



THE CATHEDRAL OF LE PUY, FROM THE NORTH.

THE CATHEDRAL OF LE PUY.

BY MRS. SCHUYLER VAN RENSSELAER.

WITH PICTURES BY JOSEPH PENNELL.

AFTER seeing the typical Romanesque churches of Auvergne, the next step should be toward the southeast, to the cathedral church of Le Puy. Velay was the old title of the district where it stands, but, as far as architectural development was concerned, this district formed part of Auvergne. Le Puy is simply a local term meaning "The Peak"; and as it frequently occurs in Auvergne, combined with some distinctive epithet, the cathedral town is often called Puy-en-Velay.

I.

LEAVE Clermont-Ferrand in the morning, lunch at Issoire, drive in the afternoon to St. Nectaire,¹ return on the following morning to Issoire, then take the train for Le Puy, which you will reach at sunset, and you will give yourself forty-eight hours of diverse pleasures that you will never forget as long as you live. All along the railway you have with you volcanic marvels, verdurous delights, and architectural surprises—ancient villages, castles, and churches, well preserved or picturesquely ruined; and at Brioude you see, close at hand, another fine church of the characteristic local type. The winding stream of the Allier constantly recrosses your path as you ascend its valley; color and light are enchantingly vivid; and toward the end of the route the mountains and ravines grow still wilder and grander, meeting the spurs of the Cevennes. Then, as you gradually climb to the top of winding passes, successive tunnels bring you out upon sudden panoramas of a startling strangeness; and the last of them shows you a prospect such as you can never have imagined, even with the poet's or the painter's or the scene-shifter's aid.

Nothing was ever imagined so recklessly improbable and pictorial as the city of Le Puy, or as the landscape around it, tossed and torn and waved and suddenly smoothed

by the touch of elemental forces, rising from well-tilled levels into beetling mounts, sheer precipices, low, rounded hills, and tall, lone pinnacles—all mingled together as though specimens of nature's handiwork had been gathered for comparison from a dozen different lands. A wide expanse of this gigantically crumpled country lies far beneath you as, from the tunnel's blackness, you emerge upon rails which wind along the brink of a perpendicular cliff. Directly opposite, across the valley, stands Le Puy. And it may excite you, not to wonder merely, but to incredulous laughter, so splendidly fantastic is its silhouette, perched upon the shoulder of a rocky peak and upon adjacent points which are mere elongated fingers—nay, mere towering needle-points—of stone. But a master of words has described this region—George Sand, in "Le Marquis de Villemer"; and once before to-day Mr. Pennell has portrayed it.²

