

JEAN MASSIEU.

BY LAURENT CLERC.

JEAN, or rather John Massieu, deaf and dumb from birth,—a name well known throughout Europe, although it is possible but very few may be familiar with the character and history of the man,—was born, in 1772, at Semens, a very small village situated at some leagues south of Bordeaux. His parents were poor, but honest; the occupation of his father being that of a vine-dresser. They had the misfortune of having in their family as many as six deaf and dumb children; three boys and three daughters. Massieu was the second, if not the youngest of the brothers. At the age of thirteen, he was admitted into the deaf and dumb school kept at Bordeaux by the Abbé Sicard, who had long before established it, after having received lessons from the Abbé de l'Épée, and before succeeding that immortal benefactor of humanity at Paris.

In 1790 or 1791, the Abbé Sicard left Bordeaux, being called to Paris to occupy the place of the Abbé de l'Épée, who had died the preceding year at the age of seventy-seven. Of course, Massieu accompanied his master thither. He was then about eighteen, and two or three years afterwards was appointed one of the tutors in the Paris Institution. He was twenty-five years old in 1797, at which time, myself, Laurent Clerc, eleven years old, was brought to Paris by my uncle Laurent Clerc of grateful remembrance. Massieu was, therefore, my first teacher, and I had good opportunity of knowing him thoroughly. He had not only intelligence, but genius; yet there was a striking contrast between some traits of his character and his intellectual faculties; for, cultivated as his mind was, he had during his whole life the carelessness and thoughtlessness of a child. I often saw him hesitate whether he should do the least action or not, for fear of displeasing even the youngest of his pupils. He consulted them on the most important, as well as on the most trifling matters; nor was it seldom that he came to communicate to his colleagues his child-like fancies or apprehensions or uneasiness. He had an

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extreme fondness for watches, books and other small articles ; and, when the fancy took hold of him, he was seen to wear two, three, and even four watches. Sometimes he bought books in all the quarters of Paris, and, when possessing these objects so much wished for, he always carried them about him in his pockets, or in his hands. He looked at them without cessation ; he showed them to everybody. By little and little this habit grew weaker, and in a few weeks it passed away, to give place to another gratification. Sometimes he bought at auction dress-coats, embroidered waistcoats, silk short pantaloons, silk stockings and buckled shoes, after the fashion of Louis XIV, Louis XV, and Louis XVI, and on certain occasions came dressed in them into his school-room to the great amusement of some, and to excite the ridicule of others. His common dress in the school was a loose grey riding-coat, descending as low as the ankles, furnished with two large deep pockets which he filled with the crayons with which the pupils wrote on the black-boards, and, when school was done, he scarcely ever failed to collect them and to replace them in his pockets, and he carried them constantly about him, except when he had to go out of the Institution. Thus passed the days of his youth between the performance of his duties as a teacher and the gratification of these different tastes which were his predominant passions. He never could subject himself to the usages of the world. It was not for want of having frequented the best society. He had for more than twenty years seen all who were most distinguished in France ; had been introduced to the most august personages, sovereigns and princes ; to ladies the most renowned for their grace and intelligence ; to the greatest men in science and the arts, and yet he did not much improve. His manners were simple. A great vivacity, mixed with a slight roughness of manners, added another feature to his character, without being a fault. His bright imagination shone with advantage in his answers, sometimes incorrect indeed, because he did not slavishly observe the rules, often arbitrary ones, of the French language ; but they were always in conformity with sound logic and general grammar. When it happened that he did not know a word, he invented one by following, with the most scrupulous

fidelity, the principles of analogy. Those slight errors, in the eyes of a cold purist, who is not much better than our poor Massieu, since he himself neglects, too, the capricious usages of society, are well made up by the originality of his thoughts, the coloring of his fancies, the justness of his comparisons, and the brilliancy of his metaphors, wholly oriental. Those who read him thought they were reading some passages of the Prophets. What is most to be admired is that Massieu wrote his thoughts with great rapidity. His answers were in the form of short discourses, in which he knew how to mix, with art, the description with the definition, without the smallest hesitation ; so that it was easy to see that he was always ready to answer. So did Mr. Sicard say on this subject, in using a simple but just and expressive comparison, that in order to put a question to Massieu, it was enough to strike the stone with a steel, and immediately the spark would issue. His answers then seemed to flow spontaneously.

I remember many anecdotes about Massieu ; I have time to mention two or three, and if I mention them here, it is less to detract from his merits than to show that his oddities did not injure his intellectual faculties. Besides, they are so well known everywhere, that when they were repeated to him at a more advanced age, far from feeling offended, he heartily joined with others in laughing at them.

One day he had a complaint to make against a man who had attempted to rob him of his pocket-book. He repaired to one of the Paris police-offices, and demanded a sheet of paper and wrote as follows :

"Mr. Judge, I am deaf and dumb. I was looking at something in a broad street with other deaf and dumb persons. This man saw me. He noticed a small pocket-book in the pocket of my coat. He silyly approached me. He was drawing out the pocket-book, when my hip warned me. I turned myself briskly towards this man, who, being afraid, threw the pocket-book between the legs of another man, who picked it up and returned it to me. I seized the thief by his jacket, I held him fast ; he became pale and trembling. I beckoned to a police-officer to come. I showed the pocket-book to the officer and expressed to him by signs that the man had stolen

my pocket-book. The officer brought the thief hither. I have followed him. I demand justice. I swear before God that he stole this pocket-book from me. He, I dare say, will not deny the fact.

