

DOWN AN OUBLIETTE.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "MEHALAH," "JOHN HERRING," ETC.



CAST INTO THE OUBLIETTE.



ONE of the most uncomfortable features of a mediæval castle in Germany and France is the *oubliette*, a subterranean dungeon, down which it is said that those were cast whom the feudal seigneur wanted to be rid of speedily.

There is hardly an old château in France in which is not shown one or more such *oubliettes*. Happily, it is quite certain that the vast majority were nothing of the sort—were cisterns for the reception of the rain-water from the roofs.

Many of the castles, if not most of them, are planted on rocky heights high above rivers and springs; and,

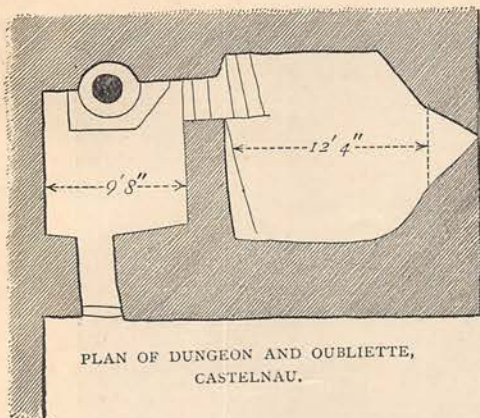
in order to form a supply of water, there were spouts from the roofs conducting the rain that fell into a reservoir constructed underground or in the base of a tower. The wooden conduits have disappeared, and the imagination of the peasantry converts the openings of these cisterns into the mouths of *oubliettes*.

No man has studied mediæval military architecture more than M. Viollet le Duc; and he boldly asserts that, among the many castles he has explored throughout France, he knows of but three or four that are indubitably such underground forgetting-places for poor wretches.

In Germany there were unquestionably such horrible pits wherever there was an "Iron Virgin"; then, when the instrument unclosed, the mangled corpse was allowed to drop into an abyss where it disappeared for ever.

That *oubliettes* were employed in France cannot be doubted, though it is to be hoped their employment was rare. Bernard VIII., Count of Armagnac, cast his cousin, Gerald of Armagnac, in 1403, down one in his castle of Rochelle, in Bigorre. The unhappy man lingered in it from ten to twelve days. Bernard had also taken and imprisoned the two sons of Gerald. He

had the younger brought to the same dungeon; but the horror caused by the sight of the *oubliette* in which lay his father's corpse, and the fear lest he also should be



PLAN OF DUNGEON AND OUBLIETTE,
CASTELNAU.

cast down, produced such a shock on his system that the young man dropped dead on the spot.

The Château of Castelnaud de Bretenoux lies in the ancient viscounty of Turenne, and is at the junction of the Bave and the Dordogne. It owed feudal homage to Turenne and the due of one egg every year.

The castle belongs to several epochs; the earliest portion is of the twelfth century, and comprises the hall in which Henry II. of England is said to have assembled the estates of Quercy in 1160, when he came to Guyenne to demand acknowledgment of his rights as the husband of Eleanor, the heiress of Duke William X.

The donjon is later—of the thirteenth century—and probably replaces a much earlier tower. It is quadrangular, whereas the more ancient donjon was circular. In the basement of this structure is the prison, a small chamber, twelve feet long by ten wide, lighted by a narrow slit through which no body could pass.

Admission to the prison is through an anteroom, eight feet six inches square, which has no window in it, only a doorway through the wall, which at this point is six feet thick. This anteroom is barrel-vaulted, but only six feet high in the middle; it is walled and paved with stone. The extremity is filled with what looks like a well, raised on a step above the floor. There is a low breastwork surrounding a narrow round hole, which is one foot eleven inches in diameter.

But of this prison and *oubliette* presently. Let us first see something of the history of Castelnaud.

There are so many Castelnaux that this one is distinguished as Castelnaud de Quercy, though it was situated in the viscounty of Turenne.

The seigneurs of Castelnaud during the English domination seem to have served one side or other much as suited their convenience; indeed, one of them did not scruple to become a captain of a free company, which was much the same thing as being a common brigand. It was the practice of these ruffians to waylay merchants, even to capture poor peasants, and hold them to ransom.

