

IMPRESSIONS

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Impressions by Pierre Loti & Henry James

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PIERRE LOTI & HENRY JAMES

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A decorative border in a dark, Art Nouveau style surrounds the text. The top section features three large, stylized flowers with prominent centers and radiating petals. The bottom section shows a dense arrangement of long, pointed leaves and stems. The sides are filled with vertical, leaf-like patterns.

IMPRESSIONS
BY PIERRE LOTI

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY HENRY JAMES

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Pierre Loti.



MAY as well admit at the outset that in speaking of Pierre Loti I give way to an inclination of the irresistible sort, express indeed a lively obligation. I am conscious of owing him that amount and that kind of pleasure as to which hesitation resides only in the difficulty of statement. He has been for me, from the hour of my making his acquaintance, one of the joys of the time, and the fact moreover of his being of the time has often, to my eyes, made it seem to suffer less from the presence of writers less delightful yet more acclaimed. It is a part of the joy I speak of that, having once for all, at the beginning, caused the critical sense thoroughly to vibrate, he has ever since then let it alone, brought about in my mind a state of acceptance, a state of gratitude, in which I have been content not to discriminate. Critically, on first knowing him, I surrendered—for it has always seemed to me that the inner chamber of taste opens only to that key; but, the surrender being complete—the chamber never again

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closed—I feel that, like King Amasis with the ring, I have thrown the key into the deep. He is extremely unequal and extremely imperfect. He is familiar with both ends of the scale of taste. I am not sure even that on the whole his talent has gained with experience as much as was to have been expected, that his earlier years have not been those in which he was most to endear himself. But these things have made little difference to a reader so committed to an affection.

It has been a very simple case. At night all cats are grey, and I have liked him so much in general that there has always been a perch, a margin left when the special case has for the moment cut away a little of the ground. The love of letters renders us no greater service—certainly opens to us no greater satisfaction—than in putting us from time to time under some such charm. There need never be a fear, I think, of its doing so too often. When the charm, in such a manner, fixes itself, what has happened is that the effect, the operative gift, has become to us simply a value, and that an experience more or less bitter has taught us never, in literature, to sacrifice any value we may have been fortunate enough to light upon. Such discoveries are too happy, such values too great. They do for us what nothing else does. There are other charms and other surrenders, but those have their action in another air. What the mind feels in any form of magic is a particular extension of the contact with life, and no two forms give us exactly the same. Every artist who really touches us becomes in this way an individual instrument, the fiddler, the improviser of an original tune. The inspiration may sometimes fail, the notes

sound weak or false; but to break, on that account, the fiddle across one's knee is surely—given, as we look about the much-mixed field, the other “values”—a strange æsthetic economy.

I.

I read and relish him whenever he appears, but his earlier things are those to which I most return. It took some time, in those years, quite to make him out—he was so strange a mixture for readers of our tradition. He was a “sailor-man” and yet a poet, a poet and yet a sailor-man. To a marked division of these functions we had always been accustomed, looking as little for sensibility in the seaman as perhaps for seamanship in the man of emotion. So far as we were at all conscious of the uses of sensibility it was not to the British or the American tar that we were in the habit of applying for it. Tobias Smollett, Captain Marryat, Tom Cringle, Fenimore Cooper had taught us another way, and in general our enjoyment of what we artlessly term adventure had not been associated, either as a fact or as an idea, with the privilege of a range of feeling. There was from the first in Loti the experience of the navigator, and yet there was the faculty, the necessity of expression. The experience had doubtless not been prodigious, but it had been at least of a sort that among writers of our race has mostly, for some reason, seemed positively to preclude expression. He introduced confusion, as I have elsewhere had occasion to say, into our assumption, so consecrated by time, that adventures are mainly for those who lack the fiddle-bow and the fiddle-bow all for those condemned

to chamber-music. This was his period of most beautiful production—the period of *Mon Frère Yves*, *Pêcheur d'Islande*, *Fleurs d'Ennui*, *Aziyadé*, *Le Roman d'un Spahi*, *Le Mariage de Loti*; which are not here enumerated in their order of appearance. They presented themselves as the literary recreations—flowers of reminiscence and imagination, not always flowers of lassitude—of a young officer in the navy, a native of Rochefort and of old Huguenot race, whose private name has so completely lost itself in his public that I shall mention him but this once as M. Julien Viaud. They made their full mark only on the publication of *Mon Frère Yves*, but from that moment Loti was placed.

I hasten to add that from that moment also the sea-rover has been less visible in him than the man of expression; without detriment, however, to the immense good fortune of his having betimes, in irresponsible youth, possessed himself of the mystery of the sea. The sense of it and the love of it, with the admirable passion they make, are the background of most of his work, and of all French writers of the day he is the one from whom Paris, with its screen of many folds, least shuts off the rest of the globe. He mentions Paris not even to curse it, and the rest of the globe—but mainly the watery wastes—has been his hunting-ground. It is largely in fact as if he had been kept afloat by the very reasons that conduce to the frequent disembarkment of the Englishman in quest of impressions. He had in these years, as a Frenchman, fewer places to land. When he did land, however, the impressions came thick and are mainly presented in the intensely personal form. They are autobiographic with-

out reserve, for reserve, in spite of his extraordinary faculty of selection and compression, his special genius for summarising, is not his strong point. Whenever Loti landed, in short, he made love, and whenever he made love he appears to have told of it. That would be our main stick to beat him with if his principal use for us had been to inspire us—as I believe it has inspired some readers—with the desire to beat. The limits of that desire on my own part I have sufficiently hinted at, and I feel that I should have had no use of him at all had I not at an early stage arrived at some sort of adequate view of his necessity for “telling.” It is the telling, above all, I judge, that is the lion in the path of those whom he displeases. I have never supposed, at any rate, that we can enjoy the special gift of others altogether on terms made by ourselves; it seems to me that when such a gift is real we should take it in any way we can get it—take it and be thankful. Of course—by the most blessed of all laws—we are always free not to take, not even to read, and I dare say that for many persons the non-perusal of reminiscences such as these constitutes a positive pleasure. There are writers, there are voyagers who tell nothing, and for the best of reasons. Loti’s singular power to tell is exactly his value, and to attempt to make a law for it might easily be, for readers and critics, a rash adventure. His striking of the notes we delight in may be, for all we know, conditioned on his striking of others we don’t. And then—and then: what can one say after all but that we leave him his liberty? Not that we would leave it to everyone. There are sympathies, in short, and impunities; so that I have been careful to make with the