"I beg you, Mr. Judge, not to order him to be beheaded; he has not killed any one, but let him be reprimanded and I will be satisfied."

The thief was convicted and sentenced to imprisonment for three months in the jail of Bicêtre.

Other incidents are not less amusing. By an urgent invitation, Massieu went to pass one of his autumn vacations in Ostend, a sea town of Belgium, with Mr. Lauwers, father of a deaf and dumb young man, and while there Mr. L. made him a present of a pair of boots. As Massieu had never worn any in his life, he was so much delighted with them, that he put them on with eagerness, got up on a table which was standing before a looking glass, and admired his fine boots for half an hour, to the great amusement of all around him and to the great scandal of his poor deaf and dumb pupil, who felt quite disgusted with his conduct, but Massieu did not mind him, and thanked the father as well as he could for his pretty present. He ever afterwards wore both boots and shoes.

Some time after the entrance of the Allied Powers into Paris, two or three English gentlemen came to visit the Institution for the deaf and dumb. One of them, much gratified with the performances of Massieu, invited him to come and breakfast with him the next morning. Massieu, who seldom refused an invitation, was punctual to the appointment, and anticipated an excellent breakfast *à la fourchette*; for he liked nothing else but boiled ham or roasted fowls, veal or mutton cotelets, together with a glass of wine, then a cup of mocha coffee, and a small glass of liquor. The English gentleman took him to one of those splendid *cafés* which are still very numerous at the Royal Palace, and ordered hot coffee and milk, buttered toast and eggs, on which Englishmen, in general, like to breakfast, and our ingenious Englishman imagined that what he had just ordered would be very acceptable to Massieu, and even that it would be something that Massieu had never tasted, as he supposed that we poor Frenchmen generally breakfasted on barren

bread and pure water ; but what was his astonishment when he saw Massieu politely refuse every article he offered him ! Taking his pencil, for he could write French very well, he wrote and asked, "What is the matter with you, Monsieur Massieu ?" Why will you eat nothing ?" Massieu answered that he loved neither coffee nor eggs, and that this kind of food did not suit him at all. "What would you have then, Monsieur Massieu ?" "Nothing but ham and wine," answered Massieu. On the spot, the gentleman called the waiter and requested him to fetch the articles. Accordingly two large slices of ham on a plate and a bottle of claret wine were brought and set on the table, and Massieu consumed both slices and emptied the whole bottle without even offering one least bit to the gentleman ; his notion being that the ham was for himself and the coffee for the gentleman. The gentleman was quite shocked with this singular conduct on the part of Massieu, but said nothing, and they parted as if nothing had occurred. The next day, however, he called on Mr. Sicard and mentioned the circumstances to him, and said that Massieu was not the man he had fancied and heard spoken of so much. Mr. Sicard apologized for Massieu as well as he could, and said that what had happened was but one of the several natural peculiarities of his pupil, which he could not cure, though he had succeeded in making him a man of learning. Massieu knew that his English friend had spoken to his master, but he did not care ; on the contrary, he thought there had been nothing improper in what he had done, for, having been invited, he had a right to ask for, at a public eating-house, what he liked best, and his motto has ever since been—"Let the Englishman have his coffee, and let me have my ham."

In 1822, the Abbé Sicard died, aged eighty years, and some months afterwards Massieu left the Paris Institution, after thirty-two years of labor. I do not know why ; perhaps it was either on account of his sorrow at the death of his illustrious master, or on account of his being dissatisfied with the changes which took place. He returned to Bordeaux and staid with some friends ; his parents and some of his brothers and sisters had deceased long before. In a year, the leader of a small school for the deaf and dumb, located at Rhodéz, Department

de l'Aveyron, in the South of France, solicited his assistance, and Massieu went there. He was then fifty-one years old. Soon after his arrival, he was struck with the beauty and loveliness of a young lady of eighteen, who could hear and speak, and who was employed in the establishment, and it was not long before he married her. They had one son when they removed from Rhodéz to Lille, a large city this side the boundaries of France and Belgium, where, with the assistance and contribution of several benevolent citizens, they established a school for the deaf and dumb, of which Massieu was the principal and his wife the matron. They had about thirty pupils when I visited them in 1836. They had lost their son, but had another child, a daughter, whom Mrs. Massieu was nursing at the time of my visit. I can scarcely describe the joy Massieu and myself experienced at seeing each other again after so long a separation. I found Massieu to be a man quite different from what I had known him to be. He was rather old, but polite, social, sensible, and much respected, and as happy as could be. No doubt that he was indebted to his kind wife for his entire alteration. When the moment arrived for me to take leave of him, to return to the United States, with tears in his eyes he clasped me in his arms, and said: "It is long since we were together. It is long since we separated, and I fear it will be long before we meet again. May God bless you! May He prosper you wherever you are, and send you back on your voyage with a calm sea and a swelling sail! Adieu, adieu, my dear Clerc. Remember me to our kind friend Mr. Gallaudet." Finally, as time pressed, we parted, both much affected, and I particularly, on many accounts; for I can never forget that he was my first teacher and constant and faithful friend. He died in August, 1846, at seventy-five years of age, on the very month I last embarked for France! I did not see his widow, but heard with pleasure that herself and daughter were still in Lille and well; keeping a milliner's store, and in tolerably good circumstances.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]