

IN OLD PROVENCE

BY LEWIS PIAGET SHANKS.

GALLIA est omnis divisa . . . How many who once toiled over Cæsar know that this Gaul of the first century is a reality? How many Americans making their obligatory European tour turn aside to visit Provence? Mention it to a tourist agent, and he will say it is too hot there! As if Atlantic City were not hotter, as if Provence had not been for centuries a summer resort of the Latins! So chance and custom combine against a land so rich in Roman buildings as to rival Rome itself, a land which offers its southern hospitality for half of what Paris exacts today.

Most guide-books to Provence send the traveller south from Paris, when the trees begin to bud along the chilly boulevards. This is the season when the Midi is loveliest. But there is another way to reach it, which takes one straight across the Atlantic, through the pale blue peaks of the Azores, past Gibraltar and the snow-capped Sierras of Spain. Before turning north to Marseilles the steamer touches Naples, throned on her sapphire bay behind the golden rocks of Cape Misenum. Vesuvius, Pompeii, all these classical memories, make Naples the best of prefaces to an excursion in Roman Provence.

Unfortunately the boat gives you only a few hours there. A day at most, and you continue your way to that other Roman port, Marseilles, the sea gate to Provence. Now is the time to recall your ancient history; Provence, *provincia nostra*, first of the provinces of Rome, had been a gap in her defenses before its conquest. Through it Hannibal had marched to sack Italy in 218 B. C. There too, over a hundred years later, the plundering Cimbri and Teutones were defeated and destroyed by Marius in the battle of the Lar, and the monuments set up in honour of the great consul are standing to-day at St. Remy and Orange. Hence the Romans took Provence. They embellished its cities with palaces and baths and temples; and like

the bones of a giant dinosaur, these relics of a dead empire lie strewn over the lower valley of the Rhone. Here, at the end of the Middle Ages, flourished the troubadours, whose lyrics showed the way to Dante and so began that outburst of national literatures we call the Renaissance; here lived Petrarch, and the popes of the 'Babylonish captivity,' whose palace-fortress at Avignon is the largest mediæval building in France. Just across the Rhone from it lies Beaucaire, the fabled home of Aucassin and Nicolette; not far away lived the nineteenth-century singer who laboured for a Provençal renaissance. But even the genius of Mistral could not restore to favour a language which had fallen into a dialect, and Provence still remains a province, a dowager queen, living in her memories.

As the boat sails into Marseilles, one is reminded that this very modern city is older even than Roman Gaul. The islands which guard the harbour—*les Iles Phénices*—recall the Phœnician mariners who first traded here, before the Greeks founded the city. In the museum of Marseilles you may see the bronze and marble gods brought by these colonists across the seas; you may read—or examine—the Greek inscriptions which have been found here, together with coins bearing the imprint of nearly every town in Asia Minor. For the rest you find no traces here of the Greek Massiglia; you must be content with the romance of the seaport, so vividly described by Daudet and by Joseph Conrad.

A forest of masts cuts deep into the city, masts decked with the flags of every country. The wharves are piled high with merchandise and swarming with people; here and there one sees the gay coats or the baggy breeches of dark-skinned Algerian soldiers, and watching from her spire on the hill stands Notre-Dame de la Garde. This was our first objective, for the shrine of the patron of sailors is hung with scores of miniature ships, each commemorating a mariner's escape from the sea. The thrifty Marseillais have built an inclined railway up the rugged hill; but we mounted afoot, a tiresome climb, but well repaid by the view from the summit. The whole harbour is visible, together with the huge basins which have been added, protected by breakwaters. One can walk on from here to the Corniche road, which, skirting the rocky coast, leads the traveller into Italy. The sea is incredibly blue, probably because of the dark-green seaweed which covers the rocks beneath. Across the bay you can see the *Iles Phénices*, and rising from one of the islands a 16th century donjon which was long used as a prison. It is the celebrated Chateau d'If, where the hero of the "Count of Monte-Cristo" was imprisoned:

you are shown the actual cell! This excursion took up the rest of our morning; after luncheon, we went on to Arles, replete with bouillabaisse, but undistracted from our Roman pilgrimage by all the cafés of the Cannetière.

Arles, once the rival of Marseilles, more than repays one for the modernity of the latter. The dead city of to-day was prosperous under Roman rule; it was the Gallic Rome, five times as large as modern Arles. Though now 27 miles from the mouth of the Rhone, Arles was a seaport nineteen centuries ago; and it was here that Cæsar built the fleet with which he took Massiglia. In the museum, which contains so many treasures, you may see an antique pillar deeply furrowed by the hawsers of ships, and celebrating in its inscription the greatness of the emperor Constantine. But Arles was built upon the Rhone; in fact, Provence itself is the delta of the Rhone, which every year carries down to the sea seventeen million cubic metres of soil. Thus the river-god has raised the barrier which has saved this group of Roman monuments from the ravages of Saracen pirates and the destructive rebuilding which comes with increasing trade.

