

BROMET WILLIAM

PEREGRINE IN
FRANCE

William Bromet

Peregrine in France

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William Bromet

Peregrine in France / A Lounger's Journal, in Familiar Letters to his Friend

*"And in his brain,
Which is as dry as the remainder biscuit
After a voyage, he hath strange places cramm'd
With observation – the which he vents
In mangled forms."*

As you like it.

PREFACE

The friend who has ventured to send these letters to the press feels it necessary to state, in apology for the insufficiency of such a trifle to meet the public eye, that they are actually published without the knowledge of Peregrine (who is still abroad) and chiefly with the view of giving copies to the numerous friends by whom he is so justly regarded. The editor, therefore, relying on the indulgence of those friends, humbly also deprecates the stranger critic's censure, both for poor Peregrine and himself.

LETTER I

Paris, December 14, 1815.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

Arrived safely at this interesting metropolis, I take the earliest opportunity of relieving the affectionate anxiety you expressed over our parting glass, by the assurance that I have happily escaped all the evils prognosticated by some of our acquaintance from a journey at this inclement season.

Those indeed of the inquisitive family of John Bull, who look only for luxury and convenience in travelling, will do well never to leave the comforts of their own happy island from motives of expected pleasure, as they will be sure to be fretted by a series of petty disappointments and vexations which fall to the lot of every traveller. A little forethought may occasionally be necessary, but I am convinced that he alone will truly enjoy a continental trip who knows how at once to reconcile himself to the chances of the moment, derive from them all the good he can, thank God for it, – and be satisfied.

Without more prosing I will endeavour to comply with Mrs. – 's request, and, trying to overcome my propensity to lounging indolence, send you, from time to time, such crude observations as may suggest themselves in my peregrinations through some of the towns and provinces of France, and during my short stay in the capital; although I fear all novelty on this subject has already met your eye, from the abler pens of more accomplished tourists.

At Dover I repaired immediately to the York Hotel, where the host and hostess justified all you had told me of their attention and civility. I found that the mail packet would attempt to get out of harbour on Saturday afternoon; the captain had in vain endeavoured to put to sea that morning; however, we succeeded on a second trial, and held one course to Boulogne, which we reached in about four hours. The vessel was very much crowded, having the mails of four days on board, and the accumulation of four days' passengers. It was very cold, and I was, as usual, sea-sick. I went on shore about eleven o'clock that night, and was conducted to an hotel in the upper town, all those of the lower town, which are the best, being full. I took under my protection an English lady proceeding to her husband at Havre-de-Grace. We knocked up the host, hostess, and drowsy servants, who, however, soon cooked us some broiled whittings and lean mutton-chops (*coutelets de mouton*); and after having taken a little *eau de vie* and warm Burgundy, I was conducted to my bed-room, having first seen my fellow traveller safely lodged in hers. The waiter, "*garçon*," was an Englishman, with all the obliging willingness of the French. I was surprised to find my dormitory so comfortable, having supped in a dirty *uncomfortable* apartment, in which I believe slept mine host and his wife, whom we had routed out of their snug quarters from an alcove at one corner of it. My said bed-chamber was large, and on the ground floor; at one end was a good wood fire blazing on the hearth, and at the other a comfortable bed in a recess, with clean sheets, &c.; over the fire-place a very fine chimney-glass, and upon a large clumsy deal table stood a basin and ewer of thick French earthenware and of peculiar form, the basin having that of an English salad-bowl with a flat bottom, – of course it is inconvenient for its purpose. Soap is only brought when you ask for it, and is an extra charge. All the bed-chambers I have yet seen answer this description, which perhaps you will think tedious; but every thing at the moment, with the warm colouring of first impressions in a foreign country, was interesting to me.

