

## Letters of Gabriel Peignot.

I OWE the opportunity of once more directing attention to the bibliographer Peignot to the kindness of that excellent member of the Library Association, Mr. Sam Timmins. After the appearance of my first paper on this subject (see *Library Chronicle*, vol v., No. 58, p. 177) Mr. Timmins kindly lent me a bundle of letters in MS. which Peignot had written mostly from Dijon to his friend M. Baulmont, comptroller of the Post Office at Vesoul. Multifarious occupations compelled me to defer the task of examining these letters, and I am bound to confess that the labour has not yielded matter of so much interest as I anticipated. The light, pleasant style which marks the correspondence is what one expects from a fellow countryman of Madame de Sévigné.

The letters, many of which were published in 1857, were written from different towns of France while the *Inspector of Studies* was on his official rounds. They derive interest from the notices of places little known in England and described here with unassuming simplicity.

It may still be said of Peignot in connection with these letters what Brunet said of his published works:—"There is no pretension about his judgments—no false assumption. Always modest in his writings, always indulgent towards other writers, this estimable man of letters must have met with more friends than censors." We get a glimpse of his personality in a letter he wrote from Saumur on 19th September, 1820. He describes the town as picturesquely situated on an amphitheatre of rock. He called at the library and was received by the librarian in a way that "made him blush." "He (the librarian) spoke of the happiness he felt in having me there, and other absurdities. He had my bibliographical works and never ceased paying me compliments enough to break my nose (*me casser le nez*). I gave him some information of editions of the XVth century which only gave him a greater fancy for my poor little person."

On another occasion some eight years later he stayed on his rounds at Lyons, and there was invited by M. Pericaud, the librarian, to inspect the public library. He found among other curiosities an old book relating to Vespasian, Emperor of Rome. According to this version of the legend, that august personage was cured of a bad ulcer by St. Veronica and the holy face of the Saviour. In gratitude for the cure, the Roman Emperor, followed by his dukes, counts, barons and knights, destroyed Jerusalem, was afterwards baptised, confessed and received the communion at the hands of his good friend the apostle of Rome. Pilate, having defended Jerusalem to the last extremity, was excommunicated and banished to Vienne. Peignot was delighted with this curious mixture of Roman and mediæval history. Singular to relate, these are almost the only two notices, contained in more than a hundred of the letters, of libraries and books, excepting his own publications. Of other matter, such as politics and important contemporary events, there is nothing to be found. Probably the writer, who was a confirmed royalist, had acquired the habit of epistolary caution in the days of the Directory, Consulate and Empire and retained it in his old age. A letter he wrote on 27th May, 1814, when he was threatened with dismissal from office, is one long groan. A visit which he paid the year before to Beaune, the place ridiculed by the poet Piron as inhabited by long-eared gentry, Peignot makes great fun of:—  
 "It was market day, the road up to the town was encumbered by those peaceful animals to whom Beaune owes a renown more durable than brass or marble. What a number of ears! and of what a length! Doubtless those gentlemen recognised in my heavy, massive driver a colleague and friend, for the moment he appeared in the midst of them, they saluted him with acclamation. This concert of *hian! hian!* was divine. The good man smiled his gratitude and perfectly enjoyed the harmony, but I not belonging to this parish and preferring more refined pleasures, bade him hasten forward."

The first letter of the series is dated from Grai, 29th May, 1813, when he first went to reside in Dijon. The last of the series is dated 11th November, 1845, four years before his death.

In August, 1814, Talma, the famous actor, visited Dijon and played "Hamlet" there, producing a great sensation. The women among the audience uttered loud cries, and many of them left the theatre, followed by some of the men. To his great delight,

Peignot was invited by a M. Didiet to meet Talma and his wife at dinner. When the company met, they were, says the letter-writer, "like the Muses" in number. "Talma," he continues, "is as amiable in society as he is admirable on the stage. Of the five hours that elapsed, through the dinner to the coffee, I had three and a-half to converse with him specially, and the time did not seem to me long. As at the beginning of dinner, M. Demontreau put several questions to me on literature and bibliography, which I answered in a satisfactory manner; it would seem that Talma was induced to address me in particular. He is very well informed, and he related to me some incidents of his life. He was a pupil of the Abbé Lille; and he cited an ode of Horace which he had turned into French verse. Intimately connected with Champfort he was with him during the dying hours which the unfortunate poet lived after his attempt at suicide. . . . He spoke much of Madame de Stael. In the way of good reading he places Ducis at the head of all. Delille reads only his own works well; Teissier is feeble; Laharpe detestable, screaming, biting, and spiteful. Champfort sparkled with wit, but he was very caustic; and his conversation had the effect of a display of fireworks. I asked Talma how old he was. He would say no more than that he was older than I am. Yet my hair is turning grey, and his locks are a beautiful black. He told me that his hair was very well dyed, and then I saw signs of grey underneath. He spoke of literature, and of his library. He detests novels, and looks out for history, travels and antiquities. He is very strong on costume, and quoted specimens of each reign of our monarchy. He is marvellously well acquainted with manuscripts: and corrected certain anachronisms in the descriptions of mediæval manuscripts in the Dijon Library. He complained of the fatigue he endured when playing with bad actors, who forced him often to play a double part. He is very short-sighted; for which I pitied him. 'Congratulate me rather,' he said, 'owing to my short-sight; when I am acting, I see nobody in the theatre, and give myself wholly to the part I am playing.'

