

AIX - EN - PROVENCE.

BY WALTER HERRIES POLLOCK.

A VERY strange contrast to life in Marseilles is found by the traveller who wends his way from the first business city of France to Aix-en-Provence, the latest and dearest home of the good King René. At Marseilles there is, even in the quietest corner of the quietest suburb that belongs to the town, a sense of bustle, active and inactive—active in the want of repose, inactive in that so little wool comes from such a deal of cry. The Marseillais, to speak of him by the aggregate, goes beyond the Athenians by not only ever seeking some new thing, but also flaunting a contempt for those old things which ought to be a great part of what pride he feels in his native place. To him antiquity means dry bones: they made soup for people of centuries ago, and there is an end of them. They do not make his soup, the soup which he can see smoking before him, and he will not or cannot perceive that there would be an actually commercial value in the bones if he would have them properly arranged, preserved, and ticketed for the convenience of people, native or foreign, who delight in ancient relics as much as Sir Andrew did in masques and revels. The day in Marseilles is not only very much the day; it is also yesterday, or rather yesterday is completely swallowed up in it. And for to-morrow, that too pales before the flying moment. An enterprise succeeds—let us say for a week; at the end of that week there is a drop; that drop means, in nine cases out of ten to the Marseillais, a permanent failure; and so when the following week brings a renewed demand for his wares, why, there are no wares with which to meet it. Instant and incessant hurry, very often about nothing, is a distinctive mark of the place, and its influence is apparent everywhere, paradoxically conjoined with want of instant enterprise. In short, "bustle, bustle" might well be a Marseillais watchword.

And the difference between this bustle and the ordered activity of Aix-en-Provence is as marked as it is pleasing in favour of the last-named place. Aix as

the capital and university town of Provence is viewed with no special favour by Marseilles; but it may well be doubted whether the people of Aix trouble their heads over this not unnatural jealousy. The repose, without a hint of laziness, that belongs to the very atmosphere of the place belongs also to the inhabitants, who are devout where the Marseillais are childishly Atheistic; kindly and courteous where the Marseillais are, if not unkindly, decidedly off-hand. There is, again, a quiet use in Aix, as opposed to a restless waste in Marseilles, of time and space. In Aix the shadow of King René at his best and highest is an enduring influence; at Marseilles the memory of the same King's visits is barely preserved. It may be urged justly enough that the very nature of Marseilles, as of a port where ships from all countries laden with men of all countries come (though Prohibitive Duty has much diminished the number), fights strongly against peaceful and princely tranquillity, even in the midst of reposeful work, that marks the inland capital; but one cannot help thinking that the difference, perhaps chiefly racial, lies deeper than this. The markets at Marseilles are noisy and full of humour, but of that purely farcical humour which in real life is too near to violence, as if the grossly fantastic decapitations and dismemberings of harlequin in old-fashioned pantomime were suddenly to come to insistent life. The markets at Aix have their humour too, but it is the humour of high comedy, where the essence of interchanged repartee is the underlying restraint of all that can lead to unseemly speech or action. The same stately yet by no means artificial air which clings to the *Cours* and *allées* of Aix touches the whole of Aix life and manners; and the same worrying and artificial touch which disfigures too much of modern Marseilles clings also too much to the ways of its modern inhabitants.

But there is no need of contrast or comparison to emphasise the gay tranquillity which is a chief characteristic of Aix and

its people. The very aspect of the Cours Mirabeau, with King René's statue at its upper end, to one entering the town—whether you see it first in the evening shade with a vapour rising from the fountains of warm water in the middle, or in the soft light of early morning, or again

students who throng the *allées* going to and from their work. There is, too, among the students a curious characteristic—namely, that five out of ten of them have precisely the look and carriage of Cambridge men, even to the shape and colouring of the features. Other types, of course,



KING RENÉ'S STATUE.

under the full noonday sun—conveys a sense of repose in which there is no lack of vivacity and interest. And if you happen on the time when the Cour d'Assises and the University examinations are both in full swing you get as good an opportunity as possible for seeing how thoroughly and yet how pleasantly the business of life is understood and conducted, both by the *avocats* and judges, distinguished by their "top" hats, and by the professors and

are to be found—the Roman and the Phœnician, each strongly marked—but in the general behaviour of all one marks the same air of courteous and dignified activity.

