

Johann Caspar Lavater, 1741-1801 : a Swiss citizen of the world

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into the town moat that this figure was built to frighten them away. Other picturesque fountains are the Zahringerbrunnen, showing a bear with its young; the Gerechtigkeitsbrunnen, showing "Justice" with an upright sword moving between Emperor, Sultan, Pope and Magistrate; the Dudelsackpfeifer, representing the free company of minstrels, full of exquisite details, like dancing children led by a fool, and the clever and wistful piper with his goose listening entranced at his feet.

At the lower end of the main street is the famous bear-pit, where the animals delight visitors with their quaint ways. Bears have always been associated with our Capital's history. It appears that centuries ago, Berchtold of Zahringer once organised a great chase in the town's neighbourhood, declaring that the town would be given the name of the first animal he should slay. As it was a bear, our capital was duly called Berne. Symbols, figures, paintings of bears are everywhere, one even sits eating grapes in the choir-stalls. The town became a free city in 1218.

A famous landmark of Berne always attracting visitors, is the Clock Tower. Watching carefully you see a rather unusual miniature pageantry: each time an hour strikes, a troupe of little bears go round in a little circle, a cock crows three times before, and once after the clock strikes. A sitting man with a staff in one hand and an hour-glass in the other counts the strokes by opening his mouth and smiting with his stick. Another wooden manikin rings two little bells when the hour is about to strike. In the belfry at the top of the Tower are the bells, and beside them stands a figure of the Duke of Zahringer in armour, who strikes the hours on the bells with a hammer.

A vigorous visitor may venture to climb the 250-odd steps up to the top of the beautiful Cathedral. The view of the city and the Jungfrau and Blumlisalp chains is magnificent. Neither should an inspection of the Rathaus, an impressive building in Gothic style, where the Great Council of the Canton of Berne meets, be missed. Berne's University is one of the largest in Switzerland, and has over 200 professors and lecturers. Founded in 1528, it now comprises seven faculties and lectures are held in the three Swiss languages as well as English.

The Federal Palace, with the houses of Parliament and Government Offices, are among the buildings a visitor should not overlook. The long imposing buildings are splendidly situated above the high banks of the river, affording a full view of the Bernese Alpine chains.

E.M.

(To be continued.)

JOHANN CASPAR LAVATER, 1741-1801

A SWISS CITIZEN OF THE WORLD

Johann Caspar Lavater, one of the most brilliant figures of Zurich's most brilliant age, the middle of the 18th century, was pastor of St. Peter's Church at Zurich. He was the author of the famous work on physiognomics and a most prolific writer in prose and verse. By his enormous popularity, both at home and abroad, he came to stand for all that was Swiss in his time.

Many of his contemporaries whose letters we still read today called him, with a smile: "A Swiss of the Swiss," thinking of the deep ties of affection which bound him to his family, his friends and his work. They were hardly aware of the higher, more truly patriotic sense in which Lavater was indeed a "Swiss of the Swiss."

After meeting Lavater for the first time, a prominent German wrote in his diary: "If only he were not so bound up with that provincial circle of his" . . . but he goes on: "And yet he has an understanding powerful enough to realise that everything there is human."

Without realising it, the writer here gave a perfect description of Lavater in a few words. Deeply rooted as he was in his home, he yet had a mind which surmounted with ease all national, social and religious barriers.

By the time he was twenty, Lavater was already taking an active part in public affairs in Switzerland, but it was a particular act of courage which carried him to a leading position in the intellectual life of Europe. The peasant population of the canton of Zurich had been suffering deeply from the tyranny of their bailiff, Grebel, a notorious oppressor of the poor. By the vigour of his protest, Lavater induced the authorities to banish Grebel and compensate the peasants for his wrongdoings. True, Lavater had done no more by this than restore order to a small bailiwick in the canton of Zurich, a tiny spot unknown to the world at large, but the boldness of his humanitarianism, the stand he made against an extremely powerful government, acted as the spark which fired young minds all over Europe, then seething with the hatred of tyranny.

The clear connection thus established between a characteristically Swiss act of liberation and current European ideas of freedom made a profound impression, among others, on Goethe, then a youth of fifteen. His first ideas of the primacy of national feeling took their rise in his admiration of the Swiss hero. He was obsessed by the "Grebel case," and begged Lavater to write an account of it "after the manner of Plutarch."

National feeling stocked low enough among the governments of the eighteenth century, but

Goethe and Lavater were by no means the only young men of their time to combine love of country with intellectual citizenship of the world. It was this common interest which made the two recognise an affinity between them. Lavater read with delight the unknown young Dr. Goethe's *Gotz von Berlichingen*, saw in him the stuff of genius and asked his help with the writing of the *Physiognomic Fragments*, the difficulties of which were growing unmanageable.

A deep and close friendship resulted, in which Lavater taught Goethe to love and understand Switzerland, while Goethe enticed Lavater to Frankfurt and the German courts, so that he might see the best in the German mind under the French varnish of the age. Each of the friends remained what he was, a convinced patriot, yet beyond that, both were convinced "brothers of mankind," whose father's house was one comprehensive mind.

As regards Lavater in particular, he was able to combine his loyalty to the characteristically Swiss form of Protestantism with a generous appreciation of Catholic doctrine on the one hand and a fine tolerance of the Enlightenment on the other. He never attempted to conceal his opinions, whether in speech or writing, and thus he created a platform for all religious convictions which the conflicting creeds, one and all, recognised as an inestimable benefit. People saw in Lavater's tolerance "the Swiss democratic spirit," and Switzerland herself, which was in the fashion in any case at the time, came in for yet greater adulation because Lavater, in spite of his understanding of the widest issues, remained stubbornly faithful to his Swiss heritage.

In a general way, however, he was not regarded as a typical specimen of his native country. Indeed, for a generation he was actually something like a symbol of his age. Few men of the eighteenth century achieved a popularity to compare with his. His sermons and hymns ran into huge editions, and spread all over the world in translation, while his diaries, which set a literary fashion, gave the world a noble example of a high-minded patriotism allied to a broad-minded citizenship of the world.

Yet it was Lavater himself who undermined his own standing in the eyes of men. He did so as the result of a psychological bent which was both a great gift and a disaster to him. He had a genuine talent for hypnotism and suggestion and realised many times that he was able to produce effects on other people which he could only explain as miracles. The strain of feeling that he shared with charlatans and mountebanks, with plain citizens, with believers and unbelievers, gifts which he believed to be his by the grace of Christ as the "heritage of the apostles" was almost too much for him to bear.

(To be continued)

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