

BY-WAYS OFF THE CORNICHE ROAD

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Old Nice.

OLD Nice, so it is said, was founded by the Phoceans somewhere about the year 350 B.C. The name *Nicaea* records the victory of these almost legendary people over the still more shadowy Ligurians. For various reasons *Nicaea* failed to develop, and when the Romans came they passed the little fishing settlement by, and founded the city of *Cemenelum*, now known as *Cimiez*, higher up on the hill and away from the sea. Then *Cemenelum* fell into decay, and with the passing of the Roman imperium, *Nicaea* began to come into its own. It built walls about itself; it sent ships to scour the coasts of *Barbary*. It was sacked and burnt by reviving barbarians and plundering Saracens; it knew plague and famine, and, after being shuttle-cocked between Counts of *Provence* and Dukes of *Savoy*, was finally annexed to France in the year of grace, 1860.

A plan of the town, published in 1610, shows *Nice* divided into two parts, the High Town and the Low. "The former," according to Sir *Frederick Treves*, "occupied the summit of the Castle Hill, was strongly fortified and surrounded by substantial walls. On this plateau were the castle of the governor, the cathedral, the bishop's palace, the *Hôtel de Ville*, and the residences of certain nobles. The Low Town, at the foot of the hill, was occupied by the houses and shops of the merchants, by private residences, and the humbler dwellings of sailors, artisans and poor folk." To-day the Castle Hill is a wooded height containing a public park; the Castle a tumbled mass of masonry, broken arches and ruined stone door-ways, about which children play in the summer-time while their mothers gossip and knit on the benches under the shade of the surrounding trees. Beneath the Castle Rock lies the *Ville Basse*, a net-work of dark winding lanes and twisting narrow streets, hemmed in by high, dingy houses with yellow, mottled and weather-beaten walls. A heavy odour of cheese, stale wine and beer, salt fish, drain pipes, plaster, mould, and decay, hangs about the frowsy *estaminets* and the frowsy *epiceries*. Flies by the myriad buzz about the black, dust-blown meat in the butchers' shops, settle angrily on joints and livers, and furiously attack the festoons of sausages, impregnable in their wizened hides. Women

at their open windows retail the latest scandal of the *quartier*, to the accompaniment of the gentle sawing of the household washing, stretched from a thousand horizontal poles.

But in the midst of these depressing and decaying houses there is still to be found the tarnished memory of old romance. The place called the *Terrasses* was once the *rendezvous* for the *beaux* and *belles* of Nice, now so sadly fallen from their pristine glory. A row of humble, melancholy, deserted-looking shops, roofed with rain-soiled asphalt, and topped by a fringe of unkempt, rust-eaten, lop-sided chimneys, represent the one-time aristocratic promenade. Facing them, in the *Cours Saleya*, are a number of ageing stone benches, where the beauties of the town once sat and received the homage of their gallants. To-day loafers lounge on these benches, prowling beggars accost you. Proletarian laundry flaps in the languid breeze, and vulgar advertisements offend the stranger's eye.

At one time the town of Cemenelum is said to have had a population of 30,000. Through it passed the great road which ran from the Forum of Rome to Arles. It was a place of importance. But to-day few traces remain of the glory that was Rome. As at Frejus, further down the coast, the amphitheatre is the chief memorial of the vanished past, but when we asked the car conductor to let us know when we reached it, the name conveyed so little to him that we were carried for a considerable distance past it before he himself discovered where it was. I asked some boys to direct us, but they were boys of Cimiez and simply did not know. When finally we reached the amphitheatre, we found the lower tiers of seats still there, and the fragments of the upper rows, supported on stone arches. Apart from the three of us the place was deserted, or tenanted mayhap by the ghosts of provincial gladiators and rising young *retiarii*. But the grass-grown ruins, with their overlay of furze and shading ilex, were too bleak and melancholy to hold the imagination in the conjured-up world of the spirit for long. The grind and creak of the wheels of the street cars, and the clap, clap of the hooves of the toiling horses, dragging the droskies with their cargoes of tourists, switched us back to the immediacies of the present. And we found that there was really no one in this deserted spot but ourselves.

