

**A LITTLE
TOUR IN FRANCE**

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A little tour in France by Henry James

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HENRY JAMES

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A LITTLE TOUR IN FRANCE.

WE good Americans — I say it without presumption — are too apt to think that France is Paris, just as we are accused of being too apt to think that Paris is the celestial city. This is by no means the case, fortunately for those persons who take an interest in modern Gaul, and yet are still left vaguely unsatisfied by that epitome of civilization which stretches from the Arc de Triomphe to the Gymnase theatre. It had already been intimated to the author of these light pages that there are many good things in the *doux pays de France* of which you get no hint in a walk between those ornaments of the capital; but the truth had been revealed only in quick-flashing glimpses, and he was conscious of a desire to look it well in the face. To this end he started, one rainy morning in mid-September, for the charming little city of Tours, from which point it seemed possible to make a variety of fruitful excursions. His excursions resolved themselves ultimately into a journey through several provinces, — a journey which had its dull moments (as one may defy any journey not to have), but which enabled him to feel

that his proposition was demonstrated. France may be Paris, but Paris is not France ; that was perfectly evident on the return to the capital.

I must not speak, however, as if I had discovered the provinces. They were discovered, or at least revealed, by Balzac, if by any one, and are now easily accessible to visitors. It is true, I met no visitors, or only one or two, whom it was pleasant to meet. Throughout my little tour I was almost the only tourist. That is perhaps one reason why it was so successful.

I.

I AM ashamed to begin with saying that Touraine is the garden of France ; that remark has long ago lost its bloom. The town of Tours, however, has something sweet and bright, which suggests that it is surrounded by a land of fruits. It is a very agreeable little city ; few towns of its size are more ripe, more complete, or, I should suppose, in better humor with themselves and less disposed to envy the responsibilities of bigger places. It is truly the capital of its smiling province ; a region of easy abundance, of good living, of genial, comfortable, optimistic, rather indolent opinions. Balzac says in one of his tales that the real Tourangeau will not make an effort, or displace himself even, to go in search of a pleasure ; and it is not difficult to understand the sources of this amiable cynicism. He must have a vague conviction that he can only lose by almost any change. Fortune has been kind to him : he lives in a temperate, reasonable,

sociable climate, on the banks of a river which, it is true, sometimes floods the country around it, but of which the ravages appear to be so easily repaired that its aggressions may perhaps be regarded (in a region where so many good things are certain) merely as an occasion for healthy suspense. He is surrounded by fine old traditions, religious, social, architectural, culinary; and he may have the satisfaction of feeling that he is French to the core. No part of his admirable country is more characteristically national. Normandy is Normandy, Burgundy is Burgundy, Provence is Provence; but Touraine is essentially France. It is the land of Rabelais, of Descartes, of Balzac, of good books and good company, as well as good dinners and good houses. George Sand has somewhere a charming passage about the mildness, the convenient quality, of the physical conditions of central France, — “son climat souple et chaud, ses pluies abondantes et courtes.” In the autumn of 1882 the rains perhaps were less short than abundant; but when the days were fine it was impossible that anything in the way of weather could be more charming. The vineyards and orchards looked rich in the fresh, gay light; cultivation was everywhere, but everywhere it seemed to be easy. There was no visible poverty; thrift and success presented themselves as matters of good taste. The white caps of the women glittered in the sunshine, and their well-made sabots clicked cheerfully on the hard, clean roads. Touraine is a land of old châteaux, — a gallery of architectural specimens and of large hereditary properties. The peasantry have less of the luxury of ownership than in most other parts of France; though they have

enough of it to give them quite their share of that shrewdly conservative look which, in the little chafering *place* of the market-town, the stranger observes so often in the wrinkled brown masks that surmount the agricultural blouse. This is, moreover, the heart of the old French monarchy; and as that monarchy was splendid and picturesque, a reflection of the splendor still glitters in the current of the Loire. Some of the most striking events of French history have occurred on the banks of that river, and the soil it waters bloomed for a while with the flowering of the Renaissance. The Loire gives a great "style" to a landscape of which the features are not, as the phrase is, prominent, and carries the eye to distances even more poetic than the green horizons of Touraine. It is a very fitful stream, and is sometimes observed to run thin and expose all the crudities of its channel, — a great defect certainly in a river which is so much depended upon to give an air to the places it waters. But I speak of it as I saw it last; full, tranquil, powerful, bending in large slow curves, and sending back half the light of the sky. Nothing can be finer than the view of its course which you get from the battlements and terraces of Amboise. As I looked down on it from that elevation one lovely Sunday morning, through a mild glitter of autumn sunshine, it seemed the very model of a generous, beneficent stream. The most charming part of Tours is naturally the shaded quay that overlooks it, and looks across too at the friendly faubourg of Saint Symphorien and at the terraced heights which rise above this. Indeed, throughout Touraine, it is half the charm of the Loire that you can travel beside it. The great dike which protects it, or protects the