

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE YEARS

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IT is a long way to Carcassonne—the map and the size of the cheque you will have to give the Tourist Agency will assure you of that—and when you are there, the Cité is still not very accessible, lying as it does across the river and up a steep hill from the Basse Ville. We knew the distance, even as we knew that the Cité has preserved in marvellous detail the aspect of a mediaeval walled town, while folk of to-day live and work there as for nearly two thousand years their forbears have done. We did not know that, even as the journey from the railway station to the Narbonne gate is long and arduous, a still longer voyage of the spirit would land us more completely in another century than we could have believed possible. The means of transit, both of body and of mind, was a small horse-drawn *voiture*, with a fringed linen canopy. It took us up the hill, and was certainly early Victorian, if not Eighteenth Century, so that the transition was not too abrupt.

But once we had passed over the drawbridge and through the Narbonne gate, we found ourselves anachronisms, for down the cobbled street there swung a cavalier in doublet and hose of blue velvet, slashed with primrose satin, a gold embroidered cloak to match, plumed hat, white ruff, sword at hip, none of your theatrical shoddy either, but the richest that a court dandy could desire. Between the outer and the inner walls were picketed horses with high painted saddles and blue trappings, their riders, in steel morions and blue tabards bearing the royal *fleur-de-lys*, taking full advantage of that short rest in the shade. Outside a low building further off stood a white palfrey, whose white rose-painted saddle and pink silk housings marked it plainly for the Queen of Beauty. Carcassonne, celebrating its two-thousandth birthday, was reproducing as part of the celebrations one of the tournaments which took place during the progress of Catherine de Médicis with her sons, Charles IX and the Duc d'Anjou, through Southern France in 1565-66.

Not being able to recall for the moment with what the doubtless heroic thirsts of 1565 were quenched, we fell back anachronistically and shamefacedly on iced Perrier, then pulled ourselves together, and made for the tilt-yard.

The areas between the outer and inner walls known as the "higher" and "lower" lists were quite inadequate for either the actors or the spectators of the day's events, so a ground had been prepared on a level space just outside the Cité, to the east. At each end was an embattled wall, with a gate in the centre and flanking towers; behind the battlements could be seen the steel morions and scarlet jerkins of men-at-arms on guard. Along one side were the stands for privileged spectators, hung with banners and tapestries, a lofty balcony in the middle being designed to afford the Queen of Beauty a chance of being seen as well as seeing. A double barrier ran all round the actual field of combat, and lying back from the corners were pavilions for some of the combatants, flying their occupants' colours. From tall painted masts fluttered the banners of families concerned in the tourney—at this height above the plain a welcome breeze mitigated the blaze of the July sun—and low hillocks which rose on each side of the lists were already crowded with spectators. With vague thoughts of Twickenham (four hundred years and half-a-continent away, but perhaps not so incongruous as it may seem, for *ludi humaniores* have a clear pedigree, and had I not seen goal-posts and a grand stand in a field near the station?) we made for the half-way line and found places opposite the tribune. The arena itself was floored with loose dry earth—soft falling but heavy going, one thinks, but possibly Twickenham has intruded again. A lively varlet in grey doublet and hose slashed with scarlet hurried off on some urgent errand, to return—on the step of the latest pattern motor watering-cart! Doubtless this was the most efficient way of laying for the time being dust that eventually hid many details of the performance, but it did not fit into the picture. The newly watered soil was then raked, so that it should not ball and clog the horses' feet.

The performance was by this time considerably overdue, so there was much warmth of applause when the band, which had been wandering through popular airs to keep the audience quiet, pulled itself into a brisk march and the cavalcade entered. First came the Marshal of the lists (Capitaine de Longvilliers) magnificent in ruby velvet, long white doeskin boots, and silver trappings on his bay mare. Here let me say that to keep an animal like that patient in the lists, as he did throughout the performance, displayed as fine horsemanship as any we saw that day. After him the Appellant (Lieut. Col. Picard), wearing black plumes, and the Defendant (Lieut. Col. de Rodellec du Porzic) wearing white. Then the trumpeters in blue tabards whom we had seen before,

Next came the Jeu des Plumets, which produced some excellent riding and great excitement. For this three competitors appeared on each side, with light visored helmets bearing plumes of the appropriate colour, and swords. The aim was to cut off one's opponent's feathers while protecting one's own, competitors who lost the whole plume having to retire. After much quick and skilful manoeuvring of horses and supple wrist-work on both sides, all the white feathers floated to the ground, and the badge of victory went to the Blacks.

