

**THE GREAT FRENCH
WRITERS. BERNARDIN
DE ST. PIERRE**

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The Great French Writers. Bernardin de St. Pierre by Arvède Barine

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ARVÈDE BARINE

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BERNARDIN DE ST. PIERRE

BY

ARVÈDE BARINE

TRANSLATED BY J. E. GORDON

WITH A PREFACE BY

AUGUSTIN BIRRELL



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P R E F A C E.

THE life of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre is so unusual, so interesting, so suggestive and amusing, that the grumpiest of Anglo-Saxons need not complain of the fact that no series of Great French Writers would be complete which did not contain the name of the author of "Paul and Virginia." Even "Shakespeare's heirs" must accept the judgment of other nations about their own authors. Our duty is to comprehend a verdict we are powerless to upset. Dorian women, as Gorgo says in the famous ode of Theocritus, have a right to chatter in a Dorian accent, and a great French writer is not necessarily the worse for a strong infusion of French sentiment.

Saint-Pierre was no ordinary person, either as man or author. His was a strong and original character, more bent on action than on literature. Though a master of style and a great painter in words, he was ever a preacher, a *sermonneur*, as Sainte-Beuve calls him. His masterpiece — as the French reckon "Paul and Virginia" to be — came by chance, and is but a chapter in a huge treatise, a parable told by the way in a voluminous gospel. It is as if Ruskin's *chef d'œuvre* were a novelette, or as if Carlyle's story had been a perfect whole, instead of a fragment and a failure.

To understand "Paul and Virginia" aright, one should read the "Études de la Nature," first published in 1784. Our grandparents read them greedily enough, either in the original or in the excellent translation of Dr. Henry Hunter, the accomplished minister of the Scots Church, London Wall. A hundred years have, however, pressed heavily upon these Studies, but to this day a tender grace clings to them. Even so will our own descendants in 1984 turn the pages of Ruskin and inhale a stray whiff of the breath which once animated a generation.

Bernardin de Saint-Pierre was as obstinate a theorist as ever lived, and his theory was that Providence had fashioned the whole world with one intent only, namely, the happiness of man. That man was not happy, Saint-Pierre sorrowfully admitted; but there was no reason whatever, save his own folly, why he should not be as happy as the days were long. Nothing could shake this faith of Saint-Pierre's. The terrible catastrophes of life — plague, pestilence, and famine, earthquakes and shipwreck — counted with him as nothing. That sombre view of human affairs which so oppressed with gloom the great mind of Bishop Butler, and drove the lighter but humaner spirit of Voltaire into a revolt half desperate, half humorous, never affected the imagination of Saint-Pierre, who none the less had a tender heart, had travelled far by land and sea, and often had laid down his head to rest with the poor and the miserable.

Walking once in the fertile district of Caux, he has described how he saw something red running across

the fields at some distance, and making towards the great road. "I quickened my pace and got up in time enough to see that they were two little girls in red jackets and wooden shoes, who, with much difficulty, were scrambling through the ditch which bounded the road. The tallest, who might be about six or seven years old, was crying bitterly. 'Child,' said I to her, 'what makes you cry, and whither are you going at so early an hour?' 'Sir,' replied she, 'my poor mother is very ill. There is not a mess of broth to be had in all our parish. We are going to that church in the bottom to see if the Curé can find us some. I am crying because my little sister is not able to walk any farther.' As she spoke, she wiped her eyes with a bit of canvas which served her for a petticoat. On her raising up the rag to her face, I could perceive she had not the semblance of a shift. The abject misery of the children, so poor in the midst of plains so fruitful, wrung my heart. The relief which I could administer them was small indeed. I myself was then on my way to see misery in other forms."

These woebegone little figures scrambling across a great French ditch in search of broth attest the tenderness of Saint-Pierre's heart, whose descriptions are free from all taint of affectation and insincerity. He has neither the leer of Sterne nor the affected stare of Chateaubriand. He had, however, a theory which was proof against all sights and sounds. The great earthquake of Lisbon is reported to have made many atheists, and certainly no event of the kind has ever so