FEATURE ARTICLES

For some months your Editor-in-Chief has been corresponding with Madame Marie-Louise Hemphill of Paris, France. Madame Hemphill is the daughter of the late Dr. Adrien Loir, nephew of Louis Pasteur and for a time, Pasteur’s research assistant. Madame Hemphill is herself an accomplished art historian, traveller, lecturer, and writer. She has spent considerable time in the United States and has lectured before gatherings of microbiologists. The following is an account, by Madame Hemphill, of a period of Pasteur’s life at Arbois in the Jura Mountains, close to the border between France and Switzerland.

Pasteur at Arbois

MARIE-LOUISE HEMPHILL

Only some one entirely devoted and at all moments at his disposal even during the holidays—which I took at Arbois with him—could be the intimate secretary which I was, as well as the manipulator he required.

Dr. Adrien Loir

Pasteur’s nephew and assistant, 1882-1888, from A l’Ombre de Pasteur, published in Paris, 1938 [Early Recollections]

I had only been married a few years when my father died in Paris in 1941, in his 80th year. I can therefore say that ever since I can remember and until he left us, I heard him speak of Pasteur every day. Such was the impact made upon him by the great man, that not a day passed without my father referring to his uncle.

May I therefore relate, as he so often did to us at home, an episode of his youth, such as he might have done.

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Many a time I heard him tell that in Paris, at the Academy, Pasteur reacted violently to the objections expressed by those who dared attack his work. They hadn’t even taken the trouble to be informed, and yet Pasteur knew of the danger of germs and said so.

He would tell us of his uncle’s friends, Balard and Duclaux, who tried to quiet him, for they realised the harm he was doing even to his health. But when in the laboratory, Pasteur worked away, alone and calm, day after day, often dictating to Madame Pasteur or to my father at night.

Each year Pasteur left Paris at the beginning of July for the Jura, where he would remain until the middle of October.

From 1875 on, my father with his parents would spend a full month every summer with the Pasteurs in their country home at Arbois. But in 1882, having started to work in the Paris laboratory, my father would spend the whole of his vacations beside him.

Life at Arbois was very similar to that led in Paris, though there were no meetings and Pasteur was able to work undisturbed and think in peace.

In the mornings he went upstairs to the laboratory. After lunch he might play croquet with some member of the family, soon to return and resume work until 4 p.m. when the whole household would go for a walk. Often when 4 p.m. came, he would have to be called repeatedly, pretending not to hear. In 1884, for the purpose of calling him, my father brought the gong that can still be seen in the hall of the house, which is now a museum. It had been given to him by his godmother, and he brought it along from Lyon where he lived, at the time, with his parents.

A friend of Marie-Louise,1 Jeanne, Bertin’s daughter, from the Ecole Normale, often came to stay. She was brought by her father, who came back to fetch her when the month was over.

Family life was gay and pleasant at Arbois, where Paster’s son, Jean-Baptiste,2 and Bertin were notorious for making Pasteur laugh. On Sundays Pasteur’s sister, who lived nearby with her husband Vichot and their two children, came for lunch. Vichot had a good voice and sang after the meal. So did Pasteur—always the same song and out of tune. It was called “La Gloire et la Fortune,” but neither Fortune nor Glory were ever attained.

I remember my father telling us how on a picnic, at Arbois, his brother, my uncle, became officially engaged—thanks to Pasteur breaking the ice with a joke.

However, work went on as well—work on

1 Out of the five children born, only two survived: Jean-Baptiste, who became a diplomat and who married but had no children; and Marie-Louise, the wife of René Valley-Radot, the author of The Life of Pasteur. Their son, Professor Pasteur-Vallery-Radot, died in 1970. He was the only surviving descendant of Pasteur.

