

FRENCH MEN OF LETTERS

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French men of letters by Maurice Mauris

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MAURICE MAURIS

**FRENCH MEN
OF LETTERS**

36

Book

APPLETONS' NEW HANDY-VOLUME SERIES.

FRENCH MEN OF LETTERS.

BY

MAURICE MAURIS,

(MARCHESI DI CALENZANO).

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1880.

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M/38

TO
CHARLES A. DANA
WITH GRATEFUL HEART
BY THE AUTHOR.

Nà che poco io ti dia da imputar sono,
Se tutto quel che ho tutto ti dono.
TASSO.

395937

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

FRENCH MEN OF LETTERS.

VICTOR HUGO.

I.

Guernsey.

“Par votre ange envolé ainsi qu'une colombe!
Par ce royal enfant, doux et frêle roseau!
Grâce encore une fois—grâce au nom de la tombe,
Grâce au nom du berceau.”

I first read these lines by Victor Hugo when a mere boy. They fixed themselves on my memory, and for many days I unconsciously repeated them as though they were the burden of a song which I had learned in the nursery. Although I was ignorant of the historical events to which they owed their origin, I was struck with their sublimity, and it seemed to me impossible that any one could say in a hundred lines more than Victor Hugo had here said in four. My father then explained to me that the poet was a strong advocate of the abolition of capital punishment, and

had addressed the stanza to Louis Philippe as a plea for the life of Barbès, who had been condemned to death as the leader of the Paris insurrection of May 12, 1830. From that day I loved Victor Hugo with all my heart. In my boyish imagination I lent to him the countenance of the guardian angel of life.

As I grew older I gave days and nights to the great master's novels and poems. The new, deep, never-to-be-forgotten emotions which I experienced can not be conveyed by words; yet my mind was far too narrow to receive the wealth of his. This man, now as sweet and candid as a child, and then as tremendous as Satan in Milton's epic; as loving as a woman, and at once as fantastic and profound as Goethe; now insensate, and then sublime; now a high priest, and then an iconoclast—identifying in short the most varied phases of nature—this man was a mystery to me. I next read of his exile and misfortunes, and learned to worship him as a hero. "I felt a hand that made me bow my head in reverent admiration," and to see him became one of the most ardent desires of my youth.

At the end of the year 1866, I went to Paris. It was my first journey abroad. Victor Hugo then lived in the hospitable island of Guernsey. Having procured an introduction, I started for the island before I had caught more than a glimpse at the metropolis of the world. I need not dwell