

CANOVA.*

TRANSLATED FROM THE ITALIAN, BY M. MORGAN, M. D. SURGEON
U. S. NAVY.

Canova's Second Journey to Paris.

The Imperial Court of France had desired for a long time that Canova should make Paris his permanent abode. The Duchess of Bracciano, in September, 1809, wrote to her husband from Paris, that Madame Mère Bonaparte wished, from the strong affection she felt for Canova, that he would come to Paris and live in her palace.

Finally, Napoleon called him there. He was written to by the Intendant General of the Imperial household, from Amsterdam, and informed that the Emperor invited him to Paris, either to remain some time or to make it his fixed residence.

The despatch added, that on account of the high esteem in which the Emperor held his transcendent talents and his extensive knowledge of the arts dependent on design, he thought his counsel would contribute to perfect the works of art then contemplated to be executed in France, which were to perpetuate the splendor of his reign.

This new office would not interfere with the exercise of the art which he practised with such unrivalled ability; and it was not doubted that the dispositions which his Majesty would make for him near his person, and to establish him in the Capital of his Empire, would be found acceptable to the artist.

The letter concluded by saying, "I cannot presume to interpret all that his Majesty in his munificence has reserved for you; but the honourable distinction proffered cannot but be flattering to you, and gives the fullest assurance of his favour and benevolence. Be pleased to reflect on this proposition, and send me answer, that I may present it as early as possible to his Majesty."

Our sculptor was at Florence when he received this letter, and every one who knew his ardent love of country, could imagine the perturbation of mind he suffered, as he never was governed by any schemes of worldly advancement or ambition, or only the noble ambition of devotion to his art.

At length he replied in the following letter:

"I received in Florence the letter of your excellency. I cannot express to you the intense feelings of embarrassment and gratitude which agitate my bosom at this new act of magnanimity and Sovereign clemency towards me. Ah! that I had language as ready as my heart is eloquent! But words would be vain to express the sentiments of my soul; and the clearest proofs I can give of my gratitude will be a prompt obedience to the Sovereign disposition of his Imperial and Royal Majesty. But this submission, so consistent with my wishes and my duty, is utterly irreconcilable with my temperament and the nature and genius of my profession. I know not, nor can I give a more indubitable evidence of my devotion and grateful affection, than that of breaking off immediately from all my business and engagements, and flying to the foot of the throne, and there offering to his Majesty the homage of my services and gratitude. If I be commanded to make the statue of the Empress, I will execute it immediately on my arrival at Paris; and shall ask permission (if his Majesty is fully satisfied with it) to return to Rome. And here I beseech you to hear the invincible reasons which constrain me to this request, and bind me to Italy and to Rome. In truth that city, the mother and ancient seat of the arts, is the only asylum for a sculptor, and especially for me, who have so long fixed my residence there, and which has become my necessary home. But I would still hope to spend much of my time in the service of his Majesty and that of the Imperial family, in preference to other labours, with the ambition of securing immortality by uniting my name with that of so great a Prince. The great number of works, models, colossal statues, pieces in relief, &c. which I have left in my studio at Rome, would make it impossible for me to remain absent from my studio without the occurrence of great inconvenience, disorder, and confusion. Among these works is the equestrian statue of his Majesty, of which I have already modelled the horse, of dimensions more vast than anything of the kind in Europe, and not unworthy perhaps in the judgment of the public, of the Majesty of him who reigns, being of the height of twenty-two Roman psalmi. Of this equestrian statue I have to make a cast in bronze, which I must superintend, it being already in the hands of the founder; and I have also unfinished another beautiful cast of his Majesty's pedestrian statue for the Viceroy of Italy. I have moreover a gigantic group of Theseus conquering the Centaur, which has been modelled; a work which

the city of Milan is desirous of consecrating to Napoleon—not to mention the sitting statue of his Majesty and one of Madame Mère—for the King of Westphalia, and other works of the Imperial family. As I was from my early youth accustomed to study, and to the solitude of a life entirely private and retired, with not robust health, but on the contrary delicate if not watched and regulated, with a temperament of great sensibility and excessive timidity out of my art, I know myself altogether incapable of directing affairs which are not intimately connected with my profession. Whenever, therefore, I should change that mode of life which is my element, I should at once die to myself and to the art for which I live. Should his Majesty command me to dedicate all the remainder of my life to his service, as I have already a good part of it, I shall obey; and should he ask my life, it is his; but he will never act contrary to the feelings of his magnanimous heart, and never violate the splendour of his name, and the munificence by which he deigned to elevate me. He will never make me renounce myself—my art—my glory—and that which is far greater, the glory of his Majesty. If my humble efforts in my art have elicited his gracious approbation, may he be pleased to consent to leave me to my quiet and tranquil labours, where, by my constant application, I can render myself more worthy of his protection.

CANOVA."

The same sentiments were expressed to Cardinal Fesch and to Denon, and both assisted him in obtaining his request.

This letter of Canova reminds us of the beautiful passage in Plutarch, in which mutations of life are condemned unless they bring some addition to happiness; and he warns against a change of the studies and pursuits to which we have long been devoted, as such changes seldom bring happiness with them.

Our artist, therefore, immediately set out, accompanied by his brother, to explain better in person his feelings to the Emperor. He arrived at Fontainebleau on the evening of October 11th, 1810, where he was cordially received by the Grand Marshal of the Palace, and the arrangements were made for his presentation next day to Napoleon.

