THE FRENCH ACADEMY IN ITS ORIGIN.

"I UNDERTAKE, since you request it, to write down what I know of the French academy, — a society about which many people talk, but which few people know as it ought to be known."

These are the words with which Pelisson, the original historian of that famous society, began his narrative. Notwithstanding the charm of his graceful style, the exact additions to the record which were made by the Abbé Olivet, and the much more recent notes of Livet, to say nothing of Kerviler's readable bibliography, and Arsene Houssaye's witty and satirical criticism, the French academy remains to this day as it was in 1653, when Pelisson's story was first anonymously published, — "a society about which many people talk, but which few people understand." Now and then some enthusiastic English or American writer proposes an English or an American reproduction, or a critic skilled in the poise of conflicting ideas sets forth the possibilities and the difficulties of organizing such an imperial agency, amid the de-centralized institutions of Great Britain and the United States. Matthew Arnold concludes his famous essay on this subject by a sentence in which admiration is tempered with doubt. "An academy," he says, "quite like the French academy, — a sovereign organ of the highest literary opinion, a recognized authority in matters of intellectual tone and taste, we shall hardly have, and perhaps we ought not to wish to have it." We may venture to add, that, if London cannot have its literary court to exercise an acknowledged supremacy within a prescribed domain, New York and Washington must wait awhile before their political or financial power can originate a society which will be potent in the promotion of letters.

Nevertheless, the growth of the French academy, and its influence upon the scientific, as well as the literary, progress of France, are quite worth studying. It is the parent of the Institute of France, but it is the child of a modest coterie of literary people such as may be found in almost every cultivated town. Its extraordinary growth is due in no small degree to that innate love of symmetrical organization, or of good form, which the French exhibit in many phases of their activity. It owes not a little to the power of the monarchy in the days of Louis XIV.

The French academy is always spoken of as founded in 1635, but several years before that date its nucleus was in existence. As early as 1629, a number of bright men living in different parts of Paris, suffering from the social impediments of a great city, and finding it inconvenient to pay visits without finding their acquaintances at home, determined to have a weekly meeting at a private house. They were men of letters, above the average ability, associated like our literary clubs, by the principle of good fellowship, with the slightest possible regulations, and having at first no higher purpose than familiar and friendly conversation on business, news, and literature, the interview ending with a promenade or a collation. If any one of the company wrote something on which he wished genuine criticism, here was his opportunity to receive unguarded and honest comments. In later years the members of the academy looked back to this golden age of its infancy, when all that is bright and charming in literary society was enjoyed without noise, parade, or animosity. To avoid the intrusion of unwelcome fame, even the fact that there was such a club was for a long time not mentioned to those who were unconnected with it.

But such light could not long be hidden beneath a bushel. One by one, outsiders heard of that charming circle which was not engaged in the exchange of compliments and flattery, but which openly and boldly pointed out to the members their literary faults. All this Arcadian chapter is charmingly told by Pelisson, whose narrative we are following as others have so often done before. Boisrobert was then in high favor with Richelieu, — the one to whom the Cardinal's physician referred when he said, "Monseigneur, I can prescribe nothing more for you but two drams of Boisrobert after dinner." From this source the great minister of France heard of the brilliant coterie which met at the house of Conrart. The far-sighted sagacity of Richelieu perceived the possibility of giving public authority to these self-contained critics, and through Boisrobert he offered to become the protector of the club, and to give it the authority of *Lettres patentes*. His proposals were gladly accepted as honors from the crown, and after due deliberation and formalities, the charter passed under the royal hand and seal in the month of January, 1635. This document is far more interesting at this late day than most such official papers. It abounds in lofty sentiments admirably expressed. It recognizes the conferences which have been held by the pre-existent 'assembly;' it confirms and defines their purpose to be the promotion of eloquence, that is to say, of skill in the use of language; it bestows upon the

infant society the name which has now become historic; it limits the membership to forty persons; and it confers upon the chief and protector, Cardinal Richelieu, the authorization of officers, statutes, and by-laws. Various other names had been proposed, — l'Académie des beaux esprits, l'Académie de l'éloquence, l'Académie éminente, — but finally Académie française was selected, because it was more modest and more appropriate.