Constantine the Great had lived at Arles! The very streets we were walking had once resounded with the tread of his legionaries. That gleaning from our Baedeker determined our first promenade, down the river bank to the Palace of Constantine, built at the beginning of the fourth century. This duty done, we sought the square which now marks the site of the ancient Forum. It is a rather dingy little place, stripped of its former glories except for the two Corinthian columns, sole relics of a host, which grace the front of a modern building. A café close by offers its chairs and tables to the student; here one may reconstruct in imagination the Roman city, the Rue des Thèmes probably leading to the baths, the Rue des Arènes to the Amphitheatre. The baths are no more, but the Rue des Arènes does take you to that huge elliptical rim, fifteen hundred feet in circumference, where twenty-five thousand spectators once watched the gladiatorial games. By moonlight, the effect of this gigantic pit is overpowering; and one does not need to be told that its sides are over a hundred feet in thickness at the base, in order to feel that impression of brutal force which is so distinctive a note in Roman buildings. No modern sky scraper gives one the same impression, because no modern building uses stones of the same terrific proportions. And this is the reason it has endured. Used as a fortress by Goths, Saracens and Franks in turn, it became in the Middle Ages a

huge tenement, by the simple expedient of walling up its arches with boards and stone. The towers were added by the Saracens, and the loss of the cornice stones bears witness to their convenience as missiles, in the sterner gladiatorial games between Franks and infidels.

"Panem et circenses"—but the cry of the mob that sold its birth-right for amusement does not fully express the spirit of Arles. There were cultured citizens in that Mediterranean port, Greeks and Romans filled with Greek ideals; they built the theatre whose semi-circular seats once covered the side of the hill southwest of the arena. Today, this once splendid monument is scarcely more than a plan. A pair of columns, with a bit of entablature, mark the pillared line of the back-stage; and the parterre is still partly paved with its coloured marble slabs. It was the monks of the Dark Ages who overthrew this monument of a hostile religion; other monks, centuries later, built a monastery from the stones. With all its art-treasures, the ancient theatre must have been very beautiful, for one of these treasures is that gem of the Louvre, the exquisite Venus of Arles.

The other statues were probably burned and turned into mortar. But we must not lament, for the Venus of Arles is not the only legacy the Greeks left to this little town. They had sweethearts and wives here, as one may see by the clear-cut Grecian features of the women. Famous through all France, the Arlésienne looks at you from every souvenir and post card. You wonder sometimes, where are the originals? But it is possible that the theatre or the moving pictures capture them, before they become antiques like the majority of those we saw.

Archæological research is after all much more satisfactory. We soon learn to distinguish between Roman masonry and mediæval, we came home from our tramps tired and thirsty and white with the immemorial dust of Provence. There is so much to see. One must go to St. Remy, where Marius exterminated the barbarians in the battle of the Iar. A hundred thousand perished here, and to this day the field is called the place of carrion, Pourrières. The very site of the bonfire where the spoils were burned has been found, and every year until the French Revolution, peasants celebrated the victory with a bonfire of their own, on the site of Marius' camp, consecrated by a battle of the Lar. A hundred thousand perished here, and to this day Near by, on the height of St. Remy, is the monument which Julius Cæsar erected to the memory of his illustrious relative, an exquisite little pyramidal structure in the style of the choragic monument of Lysicrates, looking out sentinel-like across the battlefield. Beside it

stands Cæsar's own triumphal arch, built to commemorate the surrender of Vercingetorix and the completion of his conquest of Gaul.

Rome did not die; it merged insensibly into the Middle Ages. Nowhere is this better seen than in the palimpsest of Arles. Take for example the history of her antique cemetery. Here under the cypresses where Dante, perhaps, once walked, Christian tombs early found their place among the pagan, and the spot still keeps its pagan name, Les Alysamps, the Elysian Fields. By its cemetery Arles lived on into the Middle Ages. It became the cherished necropolis of Gaul; and it was enough to place the dead in a coffin, set the bier on a raft and launch it on the Rhone, which bore it safely with the burial fee to its destination.

It was in Les Alysamps that the Christ appeared to St. Trophimus, who first preached Christianity to the men of Arles, and it was here that the saint was first interred. Trophimus was one of the first seventy-two disciples sent out to the Gentiles. Ordained by Saint Peter himself, he came to Gaul in a sacred boat; and Mistral has told how the apostle first preached in the Temple of Arles, and the marble Venus fell from her pedestal as he spoke! So we did not fail to visit the great cathedral of St. Trophine, with its Gallo-byzantine portal and its lovely cloisters dating back to the twelfth century. Here you may follow, on sculptured capital and plinth, all the well-known stories of the Bible; but if you care to see the chapel where Trophimus really held his first church, you must go to the abbey of Montmajour.

