

**BEAUME
GEORGES**

FROMENTIN

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I. – THE FIRST STEPS

EUGÈNE-SAMUEL-AUGUSTE

FROMENTIN-

DUPEUX was born at La Rochelle on the twenty-fourth of October, 1820. His family was a very old one and held in high honour throughout Aunis and Saintonge.

Aunis, one of the ancient provinces of France, glows languidly beneath the caresses of a humid sun, enveloped in a thin veil of ocean mists, and at times she seems to float in the midst of her waves and her sands, beneath a sky bounded by remote and indeterminate horizons, vague and immense, like some vast wreckage overgrown with gardens and oases. For more than a century, she was downtrodden by the English. But if she owes them the pain and humiliation of defeat, they at least inspired her with a passion for commercial greatness and a desire for wealth. Through her shipowners and bankers, she amassed riches that permitted her to devote a goodly share of her days to leisure and festivities, for the betterment of her material welfare and the embellishment of her mind. Thus in the midst of this industrious community, faithful to its duties, jealous of its liberty, there was slowly formed a powerful and cultured bourgeois class, eager for

all forms of intellectual improvement.

Eugène Fromentin's family was, on the father's side, attached by ancient roots to the soil of Aunis. His ancestors were nearly all of them lawyers and judges, and as far back as they can be traced, even to the beginning of the eighteenth century, formed a part of this bourgeois class, which, in that region of ardent Protestantism, constituted a sort of aristocracy.

His father was a physician of great ability, and for thirty-three years was director of the Lafond insane asylum, which he had founded not far from La Rochelle. He had a reputation for wit, but indecision and suspicion stifled the better impulses of his nature. Fromentin's mother, whose educational advantages had been slight, had by contrast a sensitive and warmhearted disposition. It was she whom the painter resembled in all the details of his physical nature and in all the qualities of his moral nature, while Charles, his elder brother, practical and taciturn, resembled their father, whose vocation he followed.

The mentality of Eugène Fromentin developed early. At school, he surprised all his instructors by his ability to assimilate knowledge and to think things out for himself, and he was loved by them all. Later on, he confessed that "his childhood had been very lively, almost boisterous." But somewhere during his fifteenth year, a marked change took place in him. "I had involuntarily formed the habit," he confessed further, "of reserve and silence, a habit that was often to my disadvantage, and which was respected quite as much through pity as through

tolerance. Yet it is to this habit that I owed the chance to develop in accordance with my nature; otherwise, I should have grown up warped and unfit.” And M. Pierre Blanchon, from whose admirably documented volume¹ these details are borrowed, adds further: “His views upon art and poetry clashed with the bourgeois ideas of his environment; the doctor looked upon them as mere nonsense, while his mother feared that they would lead him into temptation.” As a matter of fact, at the very period when he was passing through the moral crisis of adolescence, a romantic attachment shook his soul to its very depths with the emotions of love.

About half a league from town, just before entering the village of Saint-Maurice, the Fromentins owned a country place. The country roundabout is nothing but a level plain, fertile and bare, stretching away to the coast, where the sea, harnessed by Richelieu, loses, among its encroaching capes and islands, all its grandeur and poetry. Among their country neighbours there happened to be a certain Madame X., left, at the age of forty-three, the widow of a captain in the merchant marine. She spent her winters at La Rochelle and her summers at Saint-Maurice. She had a daughter, born at Port Louis, in the island of Martinique, in 1817, and consequently three years older than Eugène Fromentin. Madeleine – let us, from a feeling of pious respect, refer to her only by the name she bears in *Dominique*– Madeleine, being of Creole blood on her mother’s

¹ Eugène Fromentin, *Lettres de Jeunesse*.

side, had the darkest of hair and eyes, combined with a fair and almost colourless complexion. We know next to nothing about her. He had conceived for her a violent attachment. Brusquely, she was snatched from the heaven in which the secret hopes and dreams of his fifteen years had framed her. She became the wife of an assistant collector of taxes. Fromentin suffered impotently from jealousy, and all the more because his passion was sincere and ingenuous. His light-heartedness vanished, together with his self-assurance; he mistrusted his own sentiments, he probed and analyzed his thoughts. To retire to the comforting privacy of his fireside and bury himself in literary work, poetry, critical essays, fragments of drama, such was his way of healing his wounds.