Laghet.

One's first feeling in Laghet is depression; it seems so far away from the outside world and oppressed by a stabbing sense

of loneliness. The tiny *Place* is close and stuffy. The trees which fringe it seem to absorb all the fresh air, and to leave one gasping for breath. A hotel fills a third side of the *Place*, a hotel and *café* combined. In front of the *café* portion is a trellis-work, grey with the churning dust from the wheels of the auto-buses. Behind this trellis a swarm of flies and wasps disports itself among the empty beer glasses and the sausage rinds left by hungry and thirsty pilgrims and peasants who have passed that way. In front of the hotel is a public fountain and washing place, surmounted by a stone figure of the Virgin. At her feet a couple of elderly women are washing clothes in a leisurely manner. Clustered about the convent entrance is a clutter of flimsy booths which, although half empty at the moment, have still a goodly array of post-cards and trinkets, crucifixes and holy water stoups, rosaries hidden in little egg-shaped abominations, cups, rings, toy balloons, and penny tin trumpets with gaudy tassels attached. A group of French soldiers are lounging under the trees. One of them is wearing a pair of incredibly dirty and disreputable dungarees; another a tunic, through the worn sleeves of which his elbows are showing. They are very young fellows, and all of them look frankly bored. One of them helps a woman, who has finished her washing, to hoist the basket on her head; another jabs his knife into a tree and makes a half-hearted attempt to carve his initials. Their officers are lunching in the *café*, but not even that will induce us to accept the proprietor's invitation to partake of his excellent pea-soup and veal. The flies and the wasps and the ants and the dirty beer-glasses and the dusty chairs are too much for us.

The convent of Laghet is a plain, barrack-like, yellow-plaster building, with a brown tiled roof. It is perched on a huge rock, and the only entrance to it is across a narrow bridge, where the booths begin. The convent is surmounted by a bell tower with a clock which stopped, heaven knows when, at twenty minutes past five. The dome of the tower is capped by the figure of Our Lady of Laghet, under whose protection the thousands of pilgrims place themselves when they come to return thanks for deliverance from peril, sorrow, or disease. The church was consecrated in 1656, on the site of an ancient chapel, where miracles began to be reported as early as 1652. From that time the reputation of Laghet grew, and prominent people from the surrounding communities began to find their way thither, thereby setting an example which the generality were quick to follow.

The cloisters are an amazing sight. The walls are covered with *ex voto* sketches, made by those who had their part in the incidents recorded. The majority of these sketches are crude, even grotesque; some are in the worst of taste. There are death-bed scenes, sketches of men and women being hurled from carriages and motor cars, falling from houses and cliffs, being rescued from drowning, from murderous assaults, from run-away horses, from shooting accidents, from fires, and from man-eating pigs. Above this gallery of horrors is a collection of discarded crutches and walking-sticks and steel shoes, which have been placed there as an abiding proof of the miraculous intervention, on behalf of the faithful, of Our Lady of Lagnet.

Presently we leave the sombre and gloomy monastery church, and clamber into our dilapidated old bus again. We pick up a cheery little postman, who makes himself agreeable to a plump peasant woman who is going to Monte Carlo to spend the day with her son. Then, having made an incredibly narrow turn in an incredibly narrow space, and having missed the booths and the hotel veranda by the breadth of a hair, we "swoosh" across the wooden bridge again, and follow the dusty roadway that twists and winds along, with alarming hair-pin bends, until we join the Grande Corniche Road and bowl merrily into the ancient Roman town of Turbia.

La Turbie.

