

The Fundamental Traits of French Character

(By H. Chodat)

"All concord's born of contraries."—(B. Jonson).

There are two ways of judging a foreign people; two distinct views may be taken of the same nation, each from an entirely different standpoint. The more usual is the outside view, the one generally adopted by the foreigners who, passing through the country the inhabitants of which he is about to describe, judge their ways and customs at first-sight, impressionistically, notes them down, compares them with the ways and customs of his own land, and finally drawing his own conclusions, forms his opinions and spreads them broadcast. This is the method which, from time immemorial, foreigners have applied in their endeavor to form a true conception of the French and their character. Judging from the results, this method can hardly be said to have obtained its object. It has failed to probe below the surface, to explain the contradictions of which French life and character are full, and the picture presented has been marked in most cases by the sharp suggestiveness of a caricature. It is as a result of such procedure that the epithets of degenerate, immoral and frivolous have so often been hurled at France by writers who were deficient in true critical acumen or in psychological imagination.

The other method of investigation is the scientific method. It is practiced all the more rarely as it demands of the foreign student a radical setting aside of his national and racial prejudices, an absolute impartiality of his critical faculty. Few people are capable of such mental effort, least of all the casual traveller who goes to Paris bent on pleasure-seeking. This method, moreover, to be practiced successfully, necessitates a deep and accurate knowledge of the life and history of the people under consideration, such a knowledge as can only be acquired after a prolonged residence in the foreign country and intimate intercourse with its people. It requires most of all real critical power, the gift of discrimination when selecting the essential elements from the bewildering richness of the material at hand, the faculty of tracing back to their primary cause with unerring certainty mental or social phenomena that often seem in contradiction with one another. If applied rigidly and with absolute intellectual honesty, this method will enable the foreign student to discover the fundamental psychological traits which lie at the root of a people's mentality and shed a flood of light on its social manifestations.

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The task of elucidating the character of a people is not an easy one. In the case of the French it is beset with more than ordinary difficulties, the principal of which spring from some strange faults of the French themselves.

This people apparently so gay and debonair on the surface, wearing as it were, their hearts on their sleeves, are in reality hard to penetrate. However frank they are concerning many details to which Anglo-Saxons would never dream of alluding, they will never discuss their intimate, personal, or family affairs before strangers. In all essentials they are most reserved and keep to themselves, a truth which finds confirmation in the old French proverb: "Il faut laver son linge sale en famille."

Another of the many peculiarities of the French, one that has been the cause of a great deal of misunderstanding, is the curious, strange shyness with which they conceal their inmost feelings, especially their virtues, and the delight they take in appearing light-hearted and shallow, in boldly exhibiting their vices, often in a most exaggerated form even boasting of defects they do not possess. They have what has been aptly called "la fanfaronade du vice." The English on the other hand cannot reconcile flippancy with profundity.

They do not object to flippancy and they wallow in profundity, but they will not have them mixed. The French attitude puzzles and shocks them. Being the exact opposite of their own, it has naturally led them to judge their neighbors as far more wicked and frivolous a race than they really are.

In pursuing his research the student will of necessity have to choose a suitable field of observation. In doing so let him beware of confining his efforts to a study of Parisian social life. The latter is not representative of French life in general. The so-called Parisians are for the most part too cosmopolitan. Parisian society is largely made up of foreigners who have been attracted to the French capital by its reputation as the music-hall of the world or by the fame of its academic institutions. The University alone, shortly before the war, had as many as sixteen thousand students and there were also very large colonies of wealthy Englishmen, Americans, Germans, Russians and South Americans. There is of course a small proportion of real French people prominent in the social life of the great city, but their purely French characteristics have not escaped the deteriorating influence of intermarriage with aliens, of the imitation of foreign customs and manners, of the hot-house atmosphere of fashionable life.

The French peasant, on the other hand, would offer a better field of observation, were it not that he is too peculiar a type. The narrowness of his life, his want of opportunity for normal mental development, and the particular character of his environment have abnormally developed certain sides of his personality while dwarfing others almost to the vanishing point.

It must be remembered, however, that the several grades of French society are not separated by such deep divergences of caste and traditional discipline as are found in England. For instance, on the contrary, the homogeneity of the French social fabric is almost a national characteristic, and the democratic ideals which have pervaded the nation since the Revolution have still further increased this uniformity of thought and action, therefore, general statements concerning French ways and customs and character, if based on observation of the large class which stands midway between the foundation and the pinnacle of the social structure, that is to say the bourgeoisie, have a far greater chance of being conclusive.

The French bourgeois has changed very little in the course of time. He is still essentially the same as he was in the seventeenth century when Moliere portrayed him in the Chrysale of his Femmes Lavantes. He still possesses the same conservatism, the same dislike of novelty, the same tenacious clinging to traditions and forms. This trait is indeed the chief characteristic of the French people as a whole.

The love of the French for ceremonial and formalism, their use of symbols and conventions, their faith in tradition and established customs strike the foreigner very forcibly from the moment he comes in contact with them. As a matter of fact this fondness for symbolism permeates French life, whether social, political or artistic. It has brought about a codification of manners so strict, so rigid as almost to amount to a ritual. Every social situation has its appropriate gestures, its almost fixed vocabulary, and the least deviation from established procedure instantly creates the possibility of its being construed as an insult.

This uniformity of expression might lead the foreign observer to regard the French as a race totally devoid of originality. He might agree that the levelling of all individuality and personal idiosyncracies under the pressure of