



Old and New Paris (Vol. 1) : Its History, Its People, And its Places Author: Henry Sutherland Edwards

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Paris possesses one of the most ancient and one of the most characteristically modern churches in Europe—the venerable Notre-Dame, and in sharp contrast, the fashionable Madeleine, celebrated for the splendour of its essentially mundane architecture, the luxurious attire of its female frequenters, the beauty of its music, and the eloquence of its preachers. The first stone of Notre-Dame was laid, as Victor Hugo puts it, by Tiberius, who, recognising the site of the future cathedral as well-fitted for a temple, began by erecting an altar “to the god Cerennos and to the bull Esus.” In like manner, on the hill of Sainte-Geneviève, where now stands the edifice known as the Pantheon, Mercury was at one time worshipped.

So rich is Paris in historical associations that often the same street, the same spot, recalls two widely different events. Thus the statue of Henri IV. on the Pont-Neuf commemorates the glory of the best and greatest of the French kings, and at the same time marks the very ground where, in the fourteenth century, Jacques de Molay, the Templar, was infamously burned. At No. 14 in the Rue de Béthisy Admiral Coligny died and Sophie Arnould was born. At a house in the Rue des Marais Racine wrote “Bajazet” and “Britannicus” in the room where, fifty years later, the Duchess de Bouillon is said to have poisoned Adrienne Lecouvreur. There was a time when, at the corner of the Rue du Marché des Innocents, a marble slab, inscribed with letters of gold, associated the important year of 1685 with three notable events: the arrival of an embassy from Siam, a visit from the Doge of Genoa, and the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. This strange record has disappeared, together with many other interesting memorials of various shapes and kinds: such, for example, as the iron cauldron in the Cour des Miracles, where, in the name of a whole series of kings who had played tricks with the national currency, and more than once produced national bankruptcy, coiners used to be boiled alive.

As we go further back in the history of Paris, lawlessness on the part of the inhabitants, and cruelty on that of the rulers, seem constantly to increase. Until the reign of Louis XI., Paris was without police, though laws were nominally in force, especially against stealing. Theft was punished much on the principle laid down in the inscription of the sixth century which adorned one of the walls of Lutetia, the Paris of the Romans: “If a thief is caught in the act he must, in the case of a noble, be brought to trial; in the case of a peasant, be hanged on the spot.” The capitular of Charlemagne forbade ecclesiastics to take human life: which did not prevent the abbés of different monasteries from besieging one another or crossing swords when, with their followers, they chanced to meet outside the fortified monasterial walls, whether in the plain or in the public street. The right of private warfare existed in France until 1235.

Paris has undergone atrocious sufferings through war, famine, pestilence, and calamities of all kinds. The Normans, after burning one half of Paris, allowed the remainder to be ransomed with an enormous sum of money. In one of the famines by which Paris in its early days was so often visited, people cast lots as to which should be eaten. The taxes were so excessive that many pretended to be lepers, in order to profit by the exemption accorded in such cases. But it was sometimes not well to be a leper, real or pretended; for it was proclaimed one day to the sound of horn and trumpet that lepers throughout the kingdom should be exterminated: “in consequence of a mixture of herbs and human blood, with which, rolling it up in a linen cloth and tying it to a stone, they poison the wells and rivers.”

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