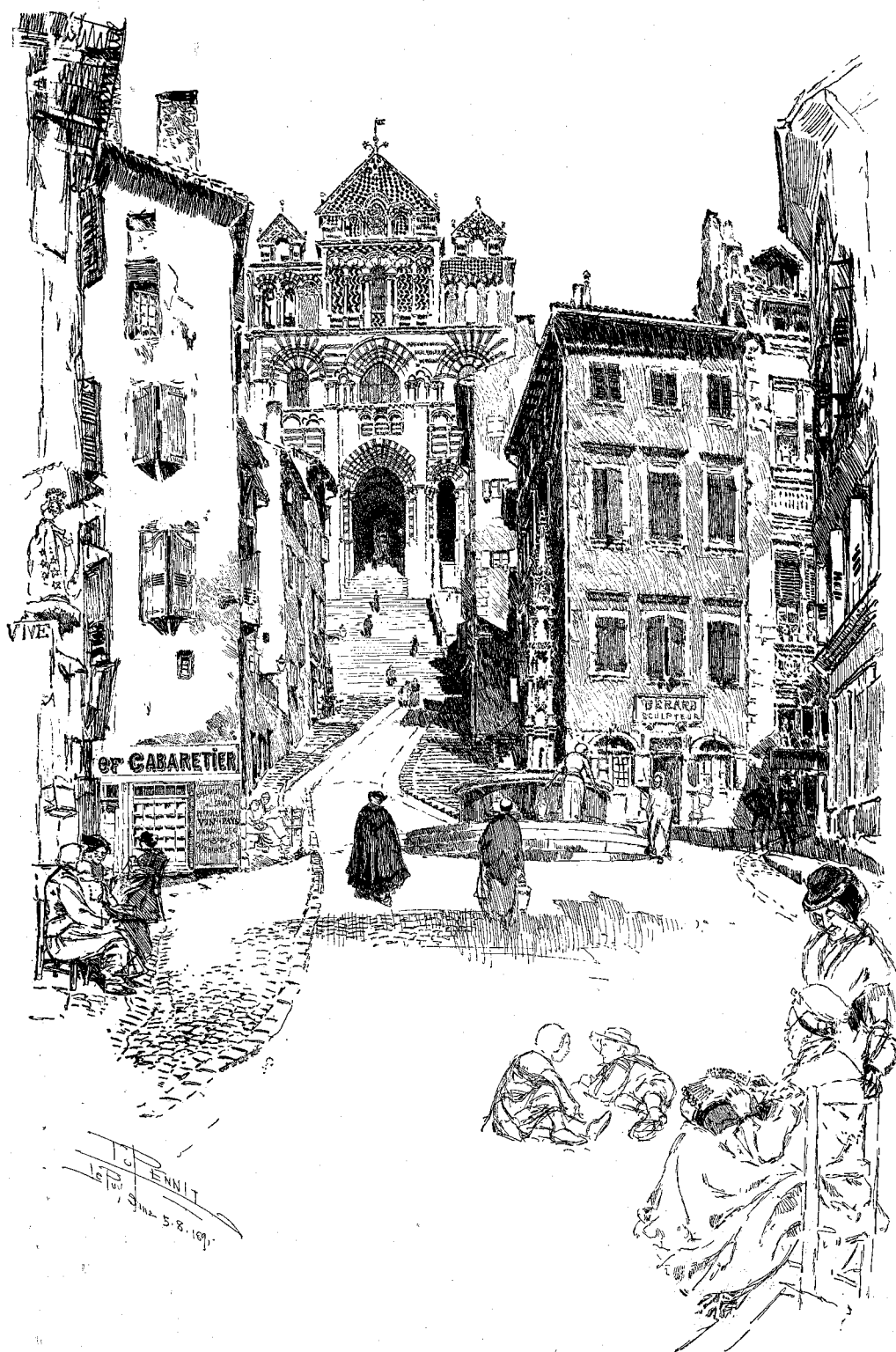
II.

THE church called Notre Dame du Puy is not a characteristic example of Auvergnese Romanesque. Nor is it individual after the manner of the cathedral of Poitiers—it is not a combination of the expedients developed by two neighboring architectural schools. It was gradually constructed during the space of two hundred years, and its peculiarity is largely due to the nature of its site and to its prééminence as a place of pilgrimage. Nevertheless, it is consistent throughout in idea, if not in feature; it is very beautiful and impressive; and its strangeness well befits the character of the town which it surmounts and of the landscape which it overlooks.

Notre Dame stands proudly on the edge of the plateau of the hill called Mont Anis, and to a distant eye the town seems to stream downward from it, like a glacier current of roofs and walls, while behind and far above it rises the Rocher Corneille, a truculent, naked peak, straight-walled on all sides but one. Stray as you will through the narrow, winding streets and irregular squares of Le Puy, full of bright sunshine and of cheerful

¹ See for the points of interest in these towns "The Churches of Auvergne," in THE CENTURY for August, 1899.