La Turbie is a little place of great age. Perched on the steep mountainside and overhung by precipitous crags, it gazes down into a huge abyss, the centre of which is Monte Carlo. La Turbie, despite a few modern villas and a fantastic hotel in the oriental style, is still at heart a mediaeval town. It is full of narrow mediaeval streets and lanes, of mediaeval smells and stenches. There are gateways, arches, courtyards, that constantly remind one of the past. The *Rue Droite*, which runs through the little town, is a portion of the ancient Roman Road to Arles. Turbia stood at the highest point of the *Via Aureliana*; it was the ancient frontier between Italy and Gaul. Along that road have passed centurion and legionary, slave and patrician, merchant and gladiator, going to and coming from the city that was Rome. They say that one may walk through this old Roman posting town many times without meeting a soul, and that this is because the people who live here have got into the habit of retiring quietly to their homes and leaving the place to the ghosts of the men and women who once lived here. They

crowd about the gate that is still called the *Portail Romain*, and haunt the base of all that remains of a wonderful monument erected by the Roman Senate in the year 6 B.C. to commemorate the victories of the Emperor Augustus over the wild tribes of Southern Gaul. This is a picture of the main street of the town at that time, as Sir Frederick Treves imagines it:

Here were the chief inns and the wine booths, the little local shops, the fruit stalls, the cobbler's vaulted niche where sandals were repaired, the cutler's store very bright with bronze, the houses of the dealers in corn and fodder, and most assuredly some begrimed hut where an old crone sold curiosities and souvenirs of the place, native weapons and ornaments, a hillman's head-dress, strange coins dug up outside the walls, bright pieces of ore found among the mountains, the local snake in a bottle, some wolf's teeth and a shell or two from Monaco beach. In the lesser streets would be the stables for the pack-horses and the mules, the cellars for goods in transit, the hovels for the slaves, the moneylenders' dens, the compounds for the soldiers and the huts of the wretched wild-eyed Ligurians who, under the lash of their masters, did the mean work of the town.

Then the silent ghosts vanish, and their places are taken by a chattering group of women washing clothes at the public fountain, by noisy children playing around their skirts, by a group of officers drinking *Grenadine* in a *café*, by a clutter of idlers sitting under the chestnut trees and discussing the arrival of the strangers, very much as their forefathers must have done two thousand years ago. Passing through the idlers, along a lane of quaint old houses with deep recesses on the ground floor, we reach the Tower of Victory. But alas! disillusionment meets us here. Instead of the magnificent golden lettering that was to be read there once: IMPERATORI CAESARI, DIVI FILIO, AUGUSTO. PONT. MAX. IMP. XIV. TRIB. POT. XVIII. S.P.Q.R. we find only the rudely scratched initials of the *hoi polloi* on the weather-worn base of the Colossus. And the sound that we hear is not the clatter of a marching legion, but the flapping of the drying garments of the proletariat, washed but a few moments before in the public fountain. Presently we begin the long steep descent to the tragic little eyrie of ancient Eze.

Eze

Eze—not the new but the old Eze—clings to its rock precariously, 1,400 feet above the Mediterranean. People lived there before the dawn of history, primitive, unknown

people. They, legend has it, were driven out by the Phoenicians, who fortified the rock for themselves. Then the Romans took it and built a harbour beneath it. After they had gone, the usual procession followed—Lombards and Saracens, Guelphs and Ghibellines, Savoyards and Frenchmen. The French finally acquired it in 1860. At one time Eze was a walled town; but when Barbarossa took it he razed the walls, and they have never been rebuilt. From that date, too, the castle was allowed to moulder away and crumble into ruins. Eze, old Eze as it is to-day, has arisen from the ashes of the older town; but it has never regained its lost vitality.

