



ALPHONSE DE LAMARTINE.

## The Two Great French Poets of this Century.

### FIRST PAPER.—I.

**H**ENNYSON in sending his wreath for Victor Hugo's coffin, inscribed "*To the World's Greatest Poet,*" voiced that general sentiment which had placed Hugo highest among the poets of his generation. Standing by his recent grave, we recall with new interest the two French writers who have most worthily worn the poet's crown in this nineteenth century, and whose prose works have also rendered French letters illustrious. Lamartine, twelve years Hugo's senior in age, and called from the earth sixteen years before him, claims the first place in the brief sketch we propose to give of each of these two inspired but diverse authors.

"To think is to live, to remember is to live again; this is why I have decided to write my Memoirs." Thus wrote Lamartine when verging on fourscore, an age sacred to memories of the past. As the venerable poet took up the pen to indite these last fond reminiscences, youth appeared to his failing eyes, a land of Beulah, with sunlit valleys and delectable mountains. His other works immortalize his genius, this enshrines his heart. The *Memoirs* cover only the first twenty-four years of his life. Just as he reached this point, the once active hand and brain forgot their cunning.

Alphonse de Lamartine, the only son of a noble and distinguished family, entered the world amid the storms of the French Revolution. The earliest sounds that met his ear were the *Ça Ira* and the *Marseillaise*, the rallying cries of an infuriated populace, and the hollow thud of the guillotine as it performed its gory work in the public squares, mowing down the loftiest heads of France. He could also recall a father in prison and a mother placed under a revolutionary guard in her own house.

Macon, in Lower Burgundy, the birthplace of the poet, had been the home of his family for generations. His grandfather having died possessed of a princely fortune, the three sons mutually had agreed to ignore the abolition of that law of entail passed by the hated revolutionary government, and allow the eldest son, as of old, the lion's share. The young-

est, the father of Alphonse, married a rich wife, and his children were reared in affluence.

The Lamartines were a pious family. One of the poet's uncles became a bishop, and his three aunts entered a cloister. His father, a chevalier in the royalist army until the execution of Louis XVI. rendered the royal cause hopeless, escaped the guillotine by accident, and retired with his family to Milly, a small estate owned by his wife. Here for a score of years or more they lived proscribed and exiled.

Still the future poet had a happy and beautiful childhood. His mother, the daughter of Madame des Rois, associate governess with Mme. de Genlis to the children of the Duke of Orleans, the eldest of whom became the king, Louis Philippe, had herself been educated with these scions of royalty. A lady of many accomplishments, she took charge of her children's studies, and Alphonse grew up under her care, petted by his five elder sisters and somewhat spoiled by his mother.

Milly, a lovely spot nestling amid smiling meadows and orchards, had for its near horizons the roofs and spires of Macon outlined against the Jura mountains, while the Alps towered up in the distance. These early surroundings inspired Alphonse with that adoration for nature and that profound insight into her mysteries which were to form the key-note of his poems. He was his mother's idol, and her overfond indulgence fostered that weakness of character which, in after years, made this petted darling of fortune rebel at the stern discipline of adversity.

When their son had reached the age of twenty, his parents sent him to Italy, hoping that change of scene might cure him of an ardent attachment for a young girl of the neighborhood, not his equal in station. "She inspired all my enthusiasms in 'Elvira' and 'Graziella,'" he writes in the *Confidences*. "Never was there a smile more exquisitely attractive. Neither the Muses with their golden tresses as they danced on the sacred mount of Olympus, nor Laura with her brown locks steeped in the freshness of bauchese, could compare with the beauty and charm of this adorable girl."

The family finances had been much reduced by the Revolution, and its head, a rich old bachelor, was an autocrat greatly feared by all his relatives. He peremptorily forbade the marriage of Alphonse with the young lady of his choice, declaring that if it took place, he would withdraw the annuity he now allowed his brother, and grant no dowries to the five daughters. Alphonse, whom personal considerations could not have moved, would not involve his family in distress and poverty; so for their sake he renounced the one cherished dream of his life—a love that colored all his after poetry and romance.

The poet who tells us in his *Confidences* that he was the loveliest child in the whole world, has the same charming *naïveté* in sounding his own praises at this later date. "I was at this time tall in stature," he says, "with beautiful hair waving naturally around the temples, with eyes to which mingled melancholy and ardor lent a grave, indecisive expression." An exquisite in dress even to extreme age, a fastidious toilet added much to his native elegance.