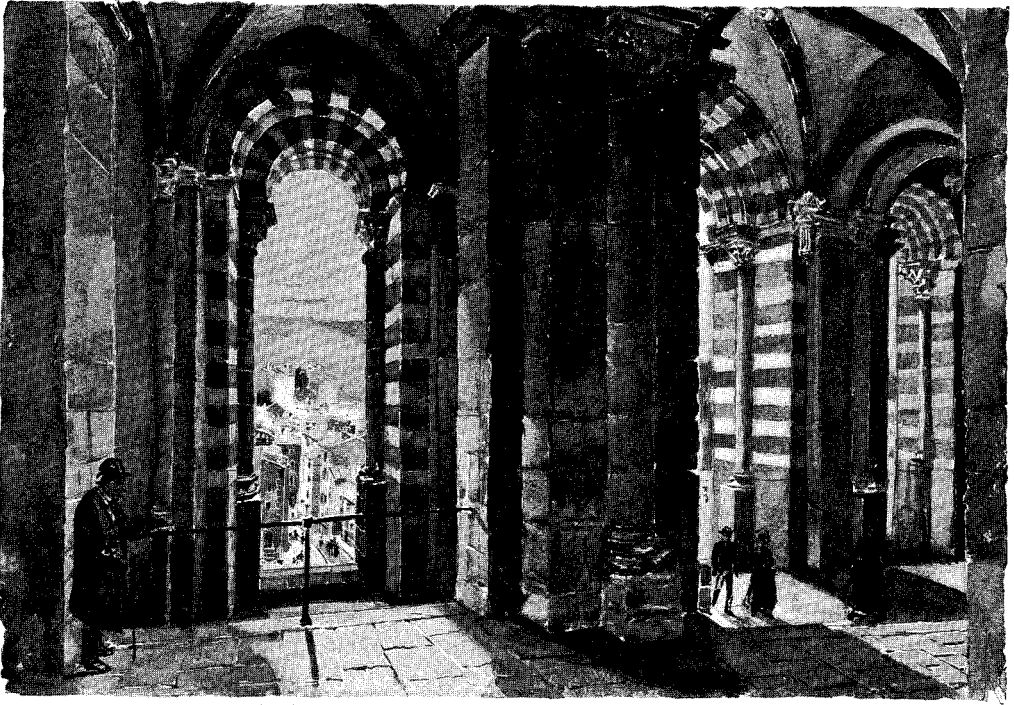
² See "The Most Picturesque Place in the World," in THE CENTURY for July, 1893.



THE WEST FRONT.



THE WESTERN PORTALS.



LOOKING WESTWARD FROM THE PORTALS.

southern life, somehow you are sure to find yourself returning to the spot shown in the picture on page 724. And then—there is no escape—you must climb once more, as the figures on page 725 are climbing, up the street which is like a stair to the stair which is like a street, and must pass once more beneath the glooming portals of the church. Then, if you turn and look back toward the west, you will see what Mr. Pennell indicates on this page. But if you still look ahead you will see, as on page 727, that the great stair continues, leading you far in beneath the nave of the cathedral; for the cathedral floor lies level with the string-course which runs above the tall arches of the western front.

There is nothing in any part of the world just like the approach to Notre Dame du Puy, and nothing like its huge crypt-stair; and there are few entrances which prepare the mind with such a majestic yet mysterious solemnity for the effect of the church itself. Nor is this effect a disappointment, although to-day it is less dramatically presented than it was in former times. Originally, the staircase led straight onward, and the feet that trod it emerged from its top-most step into the very center of the church, close in front of the high altar. But the bishop who ruled in Le Puy just before the

Revolution, saw fit to close the old opening and to build a branch to the stair, so that it debouches now in the north aisle of the nave.

Notre Dame du Puy is a much more imposing sanctuary than the others we have visited in Auvergne. Its size and its stateliness befit its rank as a cathedral church. Its nave is flanked by aisles; but its transept-arms are short, and the square termination of its choir (very early in date and therefore devoid of aisles and chapels) hardly appears like an apse. It is a massive church, dignified and serious; and yet, as you may see on pages 728 and 729, it wins great picturesqueness from the peculiar design of its ceilings. Each of the bays in the central alley is covered by a tall, domical vault adorned with blank arcades and with arched openings above them—a vault as independent in effect as is the domical lantern which springs above the intersection of the arms of the cross in other Romanesque churches. In Notre Dame du Puy this central lantern is similar to the other vaults, although of larger size.

