



THE TROLLOPE SOCIETY TRIP TO BRUSSELS AND BRUGES

Friday 29th August – Tuesday 2nd September

La Vendée Chapter 3 Durbelliere

The chateau of Durbelliere, the family seat of the Larochejacquelins, was situated in the very centre of the Bocage, between the small towns of Chatillon and Vihiers--in the province of Poitou, and about twelve leagues from St. Florent.

It was a large mansion, surrounded by extensive gardens, and a considerable domain. There were few residences of more importance as betokening greater wealth in the province of Poitou; but it was neither magnificent nor picturesque. The landlords of the country were not men of extensive property or expensive habits--they built no costly castles, and gave no sumptuous banquets; but they lived at home, on their incomes, and had always something to spare for the poorer of their neighbours. Farming was their business--the chase their amusement--loyalty their strongest passion, and the prosperity of their tenantry their chief ambition.

The chateau of Durbelliere was a large square building, three stories high, with seven front windows to each of the upper stories, and three on each side of the large door on the ground floor. Eight stone steps of great width led up to the front door; but between the top step and the door there was a square flagged area of considerable space; and on the right hand, and on the left, two large whitewashed lions reclined on brick and mortar pedestals. An enormous range of kitchens, offices and cellars, ran under the whole house; the windows opened into a low area, or rather trench, which ran along the front and back of the house, and to which there were no rails or palings of any kind. The servants' door was at the side of the house, and the servants and people coming to them, to save themselves the trouble of walking round to this door, were in the habit of jumping into the area and entering the kitchen by the window. Doubtless some lady of the house, when the mansion was first built, had protested strongly against this unsightly practice; but habit had now accustomed the family to this mode of ingress and egress, and the servants of Durbelliere consequently never used any other.

The back of the chateau was just the same as the front, the same windows, the same broad steps, the same pedestals and the same whitewashed lions, only the steps, instead of leading on to a large gravelled square, led into a trim garden. There were no windows, whatsoever, on one side of the house, and on the other only those necessary to light the huge staircase of the mansion.

The rooms were square, very large, and extremely lofty; the salon alone was carpetted, and none of them were papered, the drawing-room, the dining-room and the grand salon were ornamented with painted panels, which displayed light-coloured shepherds and shepherdesses

in almost every possible attitude. In these rooms, also, there were highly ornamented stoves, which stood out about four feet from the wall, topped with marble slabs, on which were sculptured all the gods and demi-gods of the heathen mythology--that in the drawing-room exhibited Vulcan catching Mars and Venus in his marble net; and the unhappy position of the god of war was certainly calculated to read a useful lesson to any Parisian rover, who might attempt to disturb the domestic felicity of any family in the Bocage.

The house was not above a hundred yards from the high road, from which there were two entrances about two hundred yards apart. There were large wooden gates at each, which were usually left open, but each of which was guarded by two white-washed lions--not quite so much at ease as those on the pedestals, for they were fixed a-top of pillars hardly broad enough to support them. But this doubtless only increased their watchfulness.

But the glory of the chateau was the large garden behind the house. It was completely enclosed by a very high wall, and, like the house, was nearly square in its proportions. It contained miles of walks, and each walk so like the others, that a stranger might wander there for a week without knowing that he had retraversed the same ground, were it not that he could not fail to recognize the quaint groups of figures which met him at every turn. A few of these were of stone, rudely sculptured, but by far the greater number were of painted wood, and, like the shepherds and shepherdesses in the drawing-room, displayed every action of rural life. You would suddenly come upon a rosy-coloured gentleman, with a gun to his shoulder, in the act of shooting game--then a girl with a basket of huge cabbages--an old man in a fit of the choleric; the same rosy gentleman violently kissing a violet-coloured young lady; and, at the next turn, you would find the violet-coloured young lady fast asleep upon a bank. You would meet a fat cure a dozen times in half-an-hour, and always well employed. He would be saying his prayers--drinking beer--blessing a young maiden, and cudgelling a mule that wouldn't stir a step for him, till the large yellow drops of sweat were falling from his face. It was inconceivable how so many painted figures, in such a variety of attitudes, could have been designed and executed; but there they were, the great glory of the old gardener, and the endless amusement of the peasants of the neighbourhood, who were allowed to walk there on the summer Sunday evenings.

The gardens of Durbelliere were also wonderful in another respect. It was supposed to be impossible to consume, or even to gather, all the cherries which they produced in the early summer. The trees between the walks were all cherry-trees--old standard trees of a variety of sorts; but they all bore fruit of some description or another, some sweet and some bitter; some large, some small, and some perfectly diminutive; some black, some red, and some white. Every species of known cherry was in that garden in abundance; but even the gardener himself did not know the extent of the produce. Birds of all kinds flocked there in enormous numbers, and banqueted gloriously during the summer. No one disturbed them except the painted sportsman; and the song of the linnet and the thrush was heard all day, and that of the nightingale during the night.