

THE  
IDLER IN FRANCE.

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CHAPTER I.

NISMES.

I HAVE omitted to notice the route to this place, having formerly described the greater portion of it. I remarked a considerable improvement in the different towns we passed through: the people look cleaner, and an air of business has replaced the stagnation that used to prevail, except in Marseilles and Toulon, which were always busy cities.

Nismes surpasses my expectations, although they had been greatly excited, and amply repays the long *détour* we have made to visit it.

When I look round on the objects of antiquity that meet my eye on every side, and above all on the Amphitheatre and *Maison Carrée*, I am forced to admit that Italy has nothing to equal the two last: for if the Coliseum may be said to surpass the amphitheatre in dimensions, the wonderful state of preservation of the latter renders it more interesting; and the *Maison Carrée*, it must be allowed, stands without a competitor. Well might the Abbé Barthelmi, in his *Voyage d'Anacharsis*, call it the masterpiece of ancient architecture and the despair of modern!

The antiquities of Nismes have another advantage over those of Italy: they are kept wholly free from the disgusting *entourage* that impairs the effect of the latter; and in examining them in the interior or exterior, no risk is incurred of encountering aught offensive to the olfactory nerves, or injurious to the *chaussure*.

We devoted last evening to walking round

the town, and so cloudless was the sky, so genial the air, and so striking the monuments of Roman splendour, that I could have fancied myself again transported to Italy.

Our inn, the Hôtel du Midi, is an excellent one; the apartments good, and the *cuisine soignée*. In this latter point the French hôtels are far superior to the Italian; but in civility and attention, the hosts of Italy have the advantage.

We had no sooner dined than half-a-dozen persons, laden with silk handkerchiefs and ribands, brocaded with gold and silver, and silk stockings, and crapes, all the manufacture of Nismes, came to display their merchandise. The specimens were good, and the prices moderate; so we bought some of each, much to the satisfaction of the parties selling, and also of the host, who seemed to take a more than common interest in the sale, whether wholly from patriotic feelings or not, I will not pretend to say.

The *Maison Carrée*, of all the buildings of antiquity I have yet seen, is the one which has most successfully resisted the numerous assaults of time, weather, Vandalism, and the not less barbarous attacks of those into whose merciless hands it has afterwards fallen. In the early part of the Christian ages it was converted into a church, and dedicated to St. Etienne, the martyr ; and in the eleventh century it was used as the Hôtel-de-Ville. It was then given to a certain Pierre Boys, in exchange for a piece of ground to erect a new hôtel-de-ville ; and he, after having degraded it by using a portion of it as a party-wall to a mean dwelling he erected adjoining it, disposed of it to a Sieur Bruyes, who, still more barbarous than Pierre Boys, converted it into a stable. In 1670, it was purchased by the Augustin monks from the descendants of Bruyes, and once more used as a church ; and, in 1789, it was taken from the Augustin monks for the purposes of the administration

of the department. From that period, every thing has been done for its preservation. Cleared from the mean houses which had been built around it, and enclosed by an iron palisade, which protects it from mischievous hands, it now stands isolated in the centre of a square, or *place*, where it can be seen at every side. Poldo d'Albenas, a quaint old writer, whose book I glanced over to-day, attributes the preservation of the *Maison Carrée* to the fortunate horoscope of the spot on which it stands. His lamentations for the insults offered to this building are really passionate.

The *Maison Carrée* is not square, though its denomination might lead one to suppose it to be so, being nearly eighty feet long, and only thirty-eight feet wide. Elevated on a base of cut stone, it is ascended by a flight of steps, which extends the length of the base in front. The walls of the building are of a fine white stone, and are admirably constructed.

The edifice has thirty fluted columns, with Corinthian capitals beautifully sculptured, on which rests the architrave, with frieze and cornice. This last is ornamented with sculpture; and the frieze, with foliage finely executed.

The entrance is by a portico, open on three sides, and supported by two columns, included in the thirty already named, of which six form the front, and extend to the fourth, when commences the wall of the building, in which the other columns are half imbedded, being united in the building with its architrave. The fronton, which is over the portico, has no ornament in the centre; neither has the frieze nor architrave: but some holes mark where the bronze letters of an inscription were once inserted.

This inscription has been conjectured, by the ingenious mode of placing on paper the exact dimensions of the holes which formerly con-

tained the letters of it, and is now said to be as follows :—

C. CÆSARI AUGUSTI. F. COS. L. CÆSARI AUGUSTI.  
F. COS. DESIGNATO PRINCIPIBUS  
JUVENTUTES.

But as more holes are found than would be filled by these letters, the conclusion does not seem to me to be justified.

At the far end of the portico is the door of entrance, the only opening by which light is admitted to the building. It is very lofty, and on each side is a pilaster; beneath the cornice are two long cut stones, which advance like a kind of architrave, pierced by a square hole of above twelve inches, supposed to have been intended to support a bronze door.

The original destination of this beautiful edifice still furnishes a subject for discussion among the antiquaries; some asserting it to have been erected by the Emperor Adrian in honour of Plotina, while others maintain it to have been a forum.

At present, it is used as a museum for the antiquities discovered at Nismes, and contains some admirable specimens. Among these are a torso in marble of a Roman knight, in a cuirass, and another colossal torso, with a charming little draped statue seated in a curiale chair, and holding a cornucopia in the left hand; a cinery monument, enriched with bassi-relievi, representing a human sacrifice; a bronze head of Apollo, much injured; and a Janus.

A funereal monument found in the neighbourhood of Nismes in 1824, offers a very interesting object, being in a good state of preservation. It is richly decorated, and by the inscription is proved to have been that of Marcus Attius, aged twenty-five years, erected to him by his mother Cœlia, daughter of Sextus Paternus.

So fine is the proportion, so exquisite is the finish, and so wonderful is the preservation of the *Maison Carrée*, that I confess I had much more pleasure in contemplating its ex-



terior, than in examining all that it contains, though many of these objects are well worth inspection.

I should like to have a small model of it executed in silver, as an ornament for the centre of a table ; but it would require the hand of a master to do justice to the olive leaves of the capitals of the columns ; that is, if they were faithfully copied from the original.

It was, if I remember rightly, Cardinal Alberoni who observed that this beautiful building ought to be preserved in a golden *étui*; and its compactness and exquisite finish prove that the implied eulogium was not unmerited.

I have nowhere else noticed the introduction of olive leaves in Corinthian capitals instead of those of the acanthus ; the effect of which is very good. A design was once formed of removing the *Maison Carrée* to Versailles. Colbert was the originator of this barbarous project, which, however, was fortunately abandoned from the fear of impairing, if not destroying,

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the beauty of the building. The Emperor Napoleon is said to have entertained a similar notion, and meant to grace Paris with this model of architectural perfection; but it was found to be too solidly built to admit of removal, and he who could shake empires, could not stir the *Maison Carrée*.

The transportation of antiquities from their original site can never be excused, except in cases where it was the only means of insuring their preservation. All the power of association is lost when they are transferred to other places; and the view of them ceases to afford that satisfaction experienced when beheld where they were primarily destined to stand. I can no more fancy the *Maison Carrée* appropriately placed in the bustle and gaiety of Paris, than I could endure to see one of the temples at Pæstum stuck down at Charing Cross.

One loves, when contemplating such precious memorials of antiquity, to look around on the