Montmajour is only six kilometres from Arles. Founded by Childebert, as the story goes, the abbey dates from the sixth century, but the most of the present buildings are not earlier than the eleventh. We saw the cell of the saint dug in the rock, we climbed the tower for the view, and returned late along the dusty road, a bevy of black frocked French school-boys jogging back ahead of us. A *grenadine au kirsch* followed, then a dinner in the court of the little Provençal inn, where pet chickens came familiarly to gather the crumbs from our table. Next day we went on to Nîmes.

Nîmes is really very beautiful, but it is too modern, or shall we say too much modernized, to possess the intimate charm of the tortuous little streets we had trodden blithely for two days. At Nîmes, everything is neat and well-kept, the monuments set off by ample squares, so that the town is more like a tidy museum than a bit of antiquity gradually encrusted by the Middle Ages. A modern boulevard takes you to the amphitheatre, smaller than that of Arles, but so

well preserved in its exterior that the first view of it seems to roll away eighteen hundred years. Seventy feet in height, the walls of this huge ellipse rise before you, complete and perfect, the few restorations indicated by the sharper edges of the newer blocks. Even the cornice is mainly the original one, with the brackets and holes, nearly a foot in diameter, which received the masts of the awnings or *velaria*. The wall rises on two series of arches, the upper Doric, the lower with huge buttresses taking the place of the columns, and four gateways lead to the arena through a hundred and five feet of piled-up stone. Within, thirty-four rows of seats are divided into tiers, and twenty-four exits afforded rapid egress to the 24,000 spectators.

Once cleared of its tenements and restored, the arena was utilized by the modern Gaul in his own way. He held there bull-fights *à la provençale*, a game in which the bulls are usually cows, but which is still sufficiently sanguinary. I was disgusted to find the arena placarded with the posters of a moving picture show. Romans and Goths and Saracens and Franks had fought upon these walls; what mere shadow-machine could thrill one like the thought of these terrific shades?

We went on to the *Maison Carrée* in no hopeful mood. The modern boulevard leads on to another square, but in it stands the temple which is the most perfect work of man that has come down to us intact. Built in the reign of Augustus or perhaps of one of the Antonines, this temple is undoubtedly the inspiration of a Greek architect; for it exemplifies all the laws of symmetrical irregularity which we find in the Parthenon. It is a small building, only eighty-five feet long, but were it larger one could not see so easily the whole effect of its magical harmony. You have seen it in photographs, but no single view can show you the miracle of its beauty. You must see it yourself, look at it from every side, sit down and study it in all its changing symmetry and charm. This charm is due to little curves in lines one first imagines rectilinear; even in the photograph you can see that the roof lines are not absolutely straight. Now used as a museum, the temple contains statues, pottery and coins found in the vicinity; it was a stable before its restoration, a hundred years ago.

There is another temple at Nîmes, on the hill which overlooks the town, built to the glory of Diana in the reign of Augustus. Or was it in honour of the fountain-god, whose spring supplied the Roman baths near by? At any rate, this tiny Temple de Diane, with its broken barrel-vault, is one of the most charming ruins in

Provence. Long before it was built, the Celtic tribes had set up here their own shrine to the god of the spring, whose sparkling waters, led down through Italian formal gardens, invest the whole hillside with the beauty of vivid greenery outlined by marble pilasters and balustrades. The Roman baths are quite near the temple, somewhat masked by the formal gardening, but one may still see a few of the original columns in the water of the basin.

Nîmes with her antiquities gives one an idea of the luxury of Roman life (even in the provincial towns of Gaul). But to understand the force behind that luxury, the energy and the practical sense of the race, you must make a pilgrimage to the Pont du Gard. This aqueduct, which once served to bring water to the baths of Nîmes, spans the valley of the Gardon thirteen miles to the North-east; it is part of a conduit originally twenty-five miles long. The very railroad avoids it as something bigger than steam or steel, but no imaginative traveller regrets the walk from Remoulins up the lonely valley, covered with the olive trees the Greeks brought to Provence. Silence and solitude give the fitting background for this tremendous relic, which soon looms before you, 150 feet high and 880 in length, towering against the sky. The hand of man, whose ugly modern buildings seem to caricature the *Maison Carrée*, has left this ruin in its loneliness, and eighteen centuries have only gilded its stones and filled their crevices with flowers.