Then, as an interlude, two equine stars (not unknown, maybe, at Olympia) came out to give their special turn. Before the tribune "Le Merisier" and "Plumet" reared straight up, fore feet high above their riders' heads. Down they came together, and up went their heels. Then a series of buck-jumps that might have upset a cow boy, but left these gentlemen of sixteenth century France (Bouillet and Lacassagne) serenely in the saddle. One final salutation with the fore-feet high in air and stopping there for breathless instants, and two fine examples of that unit known as a man-and-a-horse departed with dignity amid applause.

They were followed by the Jeu de la Bagne, in which the competitors, four on each side, had to remove with their lances three cane rings from posts while passing at full gallop. This, though we had a fine impression of racing horse, watchful man, and flying cloak, was not so spectacular as some of the other events.

After this came the Jeu de la Quintaine, not the turnstile target with a bag of flour on the other end to catch the unwary of which we have read, but a grinning Saracen's head with a spring in the neck. Four men rode from each side for this, and the Saracen was a battered wreck by the end of it, but it seemed to me that the Blacks, who had to ride full into the setting sun, were at a great disadvantage. Possibly the Black Knight had lost the toss, or left his tossing penny in his second-best suit of armour, but it might have been better to exchange ends half-way through.

After that, two couples in full armour jousted, riding down the barrier lance in hand in the fashion made familiar by countless pictures. Some lances were splintered, but the finer points of this event might easily escape the uninitiated. Also the fact that the fighters were anxious to avoid in reality while achieving in appearance the infliction of bodily harm on each other caused a lack of verisimilitude in the proceedings.

Following the jousts, however, came the most lively and interesting event of the afternoon, the Jeu du Mail. This was a mixture of polo and lacrosse, played five a side with a large white

(? rubber) ball and small round nets at the end of long sticks. The ball was thrown in from one end of the lists, as far down the field as possible, and the object was to return it to the end from whence it came. It could be caught in the air or picked up from the ground, though not easily, as the net was very little larger than the ball, and though there was some backing up of a player who had the ball, there seemed to be little attempt at passing. Opponents could not only ride each other off, but also knock the ball out of the net. The general effect was brim full of life. To the thrill of polo (and is there anything quite like it in the world?) add the increased size of the horses—cavalry chargers as nimble as 14.2 ponies—the rich bright colours in harness and cloak, doublet and plume, the background of embattled walls and tapestried galleries, the blue skies and sunshine of the South, and a whole-hearted enthusiasm in all concerned, and you have a scene the like of which does not often enliven the world to-day. Good horsemanship is always enjoyed even when it is not fully understood, and the spectators kept up with every phase of this enthralling game with an enthusiasm which echoed back from the ancient walls like the accumulated echo of many past conflicts.

After some half-dozen chukkas—to fall back on the nearest terminology in default of the correct one—victory went to the White team, largely owing to the fine riding of one man who could be identified only by his cloak of pink and gold damask, and the lists were cleared for the duel, or *Combat du Jugement de Dieu*, between the Black Knight, the Appellant, and the White Knight, Defendant. These presently appeared in full plate armour on horses similarly protected, lances in rest. Though two or three courses were run with lances some of which were splintered and replaced from the bundles held by footmen at the barrier, the results were inconclusive, and the first weapon was laid aside in favour of great two-edged swords. Neither with these, however, was a decision reached, and it was not till the swords had been replaced by maces that the Black Knight was seen to reel in his saddle. His squires and men-at-arms rushed out to support him, and he was led from the lists.

But only for a time. The centre barrier was removed, the dust settled a little, a clatter and stir arose behind the walls. The single combat had been settled, but the general *mêlée* was still to come. At last from each end of the lists rode forth that great array. "Terrible as an army with banners" remains one of the mighty metaphors of all time, and here we saw how it had its birth. First came the respective champions in full armour, tossing

