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978-1-108-08102-3 - A Narrative of Three Years' Residence in France, Principally in the Southern Departments, from the Year 1802 to 1805: Volume 2

Anne Plumptre

Excerpt

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A NARRATIVE  
OF  
A THREE YEARS' RESIDENCE  
IN  
*FRANCE,*  
&c.

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CHAPTER I.

*Marseilles.—The View from La-Viste.—The City  
founded by the Phocæans.—The Eglise Major.—  
Institutions of the Phocæans.*

LET the reader figure to himself a small circular plain, not more than eight English miles in diameter, two thirds of which is enclosed by high mountains, and the remainder bounded by the classic waters of the Mediterranean, and he will then have an idea of what Nature has made the territory of Marseilles. Let him figure to himself this little spot covered with an immense number of country houses, to the amount of nearly ten thousand, amidst gardens and vineyards, and he will then have an idea of what this territory is rendered by the hand of Art:—he will then have an idea of the very striking and singular view presented to the traveller on reaching the summit of the mountain of La-Viste, between Aix and Marseilles.

This mountain forms a part of the chain by which the plain is enclosed; and to see the view to the greatest advantage, the traveller ought to arrive on its sum-

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mit about two hours before sun-set. The rays of the declining orb then falling obliquely both upon the land and the water, every object in both is thrown out with perfect distinctness; not even the smallest vessel on the sea is lost. In such a moment there is something altogether in the scene, not only from its striking nature in itself, but from the power of association, which throws the mind into a species of trance. The assemblage of objects before us, though each individually may have nothing in it novel or uncommon, yet taken in the group presents a whole perfectly so,—perfectly unlike any other view, at least among those that I have seen,—so that we seem as if suddenly transported into a different world, and the images that irresistibly rush in crowds upon the mind, might almost delude it into a belief that we are travelling back into past ages. We behold the waters that bore the ships of Tyre and of Sidon, of Egypt and of Carthage, of Greece and of Rome; and still beholding them covered with vessels, scarcely can we persuade ourselves that the prosperous days of those states are long past, that it is not still their vessels which skim before our eyes. Here seems besides to have been the peculiar abode of the ancient god of the seas; and as we contemplate the smooth and glassy deep which he inhabited, we could almost expect to see him rise from the profound abyss, and glide along its surface, seated in his shelly car, with his beloved Amphitrite by his side, and surrounded by his guard of state, a band of Tritons. We approach that town which alone arrested the progress of the Roman conqueror, when aiming at universal empire, and to which the muse of Lucan has paid an honourable tribute:

Fearless of Cæsar and his arms it stood,  
Nor drove before the headlong rushing flood;

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But while he swept whole nations in a day,  
 Massilia bade th' impetuous victor stay,  
 And clogg'd his rapid conquests with delay;—

while the vast range of villas scattered over the plain, in the diminished form which they assume, from the distance and height whence they are seen, have the semblance of a vast camp, and might almost induce the belief that 'tis the camp of Cæsar himself we behold.

With such and similar ideas the mind can scarcely fail to be impressed on arriving at this spot, especially if it be the first time that the Mediterranean is presented to his view. Those waters are so strongly associated with every thing most memorable, most illustrious in antiquity, that we contemplate them with ideas wholly different from what are inspired by the ruder waves of the ocean—they carry with them an interest no where else to be found. When we recover from these illusions, and coolly contemplate the scene presented from La-Viste, a deep impression of another kind is made, and we are struck with the vast wealth and opulence at which modern Massilia must have arrived, to occasion the creation of such a numerous assemblage of country houses, every one of which is a place of retirement for some citizen of Marseilles.

The situation of the city itself is such that it cannot be seen from La-Viste. Embosomed in a little amphitheatre of hills of its own, the children of the mountains by which the territory is surrounded, it is not any where visible as a distant object, it is never to be seen till nearly arrived at its gates. In descending La-Viste the eye is soon caught by a lovely little valley between its declivity and the sea, called the valley of Séon. This is one of those spots which naturally inspires the idea, that if our lot were but cast to remain there all our days, nothing

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could be wanting to complete our happiness. And yet it may fairly be presumed, that even the valley of Séon has its dark side on which it may be viewed : but since on a fine clear afternoon, with the declining sun gilding the landscape, its bright side only is exhibited, it must then be pronounced a most lovely little spot. The fine prospect is soon lost in descending the hill ; for about half way down, the road becomes enclosed between two walls, to the entire exclusion of all view, and to the excessive disappointment and mortification of the traveller, whose imagination, in beholding the scene from the heights above, had been feasted with the idea that the beauties thence contemplated were to remain equally open to his view all the rest of the way. Instead of that, the road continues enclosed to the very gates of Marseilles, excepting for about a furlong, or scarcely so much, when it lies upon the border of a little bay in the sea, with only a parapet on that side as a guard.

