

SENS: THE HOME OF A TREASURE

THERE are a few perfect settings still to be found in this world. They are the 'apples of gold in pictures of silver' of the Wise Man.

Most golden things have quite another setting—like the jewel of gold in a pig's snout to which the same Wise Man likens the beauty of a foolish woman.

A perfect picture in a perfect shrine, or a beautiful Cathedral in a beautiful City would find a fitting symbol in the first. For the second . . . ! Quite lately when I saw for the first time one of the most famous historic French Cathedrals of the Middle Ages—a thing of rare beauty—it was this which came unsought to my mind.

The Cathedral, from its jewelled windows to its priceless Treasure, is a gem, but its setting is a mean and sordid town—so mean that it does not seem to know how great a treasure it possesses in its Cathedral. Its eyes have been blinded by a petty and venomous anti-clericalism. It has met with its reward. The historic and aesthetic significance which once made it great in Europe has disappeared, and its only value now in the eyes of the world (with the exception of a few savants and beauty-lovers who are not of this world) is as a place of passage where motors halt for the night and the owners sleep, eating and drinking abundantly, if not choicely.

There are still inhabitants of the town who remember how what remained of its ancient beauties have been torn away. Time was when the archiepiscopal palace close to the cathedral housed a Cardinal Archbishop whose scarlet robes as he passed under avenues of aged trees from one venerable doorway to another

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gave a gracious touch of colour to the grey stones. It is not thirty years ago since the people could lift their eyes from the living Prince of the Church to the statues of those who had passed away and who stand on towers and walls as though to guard in death the Church they served in life—linking the present with all that was most glorious in the story of France. Now the gates between the palace and the cathedral are locked and chained. The palace has been confiscated by the state and turned into an elementary school—its beautiful thirteenth century woodwork broken up, burnt or sold for a paltry price, while the Archbishop is left dependent for a home on the charity of his people.

Thirty years ago the approach to the Cathedral was through a square of Canons' houses. The Vicar's Close at Wells, or perhaps the Close at Salisbury, may have resembled it in its austere beauty. Now the pleasant square has gone, and in its place is a collection of the ugliest of French modern industrial buildings, with, on one side, a big printing works. The gardens where the canons must have walked and talked with savants statesmen and ecclesiastics from all over Europe is now a hideous cobbled square—a parking place for vehicles of all sorts—taxis, motors, dilapidated cabs, and the great camions which, in size like great railway trucks, are depriving the roads of modern France of all security and the towns of all peace and charm.

Truly it seems as though the French Government of the past thirty years had done as much as, if not more than, the Revolution to destroy the ancient glories of France. Sens, at least, owes the preservation of the beautiful west front of the Cathedral to the Revolution. For it arrived just in the nick of time, when the powers that then were had decided to replace it by a façade like that of the Madeleine!

But be that as it may, the only remembrance in the town, except the Cathedral itself, of better times is the

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Grand' Rue. This is not, as one might expect, the present principal street with its noise and ugliness and mean shops, but a quiet backwater behind the cathedral which affords, all the way along, gracious glimpses to the passer-by, gracious glimpses of itself, its towers and arches, low gateways, bits of antiquity—not yet demolished. Few motors go down this quiet little refuge, and there still exist in it a few little retired houses, old-fashioned, probably with no modern conveniences, but how sweetly hidden in their gardens of roses and begonias, how cool and quiet and reminiscent of a time before all civilization seemed to be rushing in a great motor race to its own destruction.

Before the Revolution, the grey stones of the Cathedral blossomed all over into the fair figures of Saints and Angels. They surrounded the great doorways and smiled down from every angle and corner. But the artists of the Revolution with the true revolutionary instinct for destruction occupied themselves in destroying the heads of all the images they could reach. Over the great west doorway there still survives the great figure of the Patron Saint of the Church, Stephen the Deacon. There he stands in his young and saintly beauty holding in his hands the Book of the Gospels. One who was among the Revolutionaries, but not of them, saved him by placing the Bonnet Rouge on his head and writing 'La loi' on the Book of the Gospels.

We recognize the same subtle spirit in the story of how one of the Revolutionaries contrived the saving of many others of the beauties of Sens: 'It is good,' he said to his comrades, 'to leave some of these things that posterity may realize how hideous was the art we are destroying, and so all future ages may praise us for what we do.'

Thanks to this unknown benefactor Sens has preserved much of its beautiful sculpture, amongst it a

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lovely renaissance doorway surrounded with delicate figures. To see what French art of that period could be, it needs but to look at the exquisite head of the child angel in the extreme right-hand corner of the arch.

Another thing. Sens has preserved from its eighteenth century wreckers its silken treasures.

Amongst much that was destroyed or stolen—illuminated manuscripts exquisitely bound and decorated books—it still possesses probably more than any other place in France of that mass of silken texture, chiefly oriental, which from the fourth century onwards began to constitute a great part of the wealth of the Church. Used not only for hangings, vestments or altar coverings, the most precious of all was taken to wrap the bodies and relics of saints; and to this it owes its preservation. All the richest silk came from the East. Some of it came to Sens directly, other came by way of Rome, for Sens was on the high-road from Paris and from England to the City of the Apostles, at whose feet the East laid her treasures. Sens has silks of all kinds: Greek, Byzantine, Persian, Egyptian, Sicilian—all proclaiming their origin by design and weave; discovered, restored and carefully preserved by one of the best-known *archéologues de tissu* in France, for the admiration of the world and the study of students. We were happy to be amongst the students—with little enough knowledge, alas! but sufficient to make our one week there a joy, and all too short. Each day as we crossed the ugly square that was once so beautiful and entered the portal which St. Stephen guards, we felt that we were entering a world of beauty. And each day we put away with a sigh the beautiful textures we had been handling and went back into a world of rushing, shrieking cars, a world of human beings disfigured by lip-stick and exaggerated ‘plus-fours,’ of jazz and loud-speakers, and gramo-

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phones. Every day we went back to a fresh crowd at the hotel, and every day it seemed an uglier and noisier one. Occasionally, but rarely, fragments of it strayed into the Cathedral but never stayed long.

One evening as we sat in the little court-yard two tourists arrived in a car. They were husband and wife, no longer young. They ordered tea, and as they partook of it I do not think they addressed one amiable word to one another. She was querulous, and he was obstinate and superior. They wrangled most of the time about a little wire-haired terrier, which, being lively, *would* get into the road. It paid no attention to whistles or calls, and the gentleman persistently refused to go after it. Finally, he departed, and the lady, being apparently the type of person who must have some one to whom to pour out its remarks, turned her attention to us, and began to explain her husband's want of consideration in dragging her all over Europe at break-neck speed in a car. Apparently they had come all the way from Geneva to Dijon the 'day before, and now they were going on that night to Fontainebleau. 'He has gone now to see the Cathedral,' she said, and added with a tone of mingled relief and triumph: 'But I saw it last year.' Monsieur took about ten minutes to 'see the Cathedral.' When he returned, they began anew their agreeable wrangle.

This time it was because the dog could not be broken of licking the windows of the car. In the midst of it their car came up and they got in.

Probably that wrangle afforded them diversion all the way to Fontainebleau. It held all the possibilities of being renewed whenever the dog's attention was attracted to the windows.

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