



GIPSIES IN CHURCH.

THE FEAST OF THE MARYS.

(PLAY IN PROVENCE.)

WITH PICTURES BY THE AUTHOR.



TEN years ago I made up my mind to go to Oberammergau. But when 1890 came nobody asked me. Instead, in the middle of May, I was in Arles, and on the 23d on my way to Saintes-Maries for the feast Mistral sings in "Mirèio."

The road to the town crosses for thirty miles the Camargue, no longer a fearful desert, but one of the richest parts of France, a land that in the autumn reeks of wine. On this May morning there passed down the broad white highway an endless succession of long carts, each filled with sad and silent peasants or bright and jolly Arlésiens, who were singing hymns as they went. Many of the people looked tired and sick and worn; in some wagons I saw blind men and cripples and helpless paralytics.

As I jogged slowly on I overtook wandering monks, gypsies, the Archbishop of Aix, and more and more cart-loads of pilgrims. Finally, as the cultivation ceased, and the wide salt-marshes began, the town, with the battlemented walls of its church, came into sight, faintly outlined low down against the sea, and I looked at it as *Mirèio* did on her weary journey:

She sees it loom at last in distance dim,
She sees it grow on the horizon's rim,
The saints' white tower, across the billowy plain,
Like vessel homeward bound upon the main.

Tourists who go to Saintes-Maries always describe it as a wretched, miserable collection of little hovels. It is, on the contrary, a flourishing fishing village, with two very decent hotels, a *mairie*, and all the other belongings of a small French country town. The hotels usually charge about four francs a day. But on the 23d, 24th, and 25th of May the landlords get a hundred francs for a room from any one who has not brought his own tent or carriage, or has not a friend, and objects to sleeping in the open.

When I wandered into the church I found that it had been completely transformed since I had last seen it. Galleries were erected around the interior, the side altars were boarded up, and the best places on the choir steps were covered with the cushions and pillows of the faithful, who in this manner reserve their seats for the three days' feast. A lay brother was busy drawing water from the holy well, salt all the year, but fresh during the *fête*, while a number of pilgrims were either drinking it or bottling it up and carrying it away. Every now and then a marvelously picturesque gypsy would mount from the lowest chapel, for at Saintes-Maries

Altars and chapels three,
Built one upon the other, you may see,

and he would scratch some powder from the rock on which the Marys landed, and descend again to where

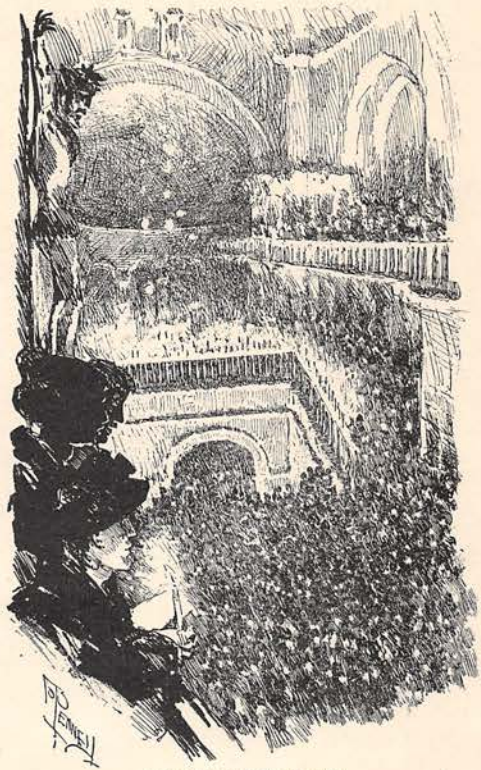
Beneath the ground
The dusky gipsies kneel, with awe profound,
Before Saint Sarah.

From their subterranean shrine came the strangest singing:

*Dans un bateau sans cordage,
Au naufrage
On vous exposa soudain;
Mais de Dieu la providence,
En Provence,
Vous fit trouver un chemin.*

Then, "Vivent les Saintes Maries!" they shouted, and their shouts echoed through the long, low, barrel-vaulted church, almost a tunnel, and were repeated by the crowds kneeling about the choir. As strange as their singing were the black-shrouded figures of the Romany *chals*, gathered together from no one knew where, and now, on their knees, grouped around the tomb of their saint. Many and evil, one felt, must have been the deeds which required all this devotion to be washed away.