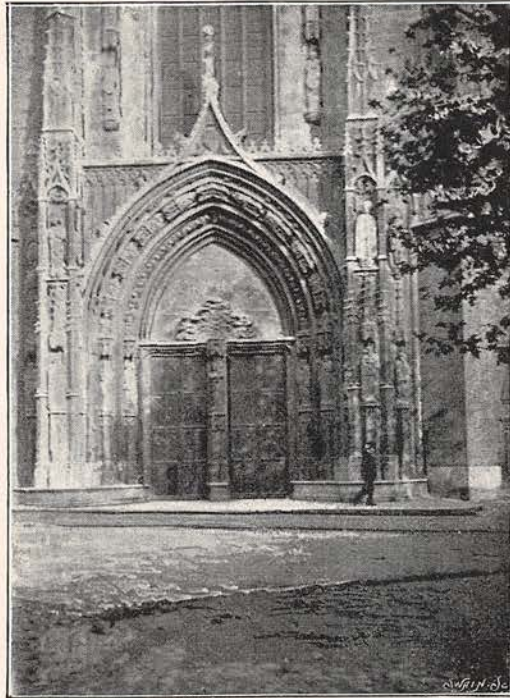
Of Aix the chief glory is the Cathedral, and of the Cathedral's glories the chiefest lies in the pair of carved wooden doors which give access to it, and which, since the beginning of the sixth century, have been preserved in a way little short of

marvellous, considering all the perils they have faced, chiefly by dint of artfully contrived "masking" doors. The inner doors are admitted to be the most perfect specimen extant of their kind, and even the finest photographic rendering cannot well convey a full idea of the grandeur and delicacy of the carver's work. No one, so far as we can ascertain, has yet been able to say with absolute definiteness of what wood the doors are made, so that one must needs fall back on the cautious description given in an excellent little guide - book, "Bois Rouge-âtre." Each leaf contains six upper panels and a large lower panel. In the large panel on the right are the figures of Isaiah and Jeremiah: on the left of Ezekiel and Daniel. On the top panels the twelve Sybils are represented, six on each side. The pride taken in these remarkable works of art by the sacristan who shows them is fully shared by the small crowd which always collects when the doors are unmasked, to gaze at them with admiration and reverence.

And probably every individual in this crowd has a firm belief in the beautiful legend of the cathedral's foundation. According to this, during the persecution which followed on the Ascension in Judæa, Lazarus, his two sisters, Martha and Magdalen, the Saintes Maries (Marie Jacobé and Salomé), and other disciples were turned adrift from Judæa in a boat without sail or rudder. The boat was miraculously directed to the shores of Provence, where Lazarus went to teach the Gospel in Marseilles (his place of refuge is still shown at St. Victor). Ste. Marthe went to Tarascon, where she miraculously tamed the Tarasque, the monster who had devastated the whole country-

side. The Saintes Maries took up their habitation in the Arles district, and St. Maximin, by divine order, went in company with Magdalen to set up an oratory, afterwards to become the cathedral, at Aix. Inside the church one finds on the right a *rotonde* of beautiful proportions, supported by columns, some of which are the very columns which belonged to the old Temple of Apollo, on the site of which the cathedral was begun and developed. The eye of an expert in architecture is needed to appreciate fully

the details of the building inside, dating as they do from the Roman times of *Aquæ-Sextiæ* down to King René's carefully preserved private gallery, and again down to modern restoration and addition through almost infinite gradations. But even a layman may assert safely that there is nothing mean (barring some modern religious pictures) or ugly in the whole effect. On each side of the choir are the magnificent tapestries from St. Paul's in London, bought in 1656, and



THE CATHEDRAL DOORS.

above these the two organ-fronts, one of them a dummy, the other the true instrument, from which excellent music accompanies excellent singing at Mass.