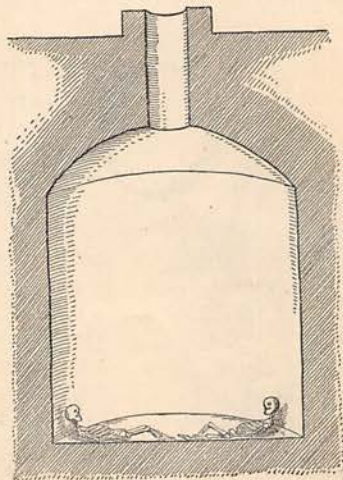
There was no town in the district of Castelnaud, which is the head of a number of little hamlets, rather than villages; and the lord of Castelnaud resolved to create a town for himself, and, what is more, a free town. The fashion for these had set in, and this was created in the following odd manner:—

Alonzo of Poitiers, brother of St. Louis, became, by marriage with the heiress of the Counts of Toulouse, the nominal suzerain to a portion of Guyenne, but actually possessed nothing save the bare title—not a castle, not a village, not a town. Even in the Rouergue, of which he was Count, he had not title to the feudal homage of Rodez, the capital, for that had been sold by Raymond IV. in 1095 to a family which thenceforth bore the title of Counts of Rodez. This was a very unsatisfactory condition of affairs, little relished by Alonzo.

He determined to create for himself what he did not possess, to form for himself a capital to his county. Accordingly, he set to work to build one on a piece of uninhabited land, and called it Villefranche de Rouergue.

At the same time in the Agenois he founded, with the same end in view, Villeneuve-d'Agen. Both towns he invested with great privileges. They were free from all taxes, except a small payment per house to himself.

Now these free towns proved a great success, and Edward I. of England founded a good many. Philip III., unwilling that the English should have large and prosperous towns sincerely attached to them by their self-interest, and drawing to them the trade of the country, established other free towns on portions of territory to which he could lay claim. The great



SECTION OF OUBLIETTE.

nobles and the bishops were not slow to perceive that the overlordships of such centres of prosperity gave them immense advantage, and they followed suit. The result is that in Guyenne there are a number of these old free towns built in the thirteenth century, and all on one determined plan.

All are as formal as an American western town.

Every street is parallel or at right angles to every other street. All the main streets are of exactly the same widths, and all the side streets the same. Not only so, but every house is precisely the counterpart of every other house. As the inhabitants were taxed by house, all were, in the eye of the suzerain, equals. Each of these *bastides* or free towns had a central market-place with an arcade on all four sides, and each a church, and one immense hall without pillars, a little aside of the market-place.

Each town was built either square or oblong, unless the ground would not admit of this stiff plan. Nothing can be more striking than the contrast between one of these "new towns" and the old ones which grew up from hoar antiquity by a leisurely growth.

Now the lords of Castelnau, having no town of their own, and, indeed, no town near, determined to make one, and they manufactured that of Bretenoux on the Dordogne. It was granted immunities like the *bastides* of royal foundation, English or French, but never thrive.

Now it is in a terribly tumble-down condition. A little shake from an earthquake, and it would go to pieces and fall into a heap of rubbish. What life it had in olden days it drew from proximity to the great seigneurial castle. Now that is in ruins, and the free town is in ruins also. There was in the reign of Louis XIV. a Castelnau who was great at court. He was given various offices and emoluments.

One night he played cards with the king, beat him and carried off such a prodigious sum that Louis was frantic; and to show his resentment against a man who chose to beat and plunder him, instead of graciously allowing his Sacred Majesty to do so, he deprived him of all his offices.

"I care not," said this Castelnau, "I will build in my castle on the Dordogne a staircase with the money I won of the king that shall be as fine as any he has at the Tuileries or at Fontainebleau."

This was about 1690. He returned to his Quercy ancestral castle and fulfilled his resolution. That is the story, and there is the staircase; but the former owners had done much to decorate and lighten the

sombre old château. In 1585 one whole façade was built in the splendid style of Francis I., and a gallery was constructed of wood, carved, gilt and painted, and hung with tapestry—that conducted to the Golden Hall, a ballroom, all the decorations of which were covered with the precious metal. This gallery was one of the glories of the province.

The last of the Castelnau died in 1705, and then the castle and estates passed into the family of the Duc de Luynes.