"His voice is agreeable in conversation; but when he raises it to the tragic tone he makes the ceiling shake. I should never finish if I were to tell you all that he said during this agreeable evening. With him was a young lady, to whom he seemed very attentive. She is not his wife. I forgot to say he told us many curious stories of Fouché, and spoke much of Buonaparte. Of

the last named he said, 'I like him, and I ought to do so, for he has overwhelmed me with benefits. He has hurled himself into the abyss, and he is unfortunate but not detestable, especially not to those on whom he has conferred benefits. Louis is on the throne, and is our king. I would sacrifice myself to prevent anyone from doing him harm, and to defend him.' "

Two of Peignot's sons have just returned from Paris, young officers in the army, and have "jumped upon his neck." This makes letter-writing rather difficult, and he complains that his *petits diables de militaires* make such a noise that he can write no more.

I have given this long extract, not only because the subject is more or less interesting in itself, but also to show how pleasantly Peignot writes on familiar topics.

M. Didiet, the host of Peignot and Talma, had been so fortunate to dig up in his garden an earthenware pot of coins of the time of Charles VI., and of one of these Peignot became the happy possessor. With a true collector's devotion to his passion Peignot, in 1826, began to write his account of curious wills, the complete edition of which was not published till 1849. More than seventy pages of the second volume of the work are occupied by a will of Napoleon Bonaparte, from which it appears that the great soldier was very liberal in bequeathing property that he did not possess. Many of the most eccentric wills printed in the book are of course attributed to English people, and the compiler seems surprised at himself when printing the will of M. Helloin, a judge at Caen, adding that it is strange the freak commanded in the will did not originate on the northern side of the channel. M. Helloin was so fond of his bed and so much addicted to lying therein that he directed his executors to have him buried with his bed exactly as he lay when death should surprise him.

Peignot's letters refer continually to his collection of wills, which he is incessantly striving to increase. One of the most comical of his burlesques is a mock petition to his publisher and friends to make room for two newly-found wills which he has discovered after the book had gone to press and was announced to be complete.

Here and there among the letters glimpses are to be obtained of their kindly writer's health and worldly prospects. Under the date of 31st December, 1819, he complains of weakness of the stomach, and in wishing a happy new year to his correspondent he writes, "Welcome 1820, for 1819 has only two hours to live,

after which it will fall for ever into the gulf of eternity. Let us endeavour to bury thirty years more." He was unconsciously prophesying truly, for he died in 1849. "Adieu!" he continues, "let us meanwhile laugh, drink—I was going to say eat, but my grumbling stomach warns me that that is not given to everybody in the world."

Our letter writer seems to have generally a good opinion of Englishmen. He gives due credit in one of his epistles to an Englishman who sounded the Lake of Geneva and found that it was 900 feet at the deepest part; 430 feet near shore and 36 feet in places near the centre. Among Peignot's intimate friends was the poet Armand Gouffé who lived at Beaune. He was a popular writer of songs, bacchanal and otherwise. Charles Nodier was also a friend mentioned in these letters as crying out for a third edition of "Peignot's Bibliographie." It must be noted here that Peignot's first publication was anonymous, and appeared in "L'an IV.," under the title of "Opuscules philosophiques et poetiques du frere Jérôme mises au jour par son cousin Gabriel P.," 18mo, Paris. It is generally admitted that his works did much to popularise the study of bibliography.

The list of Peignot's publications which appeared in 1830, was privately printed and distributed among friends as a warning against literary poachers who adopted his titles and not unfrequently the matter of his books. He dubs offenders of this kind with the title of "ostrogothiques," which sounds more terrible than our word "vandals."

It is amusing to read of the excitement caused among Peignot and his friends both at Dijon and at Vesoul by the appearance of Henry Bohn's huge "Guinea Catalogue."

One instance more of the action of the whirligig of time occurs in one of Peignot's letters where a particular hybrid of umbrella and parasol, now named in London shops "en tout cas" was fifty years ago styled in Burgundy "si tu veux," *e.g.* :

S' il fait beau,  
Prends ton manteau ;  
S' il pleut,  
Prends le si tu veux.

ROBERT HARRISON.