Throughout the afternoon people kept pouring into the town. Every foot of space around the church was filled with booths, from the stand for the sale of votive offerings managed by a priest to an equally flourishing gambling establishment presided over by a charming young lady. The gipsy women who were not engaged in praying sat by the door holding shells for alms, just as many a wandering brother in the same place may have begged his way



THE CHURCH AT NIGHT.

hundreds of years before. At the main door a small blind girl was stationed, and for the next three days the air rang with her ceaseless cry: "*Messieurs-et-Mesdames-n'oubliez-pas-la-pauvre-petite-aveugle-et-les-Saintes-Maries-ne-vous-oublieront-pas.*" To the saints themselves she never turned for the miracle for which so many were hoping, and once in a while it seemed to occur to the sacristan that hers was not the best example to encourage the belief of the faithful, and he would come and take her away. But he could never stop the endless flow of her petition, and before it had quite died away in the distance she would make her escape and find her way back again. She might have been the devil's own advocate.

The curé of the town was hustling about, looking after the Archbishop, greeting all the arriving clergy, and selling tickets for the good places in the church during the next two days. But though nearly worked to death, he was still smiling and amiable.

By evening the town was completely encompassed by a great camp of gipsies and peasants and farmers. The sun sank into the marshes, great camp-fires were lighted, and then the mosquito was abroad in the land.

I looked into the church again after dark. It was crowded; on the raised choir, where the high altar usually stands and where the



THE CHURCH DOOR.

relics were to descend on the morrow, lay the sick, votive candles casting a dim light upon their sad, thin faces, which stared out, white and ghastly, from the surrounding shadows.

And, ah, what cries they lift! what vows they pay!

Those who could were chanting hymns in quavering voices, their friends taking up the chorus. Many lay still and silent. One boy seemed too feeble to do more than to move a trembling, emaciated hand in time to the singing, and yet, every now and then, he would open wide his heavy eyes, and into his death-like face would come a look of longing, and in a shrill voice that rose high above all the others he would shriek, "Vivent les Saintes Maries!" It was as though the grave opened and the dead spoke. All night these weary watchers would lie there, waiting and hoping, and all the next day until the descent of the holy relics, the touch of which must surely heal them.

While the faith in the saints was so strong around the shrine, the faith in Boulanger seemed equally great out in the open night; at least his march was sung as loud and as long as the hymns to the Marys—louder and longer, in fact, for it kept me awake for hours. And so is all life divided between pain and pleasure.

On the morning of the 24th, the great day, there were masses and sermons and practising of the choir within the church; there were bargaining and gambling and preaching without. In the blinding sunlight a steady stream of people kept winding down the single highroad into the town, while far off, at the mouth of the Little

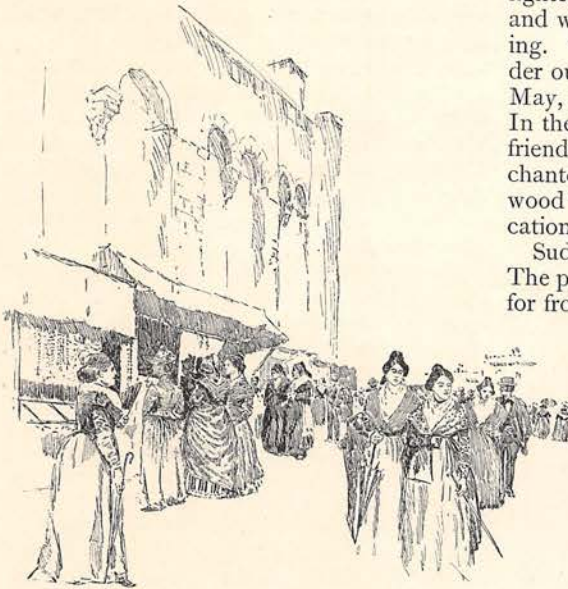


"VIVENT LES SAINTES MARIES!"

Rhone, steamers from Marseilles and Arles and Saint-Gilles unloaded their pilgrims, who, like *Mirò*, came wandering across the salt-marshes.

By three o'clock the church was nearly full; by four it was jammed. Around each door outside was a great crowd; inside there was not an empty seat. The long ray of light which streamed in through the broken rose-window at the western end was momentarily shut out by the people who had climbed even away up there. Every one in nave and gallery held a lighted candle, which twinkled and flickered and waned with the great volume of the singing. "We are in heaven, and the stars are under our feet," Gounod said when, one 24th of May, he looked down upon the same scene. In the raised choir the sick still waited, their friends and a few priests still prayed and chanted. "The church was like a wind-swept wood" with the mighty voice of their supplication.