The Revolution broke out in 1789. Orders came to the Mayor of Castelnau to destroy the castle, but the peasant was a man with some respect for antiquity, some love of the beautiful. He took a ladder and a hammer and chipped away the arms over the gate, and wrote to the Directory to say that he had demolished this stronghold of tyranny.

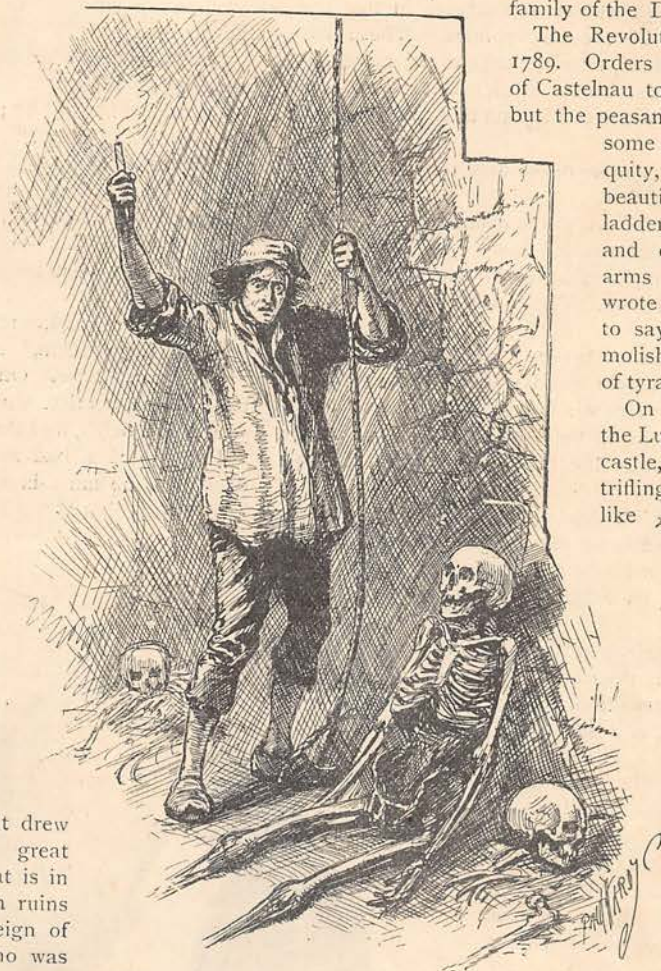
On the Restoration, the Luynes recovered the castle, but sold it for a trifling sum—something like £400. It passed from hand to hand, and was purchased about 1840 by an old registrar of Bretenoux. He endeavoured to make capital out of it by inducing the State to purchase the castle as a "monument historique."

The Council-General of the Department of Lot urged the purchase in 1844, but the Ministry considered the

place was too far distant from Paris to spend money on it.

The proprietor had heavily insured the castle. On the night of January 28th, 1851, a fire broke out under the gorgeous Renaissance Gallery, where the proprietor had stacked firewood and other combustibles, and the whole neighbourhood for miles round was illumined by the great bonfire.

The insurance company refused payment, believing the fire to have been an incendiary one. The castle was again sold, and bought by the old curé of the place for a trifle. He lived among the ruins till his death, when it passed to his nephew, a boy, and



"THE FLOOR WAS STREWN WITH SKELETONS" (p. 886).

the trustees sold it again. It was bought by a M. Pradelles, who devoted his small income to the preservation of what remained of this splendid relic of mediæval times.

He lived in the old library of the château, collected about him the remains of furniture, and spent his time in effecting repairs, loving every stone of the venerable monument.

At one time the library contained a fine collection in MS. of the lays of the troubadours in the Languedoc dialect, in several volumes. These have disappeared. Indeed, from the time of the Revolution till it was purchased by M. Pradelles, the castle has served as a store whence everyone took what treasures he liked.

M. Pradelles is now dead, and the castle is the property of his brother.

And now let us return to the *oubliette*.

In 1817 a peasant was let down. He screamed to be pulled up again, because, as he said, the floor was strewn with skeletons. There were seven there, he asserted.

No one descended to verify this account till the late proprietor thought it advisable to do so two or three years ago. He was lowered into it, and found only four skeletons of men, three lying against the wall, and one under the opening by which he had descended.