The entrance to Marseilles from Aix is very striking ; the eye is carried at once through the whole length of the town, to the entrance from Toulon at the other end. The streets that form this visto are, the street of Aix, the Course, and the street of Rome : the end of the latter seems closed by a vast mountain ; though this is only a deception from the distance, as the mountain is a considerable way from the town. When seen by lamp light, the long enfilade of lights through the town has a very fine and striking effect. The road from Aix, or, as it should rather be called, from Paris, and that from Toulon or Italy, are the only great roads that come to Marseilles ; the other entrances are merely from cross roads leading to different parts of the territory.

In the centre of the amphitheatre of hills on which the town stands is the port, a natural bason of an oblong

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form, about three quarters of a mile in length, and half that breadth. It is so entirely sheltered from all winds, that even in the most tempestuous weather a vessel rides there with perfect security; it could not be more out of the reach of danger in a river at twenty miles distance from the mouth. At the very entrance of the bason vessels are as secure as in the most remote part, since it is very narrow, and so much among the rocks, that they effectually prevent any wind acting upon it with a force sufficient to create danger. But it is only a port for merchant vessels; the draught of water at the entrance is not sufficient to admit a ship of war of any size; even a two-and-thirty-gun frigate could not enter unless its guns had been previously taken out: it is therefore no less secure against the inroads of an enemy than against those of the winds. The greatest depth of water within the port is about four fathom; in some places it is not more than three, and in others does not exceed two and a half.

Along the south side of the port runs a quay, which is the most delightful winter walk imaginable, fully exposed to the south sun, and completely sheltered from the north wind; but in the summer the heat of it is insupportable. While Provence was a separate state, independent of the crown of France, and had its own particular sovereigns, René, titular king of Sicily and Jerusalem, the father of our queen Margaret wife of Henry the Sixth, being count of Provence, used to prefer that country, on account of the fine climate, to every other part of his dominions; and during the latter years of his life resided there entirely, dividing his time pretty equally between Aix and Marseilles. When he was at the latter place he used to walk every day upon the south quay, whence it obtained the name of king René's chimney, which it retains to this day. Some say that it is an error

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to give the name to the whole quay, for that it properly belongs only to one particular spot before the door of a coffee-house, where his majesty used to sit and smoke his pipe; but the other is the more generally received opinion.

The “decent mixture of prodigy and fable,” which, Gibbon says, “has been thought necessary in every age to reflect a becoming majesty on the origin of great cities,” has not been spared in the accounts given of the origin of Marseilles: these it is needless to detail; but amongst the most sober-minded historians, who do not think the marvellous necessary for the embellishment of their narrative, a difference of opinion as to the circumstances attending its foundation still prevails. While it is agreed on all hands that it owes its origin to a colony of Phœceans from Asia Minor, who settled there some centuries before the Christian æra, the motives which led to their forming the establishment are differently represented. By some the colonists are considered as voluntary emigrants from their own country, which was sterile and inhospitable, the inhabitants paying little attention to agriculture, but living by commerce and fishing. In the course of a commercial expedition, a party of these people, having landed near the mouths of the Rhone, were so much struck with the beauty and fertility of the country, that they immediately projected the formation of an establishment there. On their return home they drew so delightful a picture of the new spot they had visited, that a considerable number of their fellow-citizens joined in the project, and, providing themselves with every thing they thought necessary for the execution of it, set sail. On their arrival in Gaul they obtained permission of the Segoregian monarch, who reigned in these parts, to build a city upon the coast; and they accordingly founded

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Marseilles, which from a humble beginning soon arrived at great opulence and distinction.

By others it is affirmed that these emigrants did not quit their country voluntarily, but were driven thence either under the tyranny of Harpagus, the lieutenant-general of Cyrus, or in the time of Xerxes king of Persia, or in that of Darius the son of Hystaspes; for all these epochs have their advocates, as being the actual one when this event happened. It is added that, when the exiles put to sea, they threw a large bar of iron into the water, taking, at the same time, a solemn oath, never to return to Phocæa till that bar of iron should rise of itself, and float upon the surface of the water; and the most bitter execrations were denounced against any one who should break the oath.

It is probable that to this story may be traced the origin of a popular opinion still prevalent at Marseilles, that there is now an immense iron anchor at the bottom of the port; and that, if it ever should rise and float upon the surface of the water, it might be considered as a sure prognostic of some dreadful calamity about to befall the city. It did not however rise to warn the inhabitants of the terrible calamity they were about to experience from the plague in 1720, or of the horrors of which this town was doomed to be the theatre during the revolution.