He visited Florence, Rome, and Naples, obtaining his first sight of great cities with glimpses of new and broader horizons. He reveled in the splendor of Italian skies and Italian art, and brought home with him a whole world of poetry and dreams. But he could not as yet "wreak his thought upon expression."

He had all life could offer, yet he was not happy. He had not found that which Carlyle calls the supreme blessedness—his true work. His father wished him to become a soldier; his uncles had planned for him the uneventful life of a country gentleman, but his mother, who recognized his



genius, had higher aspirations for him, and grieved to see his youth wasting away in inaction.

The restoration of the Bourbons at length opened a new career to the exiled royalists. Alphonse found a place in the king's body-guard, and going to Paris, entered with youthful zest into the gay life of that gayest of capitals. Here he soon fell in love with the lady whom he has immortalized in his works as "Julie." The story of this love, which for more than a year held him in thrall, has not been revealed to the world. We only know that its object was a lady of the highest position, that the most courted celebrities of the day gathered at her *salon*, that she died suddenly, cherishing to her last breath the affection she had inspired.

This bereavement drove Lamartine from Paris. He repaired to Switzerland where he lived for a time in seclusion with his uncle, the prelate. With the arrow still rankling in his heart, he returned to his mother's home, where his mother sought in all ways to alleviate his sorrow.

From the depth of this supreme affliction Lamartine rose a poet. The *Meditations* appeared in 1820, and won a popularity and success that made their author the idol of the hour, and brought him an appointment as secretary of the Embassy to Naples.

The adored poet and diplomatist was now in his thirtieth year—the darling of fame, fortune and society, the possessor of every gift that can fascinate and charm. The nimbus of melancholy surrounding him only enhanced his attractions. In Italy he met a young woman richly endowed in mind, heart and person, and the possessor of a great fortune. This elect lady was Miss Birch, the daughter of an English major-general. She soon became the wife of Lamartine, who immediately after the marriage, was sent as *Charge des Affaires* to Florence.

## II.

In the calm that followed the frightful storms of the Revolution, a new *renaissance* had dawned upon France. Victor Hugo formed the center of a band of brilliant young poets, who crowned him with acclamation, king of the romantic school of French poetry. Lamartine, who in his pleasant exile on the banks of the Arno, united the vocations of poetry and diplomacy, belonged to neither the classic nor romantic school, but it was his good fortune to be equally admired by both. The *Harmonies*, his second volume of poems, appeared on the eve of the revolution of 1830. This date also marks his appointment to the Athenian Embassy and his reception to the French Academy.

In the *Harmonies* Lamartine's genius attained its most sublime flights. "This volume," says Théophile Gautier, "contains poems of ineffable beauty and majestic melancholy. Its success, though immense, could not surpass that of the *Meditations*. Admiration had at the outset given Lamartine all she could accord to man. No new ray could find place in this poet's aureole; the splendors of his noon, added nothing to the brightness of his dawn."

He received honor and adulation calmly, almost indifferently. He had been flattered and worshiped from his cradle, and this breath of incense was but his native air, as poetry seemed his native language.

Upon the fall of the Bourbon dynasty in 1830, Lamartine resigned his diplomatic post, and departed for the Orient. "Not as a 'humble pilgrim, with staff and scallop shell,'" says Gautier, "but in royal luxury, in a ship freighted by himself, and bearing to the Emirs presents worthy of Haroun al Raschid."

He owned the horses of the caravan in which he traveled, the tents of royal magnificence he pitched as the splendid cohort halted. In the Lybian desert he met that famous adventuress, Lady Hester Stanhope, and she foretold from the

stars, his brilliant destiny. "Few men are born under more than one star," she said; "you were born under many stars. They all unite to serve you, and will interpose in your behalf."

"When destiny rains down upon thee all thy wishes, and thy happiness is unbounded, then is the time to fear," says a German proverb. This superhuman felicity was brief. Lamartine's wife and his two children had accompanied him to the Orient. Julie, the adored and only daughter, sickened and died suddenly. The other child, a babe, soon followed, and the ship that had sailed forth so gayly with flower-wreathed pennons, returned draped in black and bearing the dead. Never in view of the awful mysteries of life and death, has man poured forth a more touching or poetic lament than that of this father for his idolized daughter.

The Lament opens thus :

She was the last link of my broken chain,  
The heavenly orb that filled my world with light,  
Joy of my eyes, solace of care and pain,  
My sun-kist morn, my star-illumin'd night.

The mirror where my heart its image traced,  
And saw its youth upon her brow of snow ;—  
The spirit with my spirit's tendrils laced,  
In ties the strongest, purest earth can know.