The Archbishop's Palace is worthy of the illustrious associations (Richelieu, the great Richelieu's brother, and Mazarin were Archbishops of Aix) that belong to it. The entrance, through a garden, noisy, but not too noisy, with the prattle of birds, such as would have pleased Bacon, is a foretaste of the beauty found both in the reception-rooms and in the living-rooms, in one of which there is an exquisite series of Gobelin's tapestries, illustrating the main incidents in "Don Quixote." The shading, the colour, and the expression

in this beautifully preserved work are beyond praise.

To the theatre at Aix attaches the same pleasant air of "bygoneity," which is characteristic of the whole place, inasmuch as it stands on the site, or was built within the old walls, of the royal tennis-court, which existed in 1660. It stands flush with the other houses in the Rue de l'Opéra, and in the daytime there is nothing to distinguish it from the rest of the street. Inside it is a very well-proportioned, pretty, and somewhat faded band-box, and skilful management and curtailment are needed to produce on

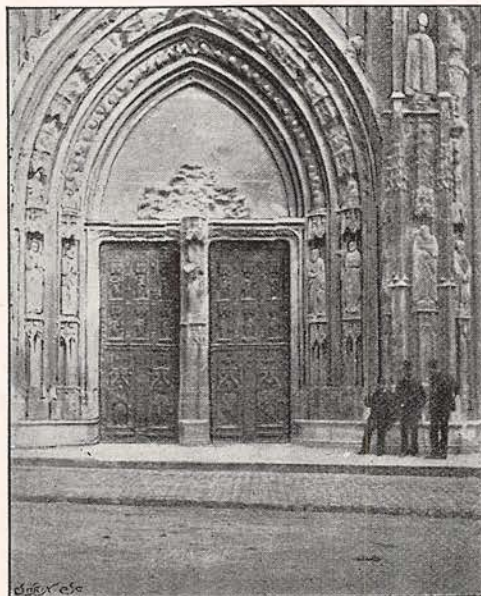
its stage operas generally presented on a grand scale. On the night of our visit Gounod's "Faust" was given, and given remarkably well, so far as concerned the conductor of the orchestra, who imparted a great deal of his own perception to an orchestra and chorus which seemed to be by nature somewhat vague. The Faust was better than many tenors of greater pretensions, and the Valentine sang in excellent style with a worn or injured

voice. The Mephistopheles was unique. He was so ambitious (and so unfortunate) in his vocalisation; so earnestly bent on doing his duty in the acting. One waited almost as anxiously as he himself did to see if the trick goblet would flame up at the right cue, and no one could withhold sympathy from his conscientious and self-conscious effort to be diabolical and to glide fiendishly across the stage in the scene where he covers before the cross-hilts of the swords. Once he broke through his overmastering sense of responsibility to perform a seemingly spontaneous devil-dance round Siebel, and the moment was intensely intense. But as an all-round performance the thing had real merit, and was listened to attentively by an audience, partly composed of

students, who had previously "guyed" unmercifully and not unjustly a curtain-raiser of unknown parentage and of inconceivable foolishness. There was a pathos mixed with the humour of this, too, because the players so very much did their very best. Altogether, the experience was a curious and a pleasant one, and the beauty and strangeness of the quiet moonlit town were all the more felt by contrast on coming into its streets from this odd and meritorious performance.

Theatrical in another way is the aspect of the crowd that assembles on Sunday afternoons in the *rotonde* at the bottom of

the Cours Mirabeau to listen to the military band discoursing most excellent music. Meyerbeer is an immense favourite both at Marseilles and at Aix, and much as I adore "Les Huguenots," I must confess to having discovered that it is possible to grow weary even of the Benediction of the Poniards. However, as I have said, the music is very well played, and most agreeably illustrates, so to speak, the varying groups that pass and repass like a



THE CATHEDRAL DOORS—UNMASKED.

well-managed stage-crowd. Many of us must have noticed one particular effect of watching such a crowd in an unoccupied mood. The attention is caught by a particular set of personages as they cross and recross the scene—a young mother with a small boy from a *Lycée*, an artilleryman with his sweetheart—some students surrounding an evidently acknowledged leader who is adored also by the attendant poodle—the list could be multiplied to any extent—and you fall to castle-building as to the past and future of these folk. Then weeks, months, it may be years, afterwards, the whole scene flashes back upon you, recalled, it may be, by the subtle reminder of the scent of flowers, and straightway you find yourself exactly where you left off in your imaginations

concerning the passing people whom, till that moment, one had clean forgotten.