Whatever may be the fact relative to the voluntary or involuntary emigration of the founders of Marseilles, it is certain that the city is of great antiquity. Some persons, from the similarity of the names, have made a confusion between the Phocians of Bœotia and the Phocæans of Asia Minor, and attribute the foundation of this city to a colony of the former people; but the best authorities all ascribe it to the latter. These colonists

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brought with them the worship of the deities who were principally held in reverence in their own country; and as Diana was among the chief of them, one of their first works was to build a temple to her honour. It is a commonly received opinion, that when Marseilles was converted to Christianity, this temple was transformed into a Christian church, and that it is the very same which under the title of *Nôtre Dame de la Majeure*, or, as it is commonly called, the *Eglise Major*, was, till the revolution, considered as the cathedral or metropolitan church.

i But they who are best versed in matters of antiquity, doubt much whether any part of the present church was included within the site of the ancient temple; they even doubt whether the ground on which the temple stood, is not lost by the encroachments of the sea. Most certain it is, that there is nothing in the present appearance of the *Eglise Major*, which evinces any remains of the taste and elegance with which the ancients constructed and ornamented the temples dedicated to their deities. The revolutionary hand has indeed added considerably to the spoliation of this edifice; but the shell of the building remains entire, its form and proportions are still the same, and these do not correspond with any of the known remains of Grecian architecture now in existence. It seems probable therefore that the ancient temple of Diana is wholly lost, and that the Christian church was built as near the spot where it stood as the encroachments of the sea would permit, while such of the spoils of the temple as could be collected were employed in its decoration.

Even of these spoils it has gradually been deprived: a little before the death of Henry the Fourth, several very fine columns of white marble were by his order carried away, and it was never known what became of them.



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Two others, which supported the portal of a door underneath the organ, were some years after carried away by the Count de Tende, then governor of Provence, as a present to his brother-in-law the Connetable de Montmorenci; and a monument to Hubert de Vins, erected in the church of St. Sauveur, at Aix, in the year 1590, was made entirely of marble dug from the garden of the Prevoté, which joins to the church. So lately as the latter end of the seventeenth century there were remaining in the church several chapters of the Corinthian order very finely carved; but what became of them is not known, they were gone before the revolution.

A modern ornament which once belonged to the Eglise Major was not more respected than these ancient ones. Paul de Sade, bishop of Marseilles, of the family of Hugues de Sade, husband to the celebrated Laura, embellished the portal of this church with a very fine jasper stone, considered as of great value. This stone being seen by Cardinal Richelieu when he visited Marseilles, he expressed a great desire to have it; on which it was seized by the magistrates of the town, and presented to him: the theft was afterwards compromised with the canons of the church for the sum of eight hundred livres. The Eglise Major had been reopened for public worship a short time before our arrival at Marseilles, but in a very dilapidated state; the only thing remaining in it worthy of attention is a very handsome and fine-toned organ. It is a remarkable thing, that amidst the seizure of metal of all kinds made at one period of the revolution, the organs in the churches were in a great many instances spared. The Major is however no longer the cathedral church; St. Martin's, which has been much better preserved, has succeeded to the first rank, and the Major is put among the secondaries.

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Among other revolutions which this church has undergone, it is generally believed that it was converted into a Saracen mosque during the time that the Saracens were in possession of Marseilles. This idea is principally supported by several inscriptions in the Arabic language having been at different times discovered in it. One, supposed to have been the epitaph of a Cacés, or priest of the order of Almudenes, whose office is to call the people together from the top of the mosque, was in substance as follows: “*God is the Lord, one and immutable.— This is the sepulchre of his servant and martyr, who trusting in the mercy of the Lord most High, it has been granted to him in the pardon of his transgressions: Joseph son of Abdaliah of the town of Mitylene, who died in the month Zilhugé.*”—Another inscription was to the following effect: it is supposed that the king mentioned in it was one of those who reigned over the Saracens during the time that they were masters of the whole south of France. “*In the name of God compassionate and merciful, to whom we must all pray, and of his prophet Mahomet, and all those who have charge of his law contained in the writings wherewith the said Lord God hath intrusted them, which shall remain to the day of judgment, and which were given to rescue us from perdition, and lead us to the golden age of consolation and pleasure, after we have quitted the vanities of this deceitful world:—I Mehemed Almazary, king, who have well-governed my people, have desired that my body should be deposited in this sepulchre.—Died in January, in the year 587 of the prophet Mahomet.— This stone is a testimony that there is but one God.*” These inscriptions, with many others in Arabic, in Greek, and in Latin, are now all lost; some before, some in the revolution.