Some of these productions of his adolescence reveal him as a student well grounded in rhetoric, very serious-minded and painstaking, nurtured on the solid substance of the best classics, and possessed of an uneasy spirit, in which there had already awakened a taste for big, fundamental ideas, together with a goading ambition to achieve, through his own unaided efforts, some creative work of beauty. Furthermore, these early efforts show a great facility of expression, an abundant and substantial eloquence that seeks distinction, not by affecting strange mannerisms, but by frankly employing the simplest of methods.

Having completed his college course, Fromentin lived for a year somewhat at haphazard. His literary efforts became known in La Rochelle, and before long won him the esteem of the

numerous men of letters who, in those days, to us the legendary days of the post-chaise and stage-coach, were drawn to a city where the social life was so distinctive and so intense. From time to time, he would steal out in the evening and furtively slip a manuscript in prose or verse into the letter-box of the *Journal de La Rochelle*. The next morning the poem or story or critical paragraph would appear, without signature, in the columns of the journal. But everyone who read it would, without hesitation, mentally sign the name of Fromentin.

He was now beginning to sketch and paint. The morose doctor, his father, who was himself an amateur artist of no mean ability, initiated him into the rudiments of the craft. The hour had come, however, for choosing some serious career for the lad. Charles was in Paris, studying medicine. Eugène was piloted in the direction of the law. He left La Rochelle in November, 1839, not without some pangs, for he was leaving behind him, perhaps forever, the woman whom he had worshipped with all his soul; and, sensitive and nervous as he was, he experienced a genuine dread of invading unknown territory, the huge city of Paris, so far away from his own kindly province, which had been so indulgent to his early efforts, so tender to the first dreams of his heart. At this time, his figure was slender and well proportioned, save that he was somewhat too short in the leg. His head was comparatively a trifle large. His pale complexion was at times tinged with a faint flush. His long brown hair fell upon his shoulders. His cheeks were full, the contour of his face formed a fine, elongated oval.

His lips, surmounted by a budding moustache, were heavy; his forehead high and rounded and very handsome. His nose, which in later years filled out and assumed an aquiline form, was at that time perfectly straight. His eyes, beneath well-formed eyebrows, were brown, and perhaps somewhat too large, but very attractive and very gentle, far more so than they were later on; in moments of enthusiasm, which in those days were fairly frequent, or when under the influence of astonishment or sadness, he would raise them towards heaven with an expression of profundity.

In Paris, he lived at first by himself and in seclusion. His aversion to vulgarity and extravagances of speech or manners was ridiculed by some of his comrades, who nicknamed him "little Monsieur Comme-il-faut." He followed the courses in the law school only halfheartedly, but was assiduous in his attendance at the lectures of Michelet, Quinet, and Sainte-Beuve, in the Sorbonne.

As a connoisseur of the beautiful in human handiwork, Fromentin soon learned to love Paris and to appreciate, in her environs, Versailles, Saint-Germain, Montmorency, those picturesque landscapes that combine the charm of nature with the glorious high-lights of history. Although without a teacher, he spent more and more time in sketching the changing forms of life, and strove, so far as it lay in him, to retain in his drawings the secret tremors of the soul. "These are his first stumbling utterances as a landscape painter," wrote M. Louis Gonse in his extensive and admirable work, critical as well as biographical, in

which he has reproduced the earliest known sketch by Fromentin, a scene from *Chatterton*, drawn the morning after a performance of De Vigny's drama at the Théâtre Française. This pen-and-ink sketch, dated April 2, 1841, shows facility, sureness of touch, and a certain felicity in composition.