The brother of M. Pradelles was uncertain whether these remains had been removed or not, but believed that some barrow-loads of earth had been thrown in on top of them, so as, at all events, to cover them decently.

I reached Castelnau in the afternoon, and spent some hours in exploring the castle. The *oubliette* naturally attracted my attention, and I greatly desired to descend into it and satisfy my doubts about it. The opening was suspiciously like that of a well, and I was convinced it was nothing more nor less than the well for the use of the prisoners situated in an accessible place.

It was too late that afternoon for me to get ropes and descend; accordingly I was obliged to defer the expedition till the morrow; and seek out an inn where I could spend the night. Where that inn was, for reasons that will soon be obvious to the reader, I will not specify with precision.

Suffice it that I found one—a very primitive, rude country inn it was. The season was winter—indeed, it was in December—and snow was falling. The *salle à manger* had not only no fireplace in it, but the window, consisting of four panes of glass, had two of these broken.

The landlord, an old, kindly

man, somewhat sad, said he would do what he could for me; but, alas! he had lost his wife eight days ago, and he was left with a little girl of thirteen, who knew nothing of cooking. However, there was a hearty will to do what was possible, and a very respectable supper was served up.

When the landlord informed me that he had lost his wife, I replied that indeed the loss of a good wife was the greatest loss which a man could suffer in life.

“Yes, a *good* wife,” said the host, with a shrug of the shoulders.

Presently the whole story came out. His wife had run away from him.

“Conceive!” said he; “she is old—forty-five—and ugly—positively ugly!”

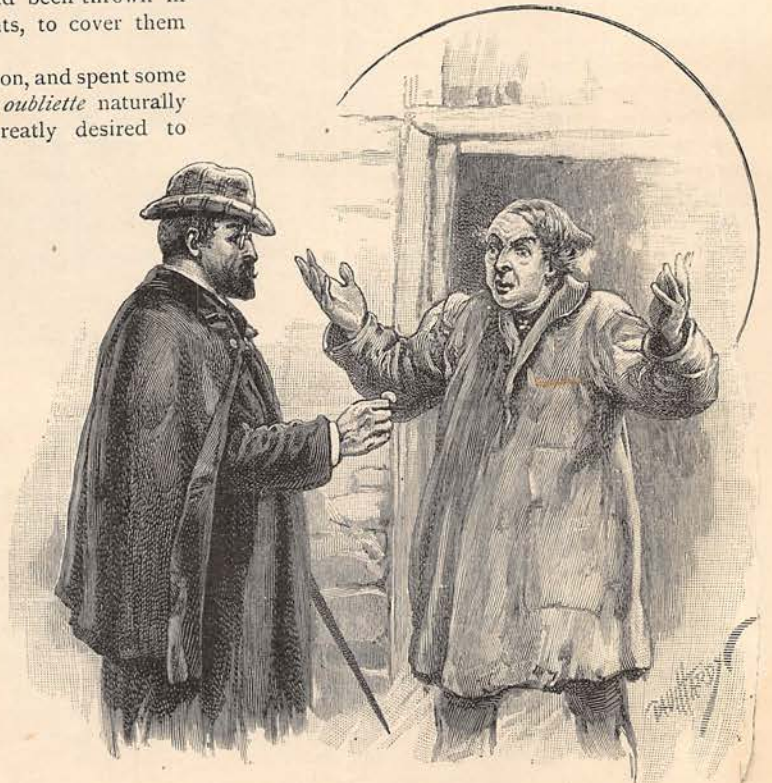
“I have no doubt you told her so,” I replied, “and that has made her run away; naturally no woman likes to be told that she is either one or the other.”

He shrugged his shoulders again, and asked my opinion as to what he should do under the circumstances.

“That is an awkward question to ask a stranger and an Englishman,” said I; “but there are two things I can advise. One is that you at once insert in the local papers that you will not be responsible for your wife’s debts, and the other—”

I produced a bad five-franc piece that had been passed on me some days previously.

“What is that?” I asked.



“WHAT IS THAT?” I ASKED.”

The host took the coin, tried it, turned it about, and said—

“It is bad—*elle ne vaut rien!*”

“Well,” said I, “if you had that coin that is worthless, what would you do with it?”