On going to the custom-house next morning, I found all my baggage, except my drawing table, camera, and apparatus; I hope to regain them, as I gave directions to Mrs. Parker, an Englishwoman, who keeps the Hotel d'Angleterre, to forward them to me at Paris in case they were left on board the packet; but there are so many porters (women principally) who attend upon the landing of a boat, and, like as many harpies, seize upon your packages, *malgré vous*, that it is more than probable I shall never see them again; in which case you must not expect very accurate sketching.

À propos, talking of female porters, let me inform you that, in spite of the boasted gallantry of the French nation, some of the most laborious part of the work, agricultural as well as commercial, is performed by women. This may, however, be in a degree owing to the exhaustion of male population, occasioned by the continued wars in which unhappy France has been so long involved by the insatiate ambition of her late ruler.

After managing, as well as I could, the affair of my missing drawing utensils, I took a cursory view of the town and environs, attended by a gay, obsequious droll, of the old French school, who hung about me with such an assiduous importunity it was not possible to shake him off; he stuck to me like a *burr*, and would fain have accompanied "*Mi-lord Anglois*" to Paris, or any where else: he brought Sterne's *La Fleur* so strongly to my mind, and amused me so exceedingly by his singing, and skipping about at all calls with such unaffected sprightliness, that I own I parted with him very reluctantly: but a poor philosophic loungeur, likely soon to be on half pay, had little occasion for a valet of his qualifications. An accident afforded me a proof of this good-humoured fellow's honesty, which I cannot deny myself the pleasure of relating. I had a considerable quantity of silver pieces in a bag, which, coming untied, the contents rolled on the bed and floor; I thought I had picked up the whole, but on returning to my chamber he presented me with several which had fallen into a fold of the blankets, and which I had overlooked. I afterwards also recovered a five franc piece from the *fille de chambre*. I believe, indeed, that the lower orders in France are generally honest, as well as sober and obliging; and that, although they make no scruple of outwitting, they will not actually rob John Bull.

Boulogne sur Mer is divided into an higher and lower town; the intermediate street, in which the church is situated, and which ascends gradually to the former, is wide and cheerful, and looking from the top of it, towards the opposite southern hills, an interesting view presented itself, – the remains of the hut encampments of Bonaparte's army of England. On the heights, to the northward of the town, are also the ruins of long streets of soldiers' huts, mess-houses, &c. Near this encampment Napoleon had begun to build a noble column, of a species of marble found in a neighbouring quarry: we saw a very beautiful model of it; the base and part of the shaft, already built, are about fifty feet from the ground, but the scaffolding around it runs to the projected height of the capital, viz. 150 feet, and is strongly bolted with iron. This column, intended as a trophy of imperial grandeur, would have been, when finished, a handsome object on the coast, and probably useful to the coasting mariner as a land-mark; it is now a striking monument of disappointed ambition, and may afford a salutary moral lesson both to princes and their subjects!

There are some striking views about Boulogne, which English travellers hurrying to and from the capital rarely stop to look at. The heights were every where bristled with cannon and mortars during the war, and the forts are very strong by art and nature: the approach to the harbour was therefore truly formidable when the republican flag waved on this iron-bound coast. This port is very ancient: it was here the Romans are said to have embarked for Britain, and the remains of a tower, built by them in the reign of Caligula, are still shewn. The harbour is also interesting from having been the rendezvous for the flotilla, which idly threatened to pour the imperial legions on our happy shores. Of this vaunted flotilla, consisting once of 2000 vessels, scarcely a wreck remains!

Our gallant tars always heartily despised this Lilliputian armada, unsupported by ships of force, which Boulogne and the ports near it are incapable of admitting. The harbour here being almost dry at low water, the French, in one tide, could only have got about 100 of their puny vessels into the outer roads, where, while waiting for the rest, they would have been equally exposed to destruction by our vigilant cruisers, or by a gale at N.W. Nevertheless our enterprising government, in the spring of 1804, was induced to send over, at no small cost, an expedition of several vessels, having each in their interior an immense mass of large stones clamped and cemented together, which *artificial rocks* (the wooden exterior being set on fire) were intended to be sunk at the mouth of the harbour and channels near it, and thus to block up the poor republican gun-boats for ever.