Far from relinquishing his literary efforts, Fromentin applied himself, from this time onward, with increased ardour, and, throwing off the trammels of romanticism, produced poems, critical studies, and even a comedy, written in collaboration with his friend, Emile Deltrémieux.

From this time onward, Fromentin held firmly to a conviction on which all his efforts as painter and author were destined to be based: namely, that an artist, instead of imitating the masters, should draw his inspiration solely from himself, from his own emotions and memories, and that, if he aspires to speak sincerely, in a new and original language, he ought to belong to some one country, to reflect its image and to repeat its accent. As a matter of fact, he himself was not, excepting in appearance, uprooted from his native soil. In the depths of his inmost consciousness, there always resounded the echo of his province.

But for the time being, while he amused himself in studying the reasons for things and administering to himself doses of his own keen analysis, he suffered from that curious affliction of dual personality which, twenty-five years later, he described in *Dominique*: "That cruel gift of being able to look on at one's own life as at a performance given by someone else. Sensibility is an

admirable gift; in the order of creation it may become a rare power, but on one condition: namely, that one does not turn it against oneself.”

Having taken his licentiate's degree, Fromentin pursued his studies for the doctorate. He entered the law office of M. Denormandie. There he met, as fellow clerks, the future lawyer, M. Nicolet, and Forcade de la Roquette, destined later to become minister. Here Fromentin spent his time chiefly in drawing sketches on the desk pads, the margins of legal pleadings, and even the panels of the doors. One day he descended into the courtyard and covered the coach-house, stable, and party-wall with his artistic efforts. He paid long and frequent visits to the Louvre. The Italian school left him wellnigh indifferent. In the French school he ranked Chardin above all the rest. But already his chief enthusiasm was reserved for the Dutch. *The Ford*, by Wynautes, with figures by Berchem, and Ruysdaël's *Sunstroke* and *Dyke beaten by the Sea* fascinated him. At times, he conceived a fine passion for Rubens. Rembrandt, however, from first to last, was very nearly, if not quite, incomprehensible to him. “He reproached Ingres,” records M. Louis Gonse, “for being an imitator of Raphael; nevertheless, he declared, after seeing one of Ingres' sketches, that he was a *sculptor of the first order*. As regards music, he knew Mozart and Beethoven only by reputation; he loved Bellini, Donizetti, etc., and the entire sensualistic school of Rossini.”

Apparently Fromentin was now hesitating between two paths,

that of the fine arts and that of belles-lettres. It is my own deep conviction that his choice had already been made. He knew that literature, worthily conceived and liberally practised, cannot become a career capable of supporting the man who follows it. He saw daily, with his wise and prudent judgment, that painting, on the contrary, can guarantee bread and fuel to an artist of real talent, respectful of his art and loyal in his efforts. Accordingly, he wrote henceforth in his leisure hours, and when the mood was on him, economizing his strength and hoping only that the art of his written word might attract attention and perhaps awaken sympathy.

At last, unable to endure any longer the legal dust of M. Denormandie's office, he boldly confided to a friend of the family his horror of judicial procedure, and confessed his desire to devote himself wholly to painting. This friend, Charles Michel, promptly went to La Rochelle, to open negotiations with Dr. Fromentin; and the latter, after a vigorous protest, ended by yielding. But, priding himself on his knowledge of such matters, he insisted upon choosing Eugène's instructor, and selected the painter Rémond, who at that time represented the academic school of landscape painting. Fortunately for him, Eugène did not remain long in Rémond's studio, but left it to enter that of Cabat. A correct and careful artist, and one of the best, next to Dupré and Rousseau, Cabat had opened a new path for landscape painting – a path in which it would not be very hard to discover the influence which this celebrated master of the

landscape exerted over the earlier manner of his pupil, through his sympathetic understanding of his subjects and the grace and distinction of his art.

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