With promptitude he answered—

“Try to pass it.”

“*Eh, bien!*” said I. “Be content; you have passed the bad piece *qui ne vaut rien.*”

Well, at two o'clock in the morning the old fellow came into my bedroom to get at his Sunday clothes; that he might be off to Figeac to insert his advertisement in the papers.

“Ah!” said I, sitting up in bed, “then you are really going?”

“Yes, and I shall return before you depart, I dare say.”

So he went off.

In the morning, after breakfast, I drove to the castle, and a farmer was there ready, provided with ropes; and he and my driver let me down the neck of the *oubliette*.

As this neck is very narrow, and both hands were needed for holding the rope, I could not carry a light with me burning, but had a candle in my pocket as well as matches.

The contracted neck soon gave way, and I was in space descending, and finally my feet rested on a mound of earth that had been emptied in to cover the bones. I lighted my candle, and carefully examined the place.

I was in a vault thirteen feet square, arched over above, and with absolutely no opening that I could discern by which water could have come in. Indeed, had there been one, I am sure I should have seen it. I had, it is true, no magnesium wire, but I examined with my candle every side of the vault. If this had been a cistern, there must necessarily have been an opening through which the rain-water was conducted into it.

There was another alternative—that the place was for sewage, but in that case there would have been an opening for outflow; of that there was none. In the Castle of Chillon, on the Lake of Geneva, visitors are shown an *oubliette*, set with spikes, that communicates with the lake. It is not an *oubliette* at all, but is a part of the sewage system of the castle.

The vault in which I was could have been nothing but an *oubliette*, unless some opening exists high up that escaped my observation. The vaulted cell is not very deep—only about thirty feet. That four skeletons were discovered in it a few years ago is a fact.

These inaccessible vaults, or accessible only from above, have been known and used from a very early period.

This sort of horrible well was the *barathrum* of Roman prisons, often mentioned in the Acts of the

Martyrs. In the Acts of the Scillitane Martyrs we read of the Proconsul giving sentence:

“Let them be thrown into prison; let them be put into the *lignum* till to-morrow.”

The *lignum* was the place with wooden stocks round the deep hole which was the *barathrum*, and which received all the sewage of the prison. The heat, the stench of the *lignum* was bad enough. In the Acts of St. Pionius and others of Smyrna we read that the jailers “shut them up in the inner part of the prison, so that, bereaved of all comfort and light, they were forced to sustain extreme torment from the darkness and stench of the prison.”

But the worst of all was the *barathrum* that opened by a trap-door in the floor of the prison cell. Sometimes prisoners were confined in it, sometimes they were despatched by being cast headlong into it through the opening. Indeed, those prisoners who were executed in prison were finally thrown down into this horrible hole.

It was into such a pit as this that St. Ferreolus of Vienne, in Gaul, was let down in 304. Stified by the loathsome odours of the place, aching from the wounds he had received from the scourges, he dared not attempt to sit down, or he would sink into the foulness that came to his knees. He determined to make an attempt at escape; he succeeded in breaking the shackles off his feet, and he managed to worm his way through the outfall into the Rhone, which he crossed by swimming.

He succeeded in reaching the further bank; but his appearance aroused suspicion. He was arrested, led back to Vienne, and decapitated. Classic authors likewise mention the *barathrum*.

That the mediæval robber-knights and feudal tyrants should have employed similar dungeons is not only not improbable, but is almost certain. We have already seen how that the Count of Armagnac cast his kinsman into one.

The remains of old castles in France and Germany deserve much more careful investigation before we can say that *oubliettes* were a part of their stock prisons, and before we can say to exactly what epoch they belong, where they exist.

When I returned to the inn, I found the dolorous host there, in his Sunday suit, returned from Figeac.

“Well,” said he, “have you been down the *oubliette*?”

“I have,” answered I.

“Ah!” sententially, “I wish there were *oubliettes* now, and we could drop into them certain misdoers.”

“There are,” I replied, “in our hearts such *oubliettes*. You have one. You cannot, indeed, drop into it the wrongdoer, but you can the wrong done. Let it lie there—forgotten—in *saccula sacculorum.*”

“Amen!” said mine host gravely.