The attempt, however, to carry this scheme into execution met with several obstacles unforeseen by the projector (a civilian and a foreigner unskilled in nautical affairs), and after various fruitless efforts, the expedition was wisely abandoned on the representation of its utter inexpediency, made to the lords of the admiralty by the navy employed on the service. The stone-ships were in consequence withdrawn, but I never heard what became of them or their projector afterwards.

In viewing the sands and neighbouring beach, I was forcibly struck with the want of enterprise in the French. Such a town possessing similar advantages in England, would shortly rival Ramsgate or Brighton, and become, in the season, the resort of fashion. Here, with every natural capability for a bathing-place, they have neither machines for bathing, nor lodgings for visitants.

Embellishments, or even repairs, are rarely thought of in the provincial towns of France; the houses are large, old, and gloomy, and descend "unaltered, unimproved," "from sire to son," without any of the cheerful *agrémens* which render our smallest houses in England so delightful.

The fishing-boats of Boulogne appeared to me clumsy and ill appointed – ours are yachts in comparison of them.

Bidding now adieu to the coast, where I have kept you too long, I took my departure for Paris with a young French gentleman of Calais and the English lady mentioned before, in a cabriolet. I shall now *whisk* you speedily to the capital. We slept that night at Vernai, a small village on the other side of Abbeville, having made a slight repast at Montreuil, where I inquired of a soldier about your friend S – , whose regiment, the Inniskillen Dragoons, with the Scots Greys and Royals, was there.

Montreuil is situated on a very steep hill. Here my passport was asked for; but I shewed the hilt of my sword instead of it, which was sufficient. We left Vernai next morning, and breakfasted upon excellent coffee and mutton chops, for which, with delicious bread and butter, they charged three francs each.

Abbeville contains 18,000 inhabitants: it is situated in a pleasant valley, where the river Somme divides into several branches, and separates the town into two parts. The view, as I approached it, was very striking; something like Salisbury from Harnam Hill. Two very fine churches are the most conspicuous objects. On the road we met the Highland Brigade; and in the town was one regiment halted, and four others about to be billeted off. I parted from my agreeable fellow-travellers at Amiens, and proceeded alone in the Diligence.

I am interrupted by the postman, but shall shortly renew my narrative, and shall not therefore expect to hear from you till I write again. Adieu!

LETTER II

Creil, a dirty little town between Clermont and Chantilly. Jan. 14, 1816.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I take the opportunity of the return of a brother officer to England, to send you a brief continuation of my journal, knowing that you will make every reasonable allowance for its imperfection. In my last, which I wrote to you soon after my arrival at Paris, I believe I conducted you with me as far as Amiens, a large city, possessing a beautiful cathedral, which however I had not then an opportunity of seeing. Here, for the first time, I got into a French Diligence, the machinery and necessary, or rather *unnecessary* appendages of which I shall not attempt to describe, but shall merely say, that within they are sufficiently easy, large, and commodious. On my journey to the capital, I was amused by a warm political conversation between a Bonapartist and a Royalist, who, I think, was more strenuous in the cause of Louis than he otherwise would have been, had he not been honoured with a cross, the ribband of which he wore in one of the button-holes of his coat.

We dined at Clermont: the first dish brought was vermicelli soup – then came the meat of which it had been made, but of which, judging that I had taken its essence in the soup, I declined to partake. Afterwards came some partridges baked, in a kind of pudding, to rags. Their flavour had been so abstracted by their covering, I suppose, that I asked what birds they were. Next entered, swimming in oiled butter, a fish with a livid-purple head, the name of which I was also obliged to enquire, and found that it was a barbel. I was soon, however, able to turn my eyes to a less novel, but more pleasing object, a fowl roasted and garnished with water cresses, but without liver, gizzard, or gravy. An omelette, with salad, pears, and walnuts, completed our dinner, my first regular one in France, and of which, consequently, I took more notice than usual on such occasions. The wine put down to us was small, but not badly flavoured: small as it is, however, the French always mix it with water. This repast, for which we paid each three francs, would have been better relished by me if some of my messmates had possessed cleaner hands, and tooth-picks more convenient than a French table-knife, which is an instrument quite rude enough for its *intended* purpose.