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rabies at that particular time. According to the methods he had used with crystals or detected corpuscles in the silkworm moth, he now examined the rabid brains sent on from Paris by Viala at a time when corpus negri had not yet been discovered. He felt that there must be a difference between a healthy brain and a rabid one. Looking through the microscope, he could detect which was which, whereas neither Dr. Roux nor anyone else could see any difference. This was, of course, when he eventually returned to Paris, for, as my father pointed out, no one else but he ever helped him at Arbois. This, at least, was so until his departure for Australia, where Pasteur sent him in 1888.

In those distant days, Pasteur after leaving the laboratory would climb up to his study on the floor above and dictate. In previous years he had had a laboratory outside the house, when he was doing his research on wines. But my father was not at Arbois then. However, when he was there the villagers often came with problems to solve. They would seek his advice about wine, about their animals, or even about their own illnesses. As far as wine was concerned, it often meant amelioration and Pasteur would often watch my father mixing under his supervision a solution of potassium to the wine to improve it.

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In years gone by, that is in 1865, Jean-Baptiste Dumas, the great chemist who had been Pasteur's teacher, had become minister for agriculture.

He was born at Alais, the centre of the silk district. Suddenly the silkworm was overrun with sickness. It died and the whole industry, so important to France, was endangered. Dumas called Pasteur and suggested that he study the illness. To his objection that he had never even seen a cocoon, Dumas replied: "All the better, you will have no preconceived ideas." Pasteur thus went to the South of France. Five years later, he published his book, which he dedicated to the Empress Eugenia. The silk industry was saved.

On arriving south, Pasteur's first action was to visit Fabre at Avignon. My father insisted always in saying that in his own mind Pasteur had best been described in the 23rd chapter, on "scorpion languedocien" in the well-known French entomologist's book Souvenirs Entomologiques.

Fabre's surprise at Pasteur's ignorance about cocoons, facts that all young children seem to know, can easily be explained by conversations my father often had at Arbois with Jules Vercel, Pasteur's friend from his primary school days. When he was free in the afternoon, my father would enjoy going fishing with his uncle's old friend, who would readily talk about the past. "Ah," he would say, "he was not like us all, he was very different. When we left school, we boys liked going fishing or bird nesting. He, not at all. Leaving us, holding his books tightly under his arm, he would return home quietly." All this was said in a strong Franche-Comté brogue, which Pasteur had lost—perhaps for the simple reason that he kept away from his schoolmates. At this age he was already eager for solitude, needing peace of mind to reflect.

When talking about Vercel, my father always ended by saying how much he enjoyed these country walks: "I marvelled," he would say, "at the ability of this man of well over 60, stalking sparrow-hawks." And he felt that Vercel, in fact, somewhat despised a child who didn't enjoy country life.

Much later, when my father was asked where lay Pasteur's genius, he would remember Vercel and say: "Maybe it came from the distant days of his childhood. Rather than play like other boys he was not content just to accept things as they were. He was introspective by nature and used to dwell on his own ideas."

As an art historian, having long reflected on these things myself, I would like to add my own views.

As we have seen, Pasteur as a child was eager, as he left school at 4 p.m. each day, to return home. He never wasted time, and we know that his hobby, even as a mere child, was painting. He achieved very good portraits—now at the Louvre—when between the ages of 12 and 16. At that early age he drew his parents, his masters and many other people around. Could it not be the painter's eye which helped him to see details that escaped others?

When he made a copy of Gros' "Napoleon at Eylau," each hair of the Emperor's fur collar can almost be counted. Could this not account for the deviation of crystals which had been missed by other scientists? Mistranchish, for one. This most important discovery that he made at the age of 26 and that led to all others?

As I have always heard in the family, an old aunt thought it a pity that he had not pursued the career of an artist. Be that as it may, in the many biographies I have read, none have stressed this gift of the artist who knows how to look. Yet I humbly believe it to be most important—added, of course, to all the others among the qualities of Louis Pasteur, this great French scientist of the nineteenth century and of all times.

2 In the author's possession. Her father's mother was Madame Pasteur's sister. They were the daughters of M. Laurent, who was vice-chancellor of Strasbourg University at the time of their marriages.