It was stated in the Journals that Canova was received as one of the most illustrious persons; and the first of sculptors, since the ancients, was certainly worthy of such honours, since in every place where his exalted talents could be appreciated, he would have received the homage due to the highest eminence as an artist.

Dialogue between Napoleon and Canova.

The Emperor of France at this time attracted the attention of all Europe; and every thing which related to that extraordinary man excited public curiosity, and became an object of diplomacy. Canova, therefore, having an opportunity of holding frequent conversations with him, thought proper to register them in his private port-folio, readily foreseeing that at a future day they would be sought after and read with avidity. He was also anxious to preserve them as they contained allusions to some delicate points, in which he wished to defend the purity of his motives and conduct in case it should become necessary, and to show that he was never allured by promises nor intimidated by danger, to desert the paths of rectitude; but always declared the whole truth even in the face of a Sovereign so powerful.

As the originals of these precious manuscripts were confided to the biographer, they are here inserted. They will be appreciated by the intelligent, and teach even pusillanimous minds never to mask truth, or flatter ambition and greatness, from the grovelling motives of vanity and interest. They moreover evince, that while Canova was obedient to the orders of Napoleon, he never lost his reverence for his Sovereign, the Pope, and the Church.

The manuscript goes on to say: "On the 12th of October, 1810, at 12 o'clock, I was presented to Napoleon by Marshal Duroc. He was just going to breakfast with the Empress, and nobody else was present.

"The first words he said to me were, 'You have become somewhat thin.'

I replied that this was the effect of my constant labour and fatigue; thanked him for the great honour he had done me in calling me near him, where I could pursue the fine arts, and at the same time told him frankly the impossibility of my removing from Rome, and explained to him my motives and reasons.

"This," said he, "is the Capital. It is proper you should stay here; and you shall be well provided for."

"You are sure, Sire, the master of my life; but if it please your Majesty that it be spent in your service, permit me to return to Rome after I shall have finished the works for which I have come here."

He smiled at these words, and replied: "This is your centre. Here are all the first works of ancient art. There is only wanting the Farnesian Hercules; and we will have that too."

"Leave, your Majesty," said I, "leave something to Italy. These ancient monuments form a chain and collection which cannot be removed from Rome and Naples."

"Italy can replace them," said he, "by making further excavations. I wish myself to dig at Rome. Tell me, has the Pope spent enough in this way?"

I then gave him an account how little he had spent, because the Pope was very poor; but that he had a generous heart, and was disposed to do much: that with an infinite love of the arts, and great industry and economy, he had collected another museum.

Here he asked me if the Borghese family had spent much in excavations.

I replied that their expenses were moderate, and that they mostly dug on shares with others, and afterwards purchased the portion which belonged to their partners. I also mentioned the sacred right of property which the Roman people had to all the monuments discovered in their grounds; and that as the species of property was a product intrinsically united to the soil, the Prince himself could not send any thing away from Rome.

"I paid," said he, "forty millions for the Borghese statues. How much does the Pope spend annually for the fine arts—a hundred thousand crowns?"

"Not so much," I replied, "for he is extremely poor!"

"Could much be done," he asked, "with a less sum?"

"Certainly," I replied.

We then spoke of the colossal statue of himself which I had executed; and it seemed he would have been better pleased with it if the drapery had been the common French dress.

"It would have been impossible," I replied, "to make a beautiful work if your Majesty had been dressed in the French fashion, with boots and spurs. Sculpture, like the rest of the fine arts, has its language of sublimity—which is nudity, and such simple drapery as is proper to the art." I then adduced many examples from poetry and the ancient monuments; and the Emperor seemed convinced: but going on to speak of the other, and the equestrian statue of him, and he knowing that this was dressed in a different way, "Why," said he, "was that not naked also?"

"It was here proper to have a different costume, as it would be inconsistent and incongruous to represent him naked on horseback at the head of his army. Such had been the costume of the ancients and moderns."

"Have you seen," said he, "the statue of General Dessaix in bronze? It seems to me badly done—it has a ridiculous sash."

When I was about to reply, he added: "Have you made a cast of my statue standing?"

"It is already done, your Majesty, and with entire success; and an engraving of it has been made by a young artist of great merit, who desires the honour of dedicating it to your Majesty. He is a young man of fine talents, and it is worthy of the munificence of your Majesty to encourage such artists these hard times."

"I wish to come to Rome," he added.

"That country merits the notice of your Majesty," I answered. "You will there find matter to warm the imagination, in contemplating the Campodoglio—the Forum of Trajan—the Via Sacra—the columns and arches." Here I described to him some of the ancient Roman magnificence, and especially the Appian Way from Rome to Brundisium, girded on each side by sepulchres; and also the other consular high-ways.

"How wonderful," said he, "these Romans were the masters of the world."

"It was not only their power," I rejoined, "but the high Italian genius, and their love of the great and sublime. See, your Majesty, what the little state of Florence did, and what the Venetians did. The Florentines had the enthusiasm to erect that wonderful Dome with only a penny a pound on wool; and this was enough to erect a fabric superior to any in modern times. Ghiberti made the celebrated gates of St. John in bronze with forty thousand sequins—now a million of francs. See, your Majesty, how industrious, and at the same time how magnanimous they were."

This was the first conversation previous to taking measures for commencing the statue of the Empress.

The 15th of October I began the work, which was followed by several sittings, in which I was always engaged in conversation with the Emperor on various subjects, as he allotted that time to his breakfast, and was entirely unoccupied. I shall relate some of the principal topics.

* Continued from page 59.