Suddenly there was a cry of "They come!" The people around the altar fell on their knees; for from the airy chapel, high above the choir, a great double ark hung suspended, and now began to move downward, though almost imperceptibly. As it came slowly nearer the sick and infirm were raised toward it in the arms of the strong. Women fairly wrestled together, each seeking to be the first to lay her hand upon the holy relics. When it was a few feet from its resting-place, a solemn procession of white-robed clergy passed from the sacristy to the choir, and one priest, springing upon the altar,



OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

seized and kissed the relics. At the same moment he was surrounded by the sick, who, as though the longed-for miracle had already been worked, pushed and struggled to touch and be healed. The priest held the relics, and the people, pressing closer and closer, fell upon them, touching them with their hands, their eyes, and even their crippled limbs, kissing them passionately, clasping them with frenzy. It seemed as though the priest's vestments must be torn to shreds, the relics broken and scattered in a thousand fragments, from the very fervor of the faithful. But finally the last kiss was given, the last petition uttered, the ark was set at rest upon the altar, the sick were placed all around it, and the chants rose louder and sweeter than ever — "Vivent les Saintes Maries!"

Was any one cured? No; not yet could the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame arise and go their way. But there was not a single sick man or woman whose hope was not strong for another year. There is no faith like this in Protestantism.

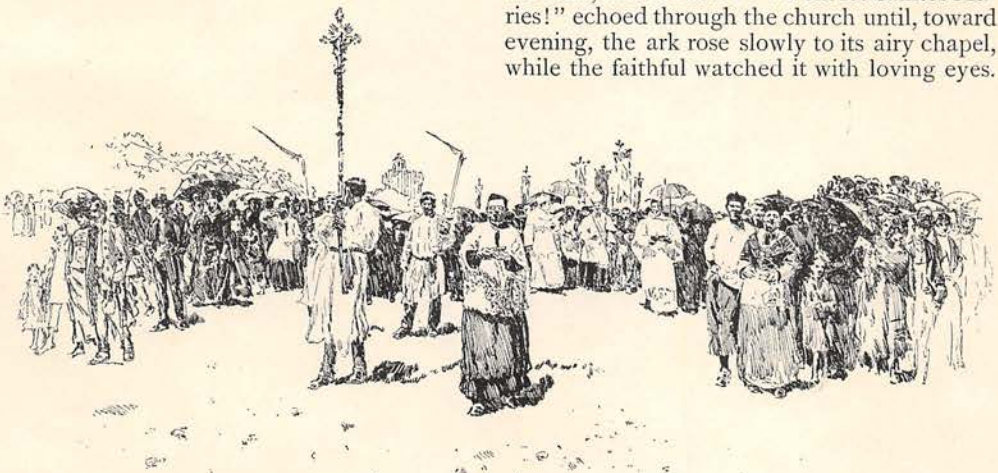
Again all night the sick lay there, and the church was filled with ceaseless singing. Hymn followed hymn, the pious gipsies in the lower chapel singing one verse, the people in the church above responding with the next. And again all night an army of pilgrims was camped around the town.

On the 25th, while the morning was still young, a long procession started from the church, headed by the different banners given by the towns of Provence. In solemn state the Archbishop of Aix, attended by clergy and acolytes, marched through the narrow streets, half in shadow, out into the open sunlight to the sea-shore. And next the sick and crippled came, some borne on mattresses, some hobbling



PREACHING OUTSIDE THE CHURCH.

on crutches, and others dragged along by their friends. Last of all a struggling crowd of gipsies carried aloft the rude figures of the two Marys in their little boat, and on every side devout pilgrims strove to kiss, or at least to touch, the holy bark. Across the sands to the sea they went, to the water's edge, and then right into the water, gipsies, people, and even priests. For a moment the boat was set afloat upon the waves, there where at the dawn of Christianity the wind had driven the saints from Jerusalem. And the gipsies again raised it aloft, and waded to land; the procession, with banners waving, candles flickering dimly in the sunshine, hymns loudly chanted, turned again across the sands, through the shadowy streets, and brought back their beloved Marys to the church. The sick were placed once more about the altar, and shouts of "Vivent les Saintes Maries!" echoed through the church until, toward evening, the ark rose slowly to its airy chapel, while the faithful watched it with loving eyes.



THE PROCESSION.



IN THE WATER.

But it had hardly reached its shrine when the church was empty. In ten minutes every one had mounted cart, or diligence, or omnibus, and was leaving for home. In two hours not a trace was to be seen of gipsy or Gentile. The pilgrims had fled as though from the plague, or had entered for a race to Arles.

So ended the feast of the Marys.

For the people of the town there was a grand ball, a grand arrival of the bulls, and a grand bull-fight. But they were much less grand and characteristic than in Arles.

This, one of the last unexploited religious festivals of the world, will have lost its character and simplicity before the article is printed. For my friend the engineer is at work on a railway.