O, fair young face, where all rare graces blended,  
Voice echoing mine, soul where my soul found rest,  
My second self, heaven that to me descended,  
Life where my life was living doubly blest.

My child, my life ! I cut these two bright tresses,  
From the fair halo round thy sunny brow,  
But yesterday, I twined them with caresses,—  
Ah—can they be all that is left me now ?

In 1834, two years after Lamartine's return from the Orient, the *Oriental Journeyings* appeared in two volumes. This work enshrines the soul of both a poet and an artist, and is a masterpiece of word-painting. Its gorgeous and beautiful descriptions sometimes weary with their minuteness, yet each is a gem carved with exquisite art.

A new honor—election to the Chamber of Deputies—awaited the successful author. He accepted it gladly, for amid his most brilliant literary triumphs, he had sighed for the life of the forum and the tribune.

In youth he had mapped out and written down his programme. His early manhood should be devoted to poetry. When he had achieved his poetic masterpiece, he would devote the maturity of his powers to a great historical work which should end his literary career. He would then become a soldier, or, this career failing him, he would enter the tribune, that moral and political battle-field of humanity, where as both orator and statesman, he would combine the man of speech and the man of action.

Few realize their youthful dreams, but Lamartine was born for an exceptional destiny. His most glowing visions were more than fulfilled. He became the first poet of his time; he wrote his great work, the *History of the Girondists*, in eight volumes; he mounted the tribune as a political leader, and became the foremost orator of France.

The *History of the Girondists* tells the story of the great French Revolution, and contains the germ of that later revolution which was soon to follow. It combines the fascination of romance and the dignity of history. The quite general impression that the work contains more of rhapsody than of history is entirely wrong. Lamartine claims in his introduction that his facts have all been carefully verified. The halo of poetry around his descriptions of men and things only enhances their charm. No more fascinating book was ever written.

To these pages more than to all other causes combined,



France owes that revolution of 1848 which drove Louis Philippe from the throne, and initiated the republic.

This work, one of the most brilliant successes ever achieved in authorship, fired the popular heart, and realized for its author that dream he had long secretly cherished—ascendancy over the masses.

The French populace rose in insurrection, and Lamartine was forced to confront the storm he had let loose. He proved the only man in France who could still this tempest. Like Orpheus, who charmed wild beasts with his lyre, he soothed that most desperate of all mobs, a French mob, with the charm of his presence and the magic of his eloquence.

When in the midst of furious bread riots, the rabble demanded his head, he came forth boldly and faced this surging, irresponsible multitude which stood ready to re-enact the horrors of the first French Revolution. The sublime courage of this man, who had dared risk his own life, saved thousands of other lives. The conflict lasted four days, and this splendid intrepidity and eloquence spared France another deluge of fraternal blood.

Lamartine had become at a single bound the most popular man in France. In April, 1848, he was sent to the Assembly as the representative of ten departments and backed by two million votes. He was the people's choice for the presidency, and if the elections had then come off, he would have received an overwhelming majority. As minister of foreign affairs, he was, for ten months, virtual dictator of his country.

The masses, fickle everywhere, are proverbially so in France. Seven months after the February revolution, Louis Napoleon, the man of all others most hated and distrusted by Lamartine, was elected president, Lamartine's vote reaching only a few thousands. Defeated even in his own department, he came near losing his place in the Assembly.

The radicals could not forget that he had been born and bred a royalist, that he had held high office under the Bourbons. They would not credit the fact that even in his most loyal days he had been tinctured with the progressive ideas of the first revolution, that he belonged to a family of enlightened royalists who had opposed not the main tenets of the revolution but its deeds of violence. Deeming him a recent convert to republicanism, they distrusted his sincerity. The conservative party, on the other hand, could not forgive his radicalism; while both parties regarded him as too much a poet and an idealist to be a judicious leader of men. And so France placed her destiny in the hands of another dreamer, whose dreams, unlike those of Lamartine, were all of self and self-aggrandizement. This the *coup d'état* of 1851 proved when all too late.

### III.

Lamartine's fall from the giddy height where popular acclaim had placed him was sudden and irretrievable. The provisional government of eleven, in which he had been the leading spirit, lasted only three months. From the date of its downfall his popularity steadily declined. But one newspaper, the *Pays*, supported him for the presidency. His day was over. After the *coup d'état* he retired from public life.

