vairasse ridicules the fashionable poetical dramas of the age, and advocates the use of prose in all writings for the stage; for what can be more ludicrous, says he, than

De vouloir que sur le théâtre dans un changement de scène, celui qui était absent et qui n'avait pas entendu les dernières paroles qu'on avait dites avant qu'il arriva, rime avec le dernier vers qu'on a prononcé, comme si'il avait ouï, et qu'on lui avait donné le temps de chercher une rime pour y répondre.

Given the nature of the book it was almost inevitable that it should have been compared with

'Gulliver's Travels,' and some have suggested that Swift found in it more than a hint for his masterpiece. One thing is certain, if Swift borrowed from Vairasse, all the gall and bitterness of 'Gulliver' is his own, for there is no trace of misanthropy in the narrative of the kindly Frenchman, who consistently preached the gospel of Optimism, which teaches that this is the best of possible worlds, and that if a man be wise, he will stay at home and cultivate his garden. Yet there are certainly one or two passages which afford a curious instance of how great wits jump. Writing of the law against perjury Vairasse says:

La médisance et les calomnies sont sévèrement punies, et s'il arrive qu'un d'entre eux accuse quelqu'un de ses concitoyens sans pouvoir prouver son accusation, il n'est pas seulement noté d'infamie, mais il est encore sévèrement châtié par les lois.

In the kingdom of Lilliput the law against this offence differed only in the severity of its punishment:

But if the person accused maketh his innocence plainly to appear upon his trial, the accuser is immediately put to an ignominious death; and out of his goods or lands the innocent person is quadruply recompensed for the loss of his time, for the danger he underwent, for the hardship of his imprisonment, and for all the charges he hath been at in making his defence.

In both States not only were the wicked punished, but the virtuous rewarded; and in choosing persons for public employments more regard was paid to
 18° good morals than to great abilities. The educa-

tional machinery of the two countries is very much alike, and the 'sweet reasonableness' of the French author's system enables him to sustain the comparison easily enough.

In view of these facts, it is remarkable that shortly after the appearance of 'Gulliver,' 'a third volume was published by an unblushing forger, as early as 1727, without printer's name, a great part of which is unacknowledged plunder from a work entitled "*Histoire des Sevarambes*," ascribed to M. Alletz, and suppressed in France and other Catholic countries, on account of its deistical opinions.' Our quotation is from Sir Walter Scott's 'Memoir of Swift,' and it would appear from it that Scott was not aware of the English edition; and also, that he had not read the spurious 'Gulliver,' or his sense of humour would not have allowed him to criticise so sharply a book which might very well have been a first draft of the 'Travels.' However that may be, the 'sequel' is an able piece of work, so able, indeed, that Swift himself need not have been ashamed to put his name to it.

The aborigines of Sevarambia are described as a remarkably fine race, tall of stature and straight of limb, hospitable and well-disposed. They lived in log cabins, situated in a fat pasture land, and worshipped the sun in the orthodox manner; in short, they were endowed with all the virtues that the dreamers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries loved to ascribe to the unsophisticated savage. It is true that the prevailing fashion in the dress of both sexes was of the simplest; but any deficiency of toilette that might be urged against them was

remedied by modesty, which covered them as with a garment. Indeed, they would have been the happiest people in the world had it not been for a fierce religious war waged against them by a nation, from 'beyond the mountains,' who had been led astray by the vain imaginings of the false prophet Stroukaras. Sevarias, however, brought peace in his train, and from that time religious feuds were unknown. Under this able ruler and his successors, the Sevarambians made such rapid progress that when Captain Siden and his companions came to dwell among them, they had attained a degree of culture undreamed of by the nations of Europe.

The great principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity formed the keystone of their constitution. In religion they held that every man's belief was entitled to respect:

Parce qu'il n'est pas au pouvoir des gens de croire tout ce qu'ils voudraient bien croire; que la foi est toujours fondée sur quelque raison précédente qui persuade le croyant, et sans laquelle, il lui est impossible d'embrasser aucune profession.

When these words were written the bigoted and cold-hearted widow of Paul Scarron had already gained complete ascendancy over the King, and many a less pronounced heretic than Vairasse was already proving the expediency of observing the proverb, *quieta non movere*—let sleeping gods lie.

Here again it is interesting to compare this and other passages on toleration with the opinions which Swift puts into the mouth of the King of Brobdingnag:

He said he knew no reason why those who entertain opinions prejudicial to the public should be obliged to change, or should not be obliged to conceal them. And as it was tyranny in any government to require the first, so it was weakness not to enforce the second: for a man may be allowed to keep poisons in his closet, but not to vend them about for cordials.

Believing that most of the ills of society are due to ambition and avarice, the Sevarambians had early adopted the principles of equality and the community of goods; and they were confirmed in these opinions by Captain Siden's account of the condition of the people in European countries. They were amazed to learn that one class were allowed to live in idle luxury, while hunger and misery was the portion of another; for Sevarias had taught that '*un veritable prince brille moins par l'éclat de son diadème que par le bonheur de ses sujets.*' Nor would they tolerate idleness, '*la nourrice des vices,*' every able-bodied man and woman being compelled by law to work eight hours every day.

On being questioned as to their views respecting capital punishment, they said:

Il y avait de l'inhumanité a faire mourir un concitoyen, et lui ôter ce qu'on ne peut pas lui donner; et de la folie a détruire une personne qui peut expier son crime par des services utiles au public.

The originality of the people asserted itself in their manners and customs no less than in their opinions. They dwelt in a sort of phalansteries, called Osmasia, an idea borrowed by Fourier when developing his ideal social system, nearly a century

and a half later. The education of the young was directed solely by the State, and for that purpose all children were taken from their parents at seven years of age. It is pleasant to learn that no second-rate books were tolerated in this happy country; but, unfortunately, no light is thrown on the difficult art of telling a good book from a bad one.

In spite of their advanced civilization, we are assured that the principles of the Sevarambians remained so excellent that they would have done credit to a people far less removed from the natural state.

There is a force of realization about this sober narrative, and an air of authenticity, which is not altogether unworthy of a Swift or a Defoe. One thing is certain, Vairasse d'Alais had something definite to say, and he did not hesitate to say it. He was a revolutionist and a prophet; and though for long years his voice was that of one crying in the wilderness, his teachings were destined to inspire others, greater than he, to carry on the work which he had begun.

JOHN RIVERS.