plumes in their helmets and sweeping housings on their horses—black and crimson for the Appellant, white and green for the Defendant—blazoned with their coats of arms. After them were carried their pennons and banners, the bearers in full armour on horse-back attended by men-at-arms on foot. Behind them stretched a double rank of knights armed cap-à-pie with their leaders' colours in helmet plume and mantle, and bannerets behind, and the heart stirred at such a goodly sight. Facing the tribune they saluted the Queen of Beauty; then at the sound of the trumpet the onslaught began. With clash and shout and glitter of steel, white plumes and black, crimson draperies and green, with sword and lance they fought in the choking dust, while we shouted with them, drunk with the spectacle. The ordered array broke into small groups; single horsemen, having settled one opponent, dashed to the help of friends in peril, till all the lists were full of clamour and struggle. But gradually the black plumes were driven back, the brown horses retreated before the grey, and at the Marshal's signal the combat ceased: the Defendant had proved his case by the arbitrament of steel. Hot, dusty and breathless the mob sorted itself out, reformed the ranks, and drew up facing the tribune. The Queen of Beauty came down, followed by her train, and to the White Knight, kneeling bareheaded before her, she gave the prize of victory. He kissed her hand with fervour, her white palfrey was led forward, and she mounted. Her pages and halberdiers ranged themselves round her, and the last procession was marshalled. Past the cheering crowds rode the Queen of Beauty—one last glimpse of bright eyes, dark hair, pearl coif, and she was gone. For the last time the horsemen swept round the lists. Arms gleamed in the setting sun; white plumes and black, green mantles and crimson tossed in the breeze for the last time. In ordered ranks they rode, like a Parthenon frieze come to life two thousand years later, till side by side the two bands came to the gateway. Then the victorious White plumes bowed to the Black—"Après vous, Messieurs"—and stood aside for the vanquished to leave the lists first. The sun, now low in the sky over the towers of the Cité, turned the dust to a golden haze, and gilded the edge of the figures as they vanished through the arch. The tail of the last grey horse turned the corner and was lost to sight. The tournament was over. But while we still sat wondering whether it was necessary or possible to drag ourselves back again to 1928, we had one breathless glimpse behind the pavilions of horses let out in a heartening gallop after the restraint of the afternoon's performance. It was like a tapestry come alive, horse and man

beneath the trees. Then we left the Cité by the Narbonne gate, crossed the drawbridge, and went down to the railway station in a motor char-a-banc.

Some days later, sitting by a Pyrenean stream, we tried to analyse and account for the powerful effect of those hours at Carcassonne and the deep impression they had made on us. Certain of the elements which were responsible for this might occur in England, but others were particular to that occasion. The point which naturally comes to mind first is the setting. Few towns in the world could provide such a background for pageantry as the Cité of Carcassonne, and the immediate surroundings were also helpful.

Then, every detail had been planned and executed with great thoroughness and artistry—and entire disregard for expense. For example, the walls, towers and gates at each end of the lists bore so strong an appearance of antiquity, so close a resemblance to the buildings of the Cité itself, that it was not until I had seen an aerial photograph of Carcassonne—showing a bare field at that point—that I was entirely certain that they had been constructed for that occasion only. Again, all the underlings, the hewers of wood and drawers of water, were dressed in keeping; from beginning to end of the performance, nothing invaded the lists that was not in the picture. Also, all the dresses and accoutrements of the performers would bear the closest scrutiny; as I mentioned before, the riders were dressed in all respects as a courtier of 1565 would have chosen, in the richest satin and velvet, the finest buckskin, all skilfully cut and beautifully made. Whether the plate-armor used was genuine sixteenth century stuff or not I do not know, but it was plate, not cardboard.

But more striking even than these things was the spirit which animated the whole proceedings. It was a real tournament, in which real horsemen were engaged in real trials against each other; each rider put his whole soul into the business as a trial of skill in horsemanship, and not as a theatrical performance, and the spectators took it in the same way. Moreover, the performers threw themselves into their parts otherwise than in the tourney itself, and swaggered about the Cité as if it belonged to them—which indeed one felt it did. When one compared their bearing with that of the average Englishman taking part in one of the pageants which became, first a fashion, then a disease in this country some twenty years ago, when one remembered how the wretched man slunk along in his ill-fitting sateen, laboriously cobbled by an earnest amateur, how the dairyman who played

Julius Caesar drove his chariot exactly like his milk float, how the funeral car which bore the body of Queen Eleanor displayed on the side away from the grandstand the words "Blank & Sons, Coal Merchants", thus seriously imperilling the gravity of the mourning crowd—and how one regarded the whole thing as a rather inferior theatrical performance in which mishaps were bound to occur and were really the most amusing part, then one began to see light. The psychological difference is largely one of national temperament: the material difference is that between the financial and personal resources of one English country town and the mobilized skill of the most artistic nation in Europe exercised on its army's finest horsemen. Whether, if the appropriate experts at the British Museum, *plus* Mr. C. B. Cochran at his most daring, *plus* another shilling on the Income Tax, *plus* the Army Equitation School at Weedon, could combine in an English mediaeval town which did *not* have a pageant twenty years ago (if such there be), they could work the same enchantment, is an interesting speculation. In the absence, however, of any healthy chance of making a fair comparison, I can only bow my head in humblest gratitude to those artists, human and equine, that gave me some unforgettable hours in a past which their skill had raised from the dead.