I arrived in Paris late on the evening of the 12th of December; and finding that I could be accommodated with a bed at the hotel where the diligence stopped, after eating some cold fowl, and drinking half a bottle of wine, I requested to be shewn to my chamber, the ascent to which was by a miserable dirty staircase. The room had a tiled floor, and felt very cold and comfortless; the bed was, however, good, and furnished with a clean pair of sheets.

Next morning, after being obliged to perform my ablutions without the use of soap, an article, as I said before, never found in the bedchambers of France without special requisition, I descended the common staircase, almost as dirty as any you ever saw in Edinburgh, and found at breakfast, in the coffee-room, an old gentleman of Boston, in America. He made me acquainted with the customs of the house, and introduced me, at dinner, to a gentleman from the Havannah, and another from a small town near Valenciennes, both of whom could talk English fluently, and were very sensible, well informed men, whose society has been very useful to me.

That day being rainy, (and, by the by, *all* Paris is more dirty than the dirtiest part of London,) I contented myself with studying the map of the city; and next morning repaired, brimful of anxious curiosity, to see the Louvre and its gallery.

Elated as I was, as almost every one must be who goes upon a similar occasion, and consequently apt for disappointment, I was confounded by its grandeur. No wonder – the court of the Louvre, which has been lately restored to its pristine magnificence, is, I am told by my Flemish friend, who has travelled all over Europe, the most superb thing of its kind existing. I found my way into the

interior by means of an English officer, who, having conducted me through the gallery of statues on the ground floor, directed me up stairs to that containing the pictures.

The collection of statues has been much less encroached on by the hands of the austere justice, which has lately spoiled this famous assemblage of the finest works of art, than that of pictures. Of these, for one remaining, eight or nine have been removed; and many that are left are not, I think, worthy of having been in company with those returned to their former habitations.

There are some very fine statues which remain, and among these the Gladiator Pugnans; but the niches, which were so highly adorned by the celebrated Venus and Apollo, now yawn upon the mournful spectator with a melancholy vacancy. The galleries themselves, however, are so grand, that the sight of them alone may be esteemed a sufficient inducement for a visit to the Louvre; and indeed they seem to rejoice that their more attractive inmates have departed.

The picture gallery is badly lighted. It is the longest room I ever saw. Children, and persons of almost all ranks, were promenading through it the day I was there, which, I believe, was one on which it is open to the public at large, under the careful supervision, however, of some keepers, who wear the livery of the king's household.

In the evening I went to the Theatre Français, and saw Talma in Ulysse. I shall speak of this very excellent actor afterwards, when I describe the performance of the French Hamlet. This Theatre, where the legitimate French drama is represented, is very large, but of a very inconvenient form. The house is dirty now; but the decorations of the auditory were not, when new, so splendid as those of our London playhouses. It is lighted, as are all the theatres of Paris, by an immense chandelier suspended from the centre of the roof, without the aid of lamps or candles in front of the boxes. The orchestra, which is numerous and good, played, at the command of the audience, the national airs *Vive Henri IV.* and *Channante Gabrielle*.

The costume and scenery are very good – the former is superb, and correctly appropriate; the latter shifted only at the conclusion of each act. To each tier of boxes the price of admission is different – becoming less and less as you ascend, a regulation which ought to be adopted in our London theatres, where it is unreasonable to take the same price for the upper tier, as for those of the lower and dress circles. "They certainly manage these things better in France." – No females are permitted to enter the pit: there are, however, two seats in front, and four or five at the back, to which they may go; and the price of such seats is greater than that of the proper pit. The house was very full, for Talma always fills it; but I went late, and was badly situated. The afterpiece was adapted from the *Sultan of Marmontel*, which we have also on our English stage.