The original statutes define in much detail the sphere of the academy, and its methods of procedure. Its purpose is thus stated in the twenty-fourth article. "The principal function of the academy will be to labor with all possible care and diligence to give certain rules to our language, and to make it pure, eloquent, and capable of treating the arts and the sciences." In subsequent paragraphs, provision is made for the distribution of the best French authors among the academicians who are to make a note of such words and phrases as suggest general rules of correct expression, the entire academy being the judge of what is thus presented. The preparation of four works — a dictionary, a grammar, a rhetoric, and a poetry — is projected. At every regular meeting, one of the academicians, in his turn, is to present a discourse in prose, reading it or reciting it as he chooses. He may select any theme, but must restrict himself in delivery to fifteen, or, at most, thirty minutes. The rest of the session is to be devoted to the examination of works which have been presented to the academy, or to the prosecution of the four great tasks already mentioned. Every discourse before the academy is to be referred to two censors, who shall report within a month their observations upon it, and the author, within the following month, shall submit to the commissioners the corrections which he may have made in accordance with their suggestions. Similar steps are to be taken in respect to other works submitted to the judgment of the academy. Brief rules are laid down to make the criticism truly effective. The commissioners or censors are not to keep copies of the papers they examine, nor of their observations upon them; faults are to be pointed out with deference and courtesy. The corrections are to be received in the same spirit; the approbation of the academy will be expressed without praise, and in accordance with a prescribed formula. Works indorsed by the academy, after such scrutiny as has been mentioned, may be published 'by order of the French academy;' but no academician may indicate his membership in the academy on the titlepage of a work not submitted to the criticism of his associates, or not approved by their action. The rules which the academy prescribes in respect to language or orthography must be followed by all the academicians in prose and verse. All revelation of the confidences of the academy, in criticism or praise, is forbidden under penalty of disgraceful and irremediable expulsion.

By these severe methods, the literary men in Paris, in the middle of the seventeenth century, endeavored to hold themselves and their countrymen up to a high standard of literary excellence. The results have been apparent from that time to this, in the clearness, the fitness, and the grace, which have characterized French writers, not only those of genius and erudition, but those of humbler standing. In later days, other academies in Paris have shared with the French its lofty rank; and perhaps there is less reason now than there was two centuries ago, for such concerted action in the improvement of the French language, and in the promotion of a pure style; yet no one can read the story of those primitive days without admiration for the spirit which conceived this lofty idea of the benefits of literary criticism, severe and considerate, and which upheld the advantages of co-operative efforts in the advancement of letters. Among all the literary clubs of the world, none has attained to such acknowledged authority, none has come so near to immortality, none has had such wide-spread influence, as that which sprang into life at the magic touch of Richelieu two centuries and a half ago.

EXPLORATION IN INDO-CHINA.[1]

ON the 12th of December, 1883, I left London for Liverpool, and embarked the next day for Rangoon.

Luckily I was introduced to the Rev. Dr. J. N. Cushing before leaving the steamer, and, as he was the best-known Shan scholar, and had previously traversed part of the country I intended to explore, I induced him to join my party. Having procured the necessary passports, and paid my official calls, I left for Maulmain to make arrangements for the journey.

On the 12th of January I sent my boys on with the luggage to Shwaygoon, a town some sixty miles distant from Maulmain up the Salween River, and followed with Mr. Ross, of the Bombay-Burmah trading company, on the 15th, in a steam-launch. The same day we left in carts for Hlineboay, where we arranged for hiring elephants for both of our parties. Returning to Shwaygoon, I made a boat-journey up the Salween as far as Yembine, to see whether it was practicable to carry a railway in that direction. On my return to

[1] From an article by HOLT S. HALLETT in the London *Graphic*.