To see all that is of interest and attraction in and about Aix would take a long stay, and in a short stay it is good fortune to get a fine afternoon for going to see one of the most attractive places near Aix, Roquefavour, with its magnificent aqueduct, at sight of which Lamartine exclaimed, "The Roquefavour aqueduct is one of the wonders of the world!" The name of the place is supposed to be derived from *Rupes favoris*, a name bestowed by Roman conquest, and it is the support of these rocks that largely helps the imposing grandeur of the aqueduct, of which the first stone was laid in 1842. The specialty of the pretty little inn underneath the shadow of the aqueduct is *écrevisses au buisson*. They are kept in a miniature covered pond, and one can eat them with much content in a *tonnelle* (frequent trap for mistranslation!). In the garden coming back into Marseilles we have to pass the *octroi*, which reminds one of the party of the vast difficulty he once had in "declaring" a sucking-pig which he had bought at Roquefavour.

The officials were so accustomed to see him return with strange beasts for a certain menagerie that when he announced the sucking-pig they nudged each other in the ribs, supposed Monsieur would have his joke, swore it was a *bonne farce*, and altogether refused to believe save on evidence of eyesight.

So back to dinner at the hotel to see at the little tables round us the faces, by this time pleasantly familiar of the frequenters for the time being of the place—the devout old lady who may in her youth have been a ballet-dancer, the gloomy retired captain whose gloom lightens in talk with a young officer on service. The beautiful young wife married to a rich young husband, who we feel soon will end by beating her, and the three *avocats* whose strange professional likeness recalls the name of the defunct "Trois Frères." Perhaps one's imagination libels the young husband—at any rate, there is nothing offensive in his bearing; and it is reserved for our last *déjeuner* to find a couple of Marseillais whose behaviour

certainly has "not that supreme repose" sitting at the table next to us. They assume that we do not understand French, favoured by the fact that the waiter has completed his service at our table, and they converse loudly on English ways and customs. The woman is ignorant of these, and seeks for information. The man knows all about it, and tells her "what lies in his power." For instance, one of us has a medallion on his watch-chain. This, the man explains, shows the extraordinary desire of all Englishmen to appear *décorés*. With the ignorant this trick will serve, and it will be thought that the medal has been gained in military or civil service. As a matter of fact (known to people as instructed as himself), in England all decorations are worn on the left coat-sleeve, a statement which causes complete puzzlement until we begin to suppose that it has some vague birth in the mourning custom of wearing crape on the left sleeve in uniform.

Presently we find the same couple occupying the same railway compartment with us from Aix to Marseilles, and still gabbling on in the belief that they are not understood, from which we learn that what, from the vulgar Don Juan airs of the man, one has suspected is, indeed, a fact. They are "a guilty pair" of the small bourgeois class, who are returning from a snatched expedition to Aix, and they talk so loudly and openly about their future plans for evading the vigilance of *lui* that it becomes intolerable, and one of our party returns, to a question in English from another, a *Bah!* as French as he can make it. It has the desired effect, for the woman plucks the man by the sleeve, saying at last in an attempt at an undertone, "Take care! All is perhaps discovered! I heard him say *Bah!*" Don Juan attempts to console her; but he casts furtive glances which seem to be peering for the tri-coloured scarf under the English get-up. For the rest of the way there is quiet, and the pair of Helots disappear out of the carriage with remarkable speed, as, having left the old-world beauty of Aix behind us, we come once more into the new magnificence of Modern Marseilles.