Next day, the 15th, having occasion to enter a hosier's shop, I had an opportunity of observing how necessary it is to beware of giving a French shopkeeper the full price which he will first ask for his goods, as he invariably demands more than they are worth, expecting, like the Jews in England, to be beat down considerably. His shop was on the *Boulevards du Temple*.

The *Boulevards* is a wide street or highway, with a separate foot-path on each side, and having between the footway and the coach road a row of trees, planted at regular distances, in the same way as the Mall in St. James's Park. The houses on each side are principally private ones, and large hotels, the residences of the nobility of France. There are also many small shops and stalls, and a great number of coffee-houses, and it is one of the principal promenades at Paris. It serves too as a boundary between the city and its suburbs, and on it are placed the gates of the city, of which the principal are *Porte St. Denys* and *Porte St. Martin*. They were both erected to perpetuate the remembrance of the glorious wars of Louis XIV., and are very noble, being sixty or seventy feet high, and embellished with well executed bas reliefs. They, like the Temple Bar at London, have each three ways through them; but they are much loftier than those of Temple Bar. It was by the *Porte St. Martin*, which opens into one of the principal streets of that part of Paris, that the allied sovereigns made their entry; the *Porte St. Denys* being the gate by which the kings of France usually entered.

In the evening I went to the Académie Royale de Musique, or the Opera House. The performances were Gluck's celebrated opera of *Alceste*, and a new ballet, called *Flore et Zephyr*. The orchestra is very numerous and ably directed; but the words of the opera are in the French language, which, in my opinion, is not so fit for musical expression as the Italian. The scenery and dresses were good, and, what you do not often find at an opera house, the acting was excellent. The vocal part of the performance is, however, much inferior to that in London, as Madame Catalani now sings at the Theatre des Italiens, of which her husband has lately become the proprietor.

The music of the ballet, which is delightful, is by Venua, whom I have heard play in concert on the violin in London. The story is prettily told, and the dancing, of course, the best in Europe. The house itself, like the Theatre Français, is dirty, and of an inconvenient form. It is very large, being capable of holding 3000 spectators. It does not appear, however, so large as the King's Theatre, Haymarket, nor was it ever so handsomely decorated.

It is not the custom in Paris, as in London, to go full dressed into the boxes of a theatre. On the contrary, nothing is more common than to see gentlemen with their great-coats of half a dozen capes, and ladies with their high walking bonnets, in the principal boxes in the house.

Next morning, 16th, on my way to St. Cloud, in order to report my arrival to the commanding officer, I passed through the court of the Palais des Tuileries, and saw the beautiful triumphal arch from which the Corinthian horses were lately taken. It is built almost entirely of the finest marbles, and is adorned with appropriate statues and bas-reliefs, which cover it in every part. But it is not, I think, well placed. It is a gate in form, but unlike a gate, it is not flanked by a fence; on the contrary, it stands alone, at a little distance from the superb iron rails, with golden tops, which inclose the court of the palace. It would be an improvement to bring forward the rail in a line with it, and so make a proper gate of it. The car at top remains, and the figures of Victory and Peace which conducted the removed horses; the latter are to be replaced by their models, now under the hands of the artist.

Upon the Quai des Tuileries I got into one of the many cabriolets which there ply for passengers to the towns in the neighbourhood. I passed the Champs Elysées, which appeared in a most forlorn state. They are planted with trees in every direction, in the trim formality of the ancient style, having alleys through all parts of them. But I saw no open lawns, or plots of grass, only one large grove of ugly trees, like some of the groves in Kensington Gardens, and the paths through them almost impassable.

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