Like the domical lanterns in the churches of Clermont and Issoire, these vaults at Le Puy are fashioned in a purely local way. Doubtless the inspiration for them was furnished by Byzantium; but they are not

copies—they are hardly adaptations—of Byzantine vaults, while they are totally unlike all those which Byzantine influence developed in Périgord, Saintonge, Poitou, and Anjou. They are oblong in plan, and are composed of an octagonal drum and dome. The transition from the rectangle to the octagon is effected by a peculiar use of small pendentives or squinches inclosed within the corner arches, and both drum and dome are much taller in proportion to their spread than any nave-vaults we have hitherto seen. Of course the effect of such a nave-ceiling, divided into boldly independent parts, is very different from the effect of the barrel-vaults used in other Auvergnese churches, or of the shallower domical compartments of the western provinces. But despite the independence and the height of these vaults, they are covered, like the shallow domes of the cathedral of Angoulême, by a continuous external roof, broken only by the conspicuous cupola which surmounts the intersection of the arms of the church.

The easternmost three bays of Notre Dame du Puy are constructed with round arches only, and, beyond their many retouchings, may date back to about the year 1000. The square projecting chambers which, much

altered, are now mere vestibules giving access to the choir from the north and the south, were probably at first the transept-arms of the church; and it seems at this time to have been completed by a fourth bay toward the west. This bay now has two of its sides constructed with semicircular and two with pointed arches, and must have been remodeled when the original façade was torn down and two new bays were built out toward the west, with the corresponding portions of the arcaded crypt and its stairway.¹ In this part of the church the great constructional arches all have the pointed form; and so it is with the westernmost two bays, which, with their substructure and the strange party-colored façade, were probably not finished until late in the twelfth century.

As I have explained before, the presence of the pointed arch in southern work of so early a date does not mean the advent of the Gothic style; it merely means a knowledge of the superiority of the pointed to the semicircular arch as a flexible constructional device. In the minor arches and the blank arcades of even the latest parts of Notre Dame du Puy the round arch is retained, and there is no sign of that desire to concentrate weights and thrusts upon special points

¹ At the same time that the crypt-stair was altered, the ceiling above the seats of the canons who performed the service in Notre Dame was lowered by the intro-

duction of a second vault, because they had complained of the coldness of the church. This unfortunate alteration may be traced in the picture on page 728.



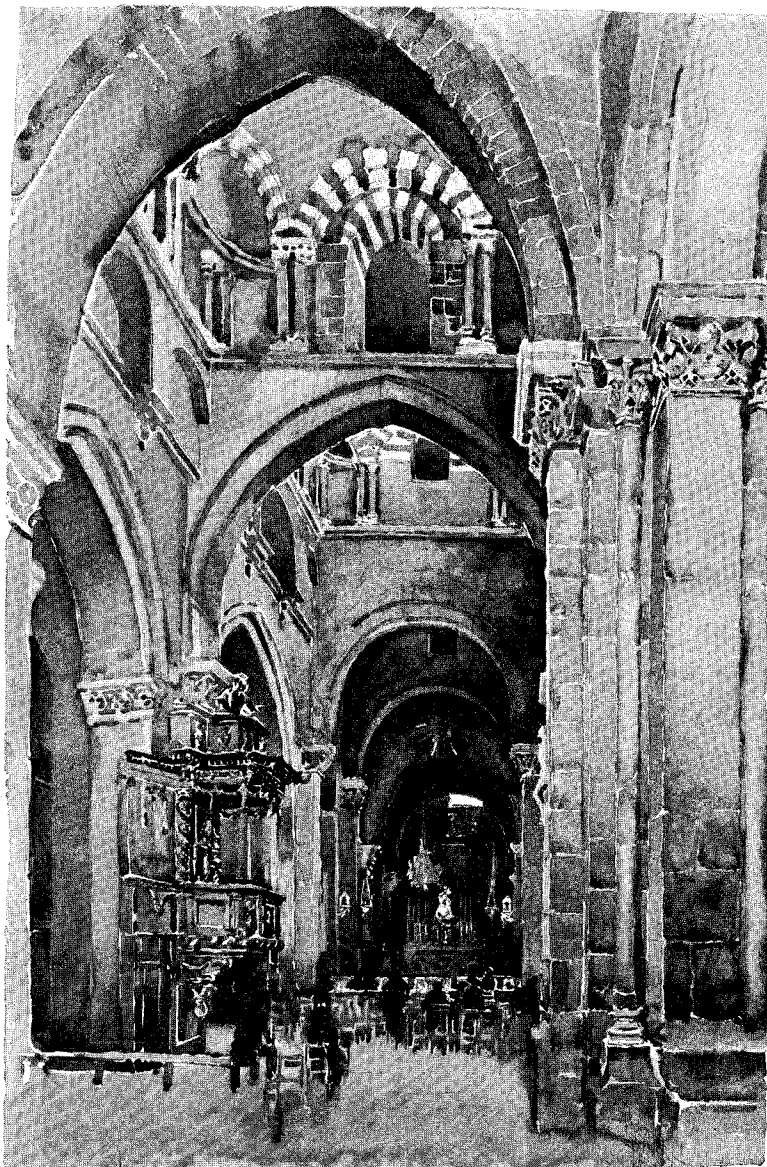
THE STAIRWAY UNDER THE NAVE.