Joseph Pennell.

THE STORY OF THE TWO MARYS.

If a lizard, wolf, or horrid snake
Ever should wound thee with its fang, betake
Thyself forthwith to the most holy saints,
Who cure all ills and hearken all complaints.



THE saints that Mistral sings of in his "Mirèio" are Mary Jacobe and Mary Salome, whose feast in May, in the little village which bears their name, is the greatest festival of Provence, and whose legend has been told again and again by Provençal poet and chronicler. They were two of

the large company of holy men and women from Palestine who were thrown by the Jews into a boat without sails or oars or food, and then set adrift upon the sea. But, so tell they the tale, an angel of the Lord was sent to them as pilot, and the two Marys and Sarah, their servant, holding their long robes like sails to the wind, came swiftly and safely to the shores of the land which it was their mission to convert to Christ. They disembarked upon the remote edge of the wide and desolate Camargue, built an altar, and Maximin, one of their number, offered up the sacrifice of the mass, and



THE RETURN FROM THE SEA.

where the water had been as salt as the sea it now suddenly rose at their feet sweet and pure from a miraculous spring, a sign of the divine approval.

Then they separated, each to go his or her own holy way, all save the two Marys, who with Sarah stayed, and, building a cell near the altar, lived there the rest of their days. Sometimes fishermen passed by that lonely coast, and to them the saintly women preached the true faith, and won them to Christ. Sometimes from Arles Trophimus came and administered the sacraments to his sisters in the Church. And the fame of the holiness of the three women went abroad, and when, after they died, they were buried where they had lived, people journeyed from far and near to visit and pray at the tomb, and many miracles were worked, so that their renown grew ever greater and greater. Before many years it had become a well-known place of pilgrimage,—one of the most ancient in France,—and a mighty church was built over their lowly altar, and many and strange were the wonders wrought. A little town grew up about the church, and nuns and monks erected their convents and monasteries near, and as Rocamadour was honored in the far west of Languedoc, so was the shrine of the Saintes Maries beloved in Provence.

Then evil days followed. Saracens and Danes laid waste the land, and if even Arles and Marseilles fell before their attacks, how could the remote village in the desert withstand them? And there were also pirates, who infested Camarguan shores. And between them all, by the tenth century, nothing was left of Saintes-Maries except the little altar guarded by a hermit. But it fell out that one day William I., Count of Provence, hunting in the Camargue, chanced upon the old forgotten shrine, and the hermit told him of its glory in the past; and the Count's heart was touched, and he promised to restore it to its greatness. And the church which he built was strong, and fortified with battlements and a tower,—you can still see it on the sands to-day,—and pirates were defied, and peace once more reigned in the sacred spot. Then again pilgrims thronged to it from every part of France. Houses and monasteries again rose beneath the shadow of the church. Miracles were worked, and its prosperity returned, as

William had promised. Four centuries later good King René found beneath the church the bones of the three blessed women,—by the sweet smell they gave forth they were known to be the remains of the two Marys and Sarah,—and inclosed them in a richly adorned casket, which was placed in the little airy chapel above the choir. It was then decreed that once every year, in May, they should be lowered into the church, and shown to the faithful. The relics of Saint Sarah were set in the crypt, where they received special honor from the gipsies, to whose race she had belonged. As the centuries passed the fame of the shrine increased, and there was no better-loved place of pilgrimage throughout the land.

And then again began evil days. From the Reign of Terror the village by the sea could not escape. The church was sacked, its shrine desecrated, and had not the curé concealed the sacred relics, they too must have perished when their casket was burned. After the Revolution, when quiet was restored, a new casket was made, the bones were again carried to their chapel, and the annual pilgrimage began with all the old fervor.

Saintes-Maries is so out of the way, so difficult to reach, that in this railroad age it may be said to have lost its old popularity, that is, outside of the *Midi*. A twenty-five miles' drive across the broad plain of the Camargue, and the absolute certainty of having to sleep out of doors, seem no light matters to the pilgrim who can step from a railway-carriage into a big hotel at Lourdes. As a consequence Saintes-Maries, which has no other interest save that which the shrine gives it, receives but scanty mention in the guide-book, and to the average tourist is practically unknown. But throughout the south of France the devotion to the two Marys has never weakened. The people still flock to the May feast by hundreds and thousands. And because of the sincerity of the pilgrims, and the absence of curious lookers-on, the festival has retained a character of which few religious ceremonies nowadays can boast. However, a railroad is being built across the Camargue, and in a few years Saintes-Maries will have lost its character and become as fashionable as Lourdes.

Elizabeth Robins Pennell.