Always lavish of money, he had during his brief lease of power, scattered his gold with a reckless hand. His short-lived popularity proved his financial ruin. He had, in fact, spent three fortunes—his paternal inheritance, his wife's immense dowry, and the great wealth left him by his uncle. His only foolish personal expenditure had been the vast sums squandered on the Oriental journeyings. He had practiced a lavish hospitality, and yet his household expenses had never amounted to more than forty thousand francs a year. His charities had ingulfed his fortune. To the last of his life

he continued to give, and it is said that he was never known to bestow any alms but gold upon the beggars of the streets. His practice of buying vines of his vine-dressers at high prices secured by mortgage on the estates, and selling them at a discount, enriched the vine-dressers, many of whom became capitalists, but impoverished him. He always cherished the delusion that he was a great financier, and relied upon the sale of his books to help him out of embarrassment. He indeed realized enormous sums for literary work. The *Oriental Journeyings* brought him one hundred thousand francs, the *History of the Girondists* four times that sum; but Lamartine was so deeply in debt that to pay him money seemed hopeless as the labors of the Danaïdes. "Debt is a stimulus to work," he said early in his career. "I shall always manage to have an indebtedness of 200,000 francs."

His heavily mortgaged lands were so sacred to him from tender associations that the thought of selling them was torture. So was the idea of transferring his tenants to a less indulgent master. His love for his paternal estates amounted to a superstition. They had come to him burdened with many legacies, among them the portions of the five sisters to whom he was always the kindest of brothers, and various payments to numerous relatives. He tried both to save his lands and to pay his debts by literary work; hence the prodigious activity of his last twenty years. Much of this latter work is ephemeral and unworthy of his genius.

To save Milly from the executioners, he wrote the *Confidences*, reluctantly opening to the public the sealed book of sacred remembrances. Here is found the exquisite story of *Graziella*.

Lamartine, though supposed to be the vainest of men, was never content with his achievements. He sighed to be something for which nature had not designed him. At the height of his renown, he declared that he would prefer above all things else to be a great musician, adding: "I have always felt that the language of words lacks power to render the resonance and color of all that vibrates within the soul, while the language of sound is infinite. The alphabet is soon exhausted; the orchestra has no limit. I would give a thousand poems like my *Lake* for one 'Pastoral Symphony' of Beethoven's."

He used to aver that he had never written but one real poem, that the draught of this had been accidentally lost, and he had never been able to recall a line. He planned to write one book—a book of psalms, into which he would concentrate the full power of his genius, the whole warmth of his heart, the adoration of his spirit. The plan was never carried out.

He thus expresses his poetic creed in the *Confidences*: "Verse is the language of the childhood of nations, poetry that of their maturity. Poetry is no empty jingle of sounds; it consists in the idea, the sentiment, the figure, that trinity of speech which constitutes the *Word*. Rhymsters will say that I blaspheme; real poets will feel that I am right."

As the illusions of youth faded into the disappointments of mature years, Lamartine ceased to be a poet. The historian's pen also dropped from his fingers, and he became but one more of that throng who write for daily bread. Hasty compilations and catch-penny volumes usurped the place of those great works of genius which have rendered the name of Lamartine immortal. "This demigod, with reminiscences of heaven, became a hack-writer like the rest of us," says Gautier. "Pegasus wearily dragged his plow through the furrow, when one sweep of his pinions might have borne him to the stars."

Lamartine lived twenty-one years after his fall from that supreme height on which he had stood for a few brief months, the greatest man in France, a colossal figure in



sight of the nations. Three of these years he passed in the Assembly, where he was no longer recognized as a leader. The *coup d'état* and the triumph of that hated man whom Victor Hugo aptly styles "Napoleon the Little," drove Lamartine chagrined to private life, though by remaining with the opposition he might have wielded a potent influence against the imperial government.

Louis Napoleon sought him out in his retirement and tried to purchase his allegiance by paying the debts which were crushing him to the earth. He refused the bribe, but in later years accepted a governmental pension, feeling that it came from France and was due him as some slight consideration for the treasure he had poured out as water in her behalf. In 1860, the municipality of Paris gave him a country seat near the Bois du Boulogne.

That evil day he had so long sought to avert came at last. His lands were sold, but one of his nieces, Mlle. Valentine de Lamartine, from her slender means bought in the estate of Milly, where Lamartine passed his remaining summers. This niece, one of a charming group of nieces of both Lamartine and his wife, solaced the last days of her uncle with a daughter's loving care and devotion. At last accounts she was still living, a gifted, beautiful woman.

Two anecdotes tell the story of Lamartine's benevolence, two of many of the same sort which might be repeated. One evening in his wealthy days, Lassailly, the half-famished secretary of Balsac, said in his presence: "If I only had a hundred francs I should be happy for once in my life!" "Be happy for once then and for nine times more," replied Lamartine, giving him one thousand francs.