Eze is reached from the Middle Corniche Road by a steep winding pathway, which leads to the only entrance of the village. From the Corniche Road it resembles Mont St. Michel, and from a distance rock and buildings blend so perfectly that, unless one knew that buildings were there, he would swear that there were none. It is only by looking very closely that he can see them. Everything in Eze seems unreal, the dark little *estaminet* just through the archway entrance, with its ghostly-looking counter, the rows of ghostly-looking bottles in its dim interior. Even the sleeping mongrel on the doorstep seems like something in a Dürer print. One tiny shop professes to sell tobacco, another picture post cards, but I suspect that, if anyone ever really asked for cigarettes or post cards, some ghost would come from the back shop and say there really weren't any and that neither she nor they had any physical existence in this world of unreality and make-believe. The *cabinet de telephon* increases the illusion of unreality, for who ever heard of anyone ever wanting to telephone to anybody from Eze? An odd, corkscrew, cobbled street mounts steeply to the ruined castle, and when the stranger, having climbed it, begins to come down what is clearly the same street, he suddenly finds himself stumbling down what is clearly quite a different street, which obviously it cannot be, for he lands at exactly the same spot whence he started a few moments before. A dreary spot Eze, a clutter of ruined houses and mouldering walls, of yawning cellars and roofless cottages. Three or four children are playing a game which, if played anywhere else, would be a noisy game. But in Eze noise would be out of place. A woman is stitching clothes at the door of one of the sombre houses, a static figure who ignores our presence as we pass. Some workmen are erecting a scaffolding against the wall of one of the more solid-looking houses. Another workman, staggering up one of the bewitched corkscrew streets

under a heavy plank, murmurs something about the day's being warm. A priest comes from a doorway with a boy to whom he seems to be giving some instructions. Then—an odd sound in Eze—two pretty girls chatting gaily and laughing at a window in the top storey of a tall house.

On our way back to the postern gate we pass the *Musee*, and a middle-aged woman, sitting on a chair by the doorway knitting, rises and asks us, in French of the *Pas de Calais* whether we would care to see the relics. As if Eze were not relic enough! Something about the woman attracts us, and we enter a little chapel, and are shown the altar, a picture of the Virgin painted on oak, a penitent's cross, two little wooden angels, a brass crucifix of unknown age and possibly of Greek workmanship, some wonderful garments wrought in cloth of gold, and a painting, not well done but interesting because it is supposed to show Eze in the middle of the sixteenth century. The castle in the picture is intact, solid, and rounded. From the highest tower a red flag, with a white cross, is waving. To-day nothing of the castle of the Lords of Eze remains but the fragment of a wall and a jagged corner of a vaulted chamber.

Presently *Madame* discovers that we are Scottish, and that I live in Canada, not very far from Montreal. And with that the floodgates are opened. Her nephew is being educated by the Jesuits in Montreal. She knows a number of Scottish people and likes them. There are actually ninety-two souls in Eze, mostly old people who have worked on the land for the best part of their lives, and a few Italian labourers. All the young people go to Nice. They think now-a-days only of clothing, and dancing, and of amusing themselves. The rebuilt villa belongs to a Mr. Barbour, an American artist. Mr. Barbour, as we would see, has had the good taste to rebuild his villa with its hanging gardens in the style of the other buildings, and has installed a fountain. His neighbour is a *Princesse de Suede*. She, too, is a writer, and thinks nothing of going to Nice to fetch her provisions, which she carries in a black, shiny leather bag. There is no food in old Eze, and no water except that on the American's property. There is no fruit, and there are no vegetables. The vegetable cart comes down from La Turbie three times a week, when the driver stands outside the postern gate and rings a bell, as no conveyance can come into the town. The only things that flourish in Eze are mosquitoes and fleas. *Madame* tells us that she is of good family and that her people lost their money in cotton speculation in Roubaix. During

the Great War she had been housekeeper to the *curé* of Valenciennes, who was shot by the Germans because a message from a French General had been discovered in one of his boots. She had knocked off the hat of the German *aumonier* who came to tell her about the *curé's* death, a crime for which she too might have been shot. The German was, however, a Catholic himself, rather a kind-hearted man; he had been with her master the night before the *curé* was shot. After the *curé's* death she had gone to Zeebrugge and had seen the bombardment of the port by the English. She had drifted to Eze when the war was over, and hoped to spend the rest of her life there, showing the relics to visitors. From time to time she interrupted the garrulous flow with a "*Tiens! Ecosais et Canadien. Tiens! Tiens!*"

An odd *rencontre* in this place of memories.