Before leaving Nîmes we made an excursion in the other direction to Aigues-Mortes on the coast of the Mediterranean. It was here that Saint Louis embarked for his crusades of the twelfth century; in fact the town was built and fortified to provide the kings of France with a seaport, Provence being still a separate county. The place is entirely surrounded by a wall, over thirty feet high, upon which we made the circuit of the town. Protected by the sand which has silted up her little harbour, Aigues-Mortes remains a perfect specimen of a medieval walled city; the fortifications, which have withstood no attack, have been thoroughly restored and appear like new. To the North-west there is a sort of citadel, called the *Tour Constance*, with walls seventeen feet thick. From the summit one looks out over the stagnant salt-marshes; from the sea side, at night, the city looks the very image of loneliness and desolation, a setting worthy of *Materlinck*.

A similar impression of lonely grandeur, but one untinged by any unhealthy romanticism, is experienced at Orange. You feel it slightly before the triumphal arch of Marius, set across the great

Roman highway by which the legions marched to the conquest of the north. Seventy feet high by sixty-seven wide, it is impressive by its mass, but it lacks simplicity; and one must seek the Roman theatre of Orange to match that great impression. The facade of this theatre, the finest of all still existing, is a wall three hundred and forty feet long by one hundred and eighteen high, the largest wall in Europe. Thirteen feet thick today, it was once even thicker, for it was faced with marble on the interior, which served as permanent back-scene for the stage. Behind the facade, on the slopes of the hill, were seats for seven thousand spectators and now that careful restoration has replaced the seats, you may hear *Oedipus Rex* or *Alceste* or *Phèdre* here in August, performed by actors from the *Comédie Française*.

Such a treat I had promised myself that Sunday afternoon. But rain deferred the performance, so I left Orange with only the memory of a long noon-hour spent upon the hill above the theatre looking down upon the great stage and across the curtain wall to the horizon. Silence and solitude made the moment worthy of the grandeur that was Rome, but the impression was not single, for behind that line of hills lay the city which I had found the most charming in all Provence, Avignon.

Was it because Avignon seems to keep the merry humour of the days when they danced the farandole on the ruined bridge across the Rhone? Or was it simply that we found, in this *Ville Sonnante* of Rabelais, a restaurant which even he would not have despised? Be that as it may, Avignon is a city where all good Americans might hope to die. I saw it first from across the river, a clustering mass of roofs and spires dominated by the battlements of the papal palace, the whole reflected in the sinister darkness of the Rhone. Within that palace fortress seven popes lived and reigned; to build it took all the energy of three of them. The building covers 6400 square metres. Seventeen feet thick, the walls show the wealth of the papal treasure and the necessity for its protection; within are everywhere secret passages and stairs. Here Benedict the Antipope held out through ten years of siege, unsubdued even by Bertrand du Guesclin, yet the castle shows hardly a trace of injury, and when you climb the highest tower and look down a hundred and sixty feet to the roofs of the town, you agree with half of Froissart's description: "This is the strongest and the fairest dwelling-place in the world."

Time was when the statement was wholly true. But fortune has

not been kind to the palace. Long a prison, it served as a military barracks through the larger part of the nineteenth century, and impious hands destroyed the frescoes painted by Italian artists. All this was explained to me by the guard, a fine old white-bearded Provencal, who displayed with equal conviction the cell of Rienzi and the tower climbed by the pope's mule in Daudet's charming tale. He had known Daudet, he said, but he spoke most of Mistral, his master, for he too was a *Félibre*, a nineteenth century troubadour. "In England," he added, "they talk a great deal about me." I have been unable to verify this modest assertion, but no one could hold that against so courtly a gentleman.

Another poet of Avignon, the great Petrarch, frequented this palace of the popes, and in the valley of Vaucluse close by he had a hermitage where he wrote his sonnets to Laura. It is a lovely drive to the valley, surrounded by hills, but the factories spoil the town of Vaucluse, one of them covering the site of the hermitage. The image of the poet confronts you everywhere—on postal cards, offered by women who resemble Laura in neither age or beauty. In all the valley, only one indubitable relic of the past remains, the ruined castle of Petrarch's friend, the Cardinal de Cabassol.

So it is more agreeable to think of Petrarch and Laura in the city where they met, in the papal palace or in the cathedral on the hill above. But on that rock, which rises sheer three hundred feet above the Rhone, you are likely to forget all your mediæval history in the panorama spread out before you. Nothing can equal the majesty of the slowly curving river, winding through a valley streaked with fields and dotted with old stone houses; on the opposite bank *Ville-neuve-les-Avignon* and the castle of *St. André*, at your feet *Avignon*, with its red-tiled roofs and its countless churches, clustered around the huge mass of the papal palace; and beneath the citadel, the broken twelfth-century bridge on which they used to dance. If you have ever spent a summer evening in the city, so gay and merry when its day's work is ended and the open air cinema brings everyone to the square and the principal street, you will admit that the old rondo expresses perfectly the soul of this summer land, careless of all her weight of years and young as when the minstrel first sang the *farandole*:

Sur le pont, d'Avignon,
L'on y danse tout en rond.