In his days of severest poverty, when the only resource of the former literary Cæsus was the offerings of subscribers to his *Course of Literature*, Lamartine, who was growing too old and feeble to walk, sought by severe economy to lay up two thousand francs for the purchase of a pony chaise. One morning a poor widow entered his study, flung herself at his feet, and said in a voice choked with sobs, that on the morrow the wretched pittance she possessed would be taken for debt, and she and her seven children left penniless.

"How much is the debt?" asked Lamartine.

"A thousand francs," was the reply.

"That is more money than I have in the world," he said sadly; "but dry your tears," he added, "I forgot." Then going to the corner cupboard where the fund for the pony chaise had slowly accumulated, he handed it to her, saying: "Here is just barely the amount."

"But the chaise?" asked a friend who was present.

"The doctor has ordered me to walk for exercise," stammered Lamartine.

In an hour of pressing necessity, friends suggested a subscription, the amounts loaned to be repaid from future editions of his works. "What! I pass around my hat like a beggar!" was his indignant reply. He was at last driven to this resource. Subscriptions were opened for him both in Europe and America, but with small success. It was a melancholy spectacle. This man who had lived on the heights of fame and fortune, and lavished gold as if he possessed the exhaustless purse of Fortunatus, now solicited public alms!

The Turkish Sultan, grateful for his glowing laudations of the Orient, had at the beginning of his reverses, given him one-third of a province just beyond Syria. But the dreams of wealth from this quarter, at first so fondly cherished by Lamartine, proved illusive. The Sultan would not allow the colonization of the land by Christians, and placed such other restrictions on the gift as to render it valueless. "The descent of Averus is easy." When Lamartine's feet had once touched the declivity of fortune, there was for him no backward step.

Lamartine was one born to grace the heights, not the lowly vales of life. He showed neither grace nor dignity in misfortune. The man who had for so many years received the incense of the multitude, could not endure neglect. This Adonis, whose youth had been so radiant, this Apollo, whose beauty had charmed even more than the brilliancy of his wit or the elevation of his genius, could not learn the happy art of growing old gracefully; he shuddered at the thought of physical decline.

His wife, the most admirable of women, was taken from him in 1867. "I am growing old in my solitary house, surrounded by the graves of my loved ones," he wrote despairingly. "Cato himself could have felt no more satiety with life, and I would a thousand times die his death of a suicide were his religion mine."

It was well for him that the light of a higher life illuminated his darkness; that he believed in Christ and immortality. "That incommensurable space between man and God which has no name, seems filled up with the mystery of the incarnation," he says in the *Confidences*.

The devoted niece shared his last days in that humble home of the Rue de la Ville l'Evêque in Paris. Friends still came and went as of old. Every evening the small drawing-room was full of guests. But a cloud began to gather around the intellect of the master. The last months of his life were passed in a state of second childhood. "Seated on the wreck of his hopes, his grandeur and his glory," he was yet happy because unconscious of sorrow and calamity.

This man whom his latest biographer, Henri de Lacretelle, calls the greatest genius of our century, the soul into which God had put most of Himself, died unmissed and unlamented by the world in which he had borne so brilliant a part. At the age of seventy-nine he was laid to rest with his fathers. He sleeps at La Point, the scene of so much happiness and of a prosperity greater than often falls to the lot of mortals. His career illustrates the fickleness of human fortune, and gives yet more melancholy significance to the old Greek adage, "Count no man happy until his death."

FRANCES A. SHAW.

### The Baby Girl.

BABY girl, with dark-brown eyes,  
Looking so innocent, arch and wise,  
With your small white hands and your dimpled feet,  
I wonder of what you are thinking, sweet!

Where are you looking? Is't far away  
Into the future? Tell me, pray,  
If beautiful visions there you see  
As bright as a baby's dreams should be,

Of happy laughter and childhood's blisses,  
Caresses, chidings, and stolen kisses.  
Of the glad days that will come and go  
While the baby shall to girlhood grow.

Ah! God grant that her future years  
May not be clouded with grief and tears.  
Those little feet, may they never stray  
In paths of sorrow and sin away.

The tiny hands so soft and white,  
May they ever be raised in the cause of right.  
The dark-brown eyes and the spotless brow  
Be always as guileless and pure as now.

God bless the baby! and if she gain,  
Whether in joy or perchance through pain,  
A home at last beyond gates of pearl,  
Not more could I ask for the baby girl.