of support, which was the real motive power in the development of Gothic art.

III.

ON the steps of Notre Dame du Puy you may buy a little history of the church, which be-

It will tell you that before the time of the Romans the hill called Mont Anis was crowned by a druidical circle, in the center of which stood a rough altar-stone; and that this stone, after being long preserved in a Roman temple, was reverently set within the Christian



THE NAVE.

gins with some words of Thomas Jefferson's, and ends with an account of a statue carved by the prophet Jeremiah. It is as interesting as any fairy-tale, and I counsel you to sit down upon the steps and peruse it there, so that everything it says may seem unquestionably true.

cathedral for the cure of the sick and the maimed who might stretch themselves upon it. This story at least you may certainly believe, for everywhere pagan ideas and customs, symbols and objects of devotion, baptized with novel names, were incorporated into Christian rituals and beliefs.

And, moreover, a fragment of Le Puy's druidical stone, which was shattered by a lightning-bolt while it lay in the cathedral, now forms the sill of a little altar, dedicated to the Virgin, on the landing above the one hundred and second step of the great crypt-stair.

that St. George, who had communed with Christ himself, was despatched by St. Peter on a mission to Velay, in company with St. Front, whose field was to be in Périgord. Soon St. George died, and was buried by the roadside. St. Front hurried back to Rome,



THE DOMES OF THE NAVE.

Gregory of Tours, writing in the sixth century, believed that the gospel had been carried into this part of Gaul three hundred years before. But our book tells a more attractive tale. Even the histories of Provençal churches do not take us further back or introduce us to more venerable figures. It says

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but returned, at St. Peter's bidding, with St. Peter's own staff in his hand. When this staff was placed upon the new-made grave, St. George awoke, and arose, and continued his appointed course; and when he died for the second time, in the year 84, he had well begun the evangelizing of Velay, in spite of



THE CHOIR.

terrific opposition from hordes of terrific demons. And, our book declares, a portion of the vivifying staff is still in the keeping of a house of holy women in Le Puy.

St. George did not establish his episcopal chair at Le Puy. But when word was brought him, at the place now called St. Paullien, that the Virgin had appeared to an aged woman on the druidical stone of Mont Anis, he knew what the miracle meant, and prepared to dedicate the spot to the worship of Mary. As he approached it, in the hottest days of summer, he saw that it was covered by a symbolical robe of purity—a miraculous mantle of fresh snow; and then a wild stag suddenly appeared, and with rapid steps traced in the snow the plan of a church.

Unable at once to lay actual foundations, St. George marked out the lines with a hawthorn hedge; and on the following day, when the snow had melted, lo! a wreath of purity, as unseasonably marvelous, encircled the mount. The hedge had burst into spring-like bloom.

In later years the Virgin again appeared, on the same spot, to another aged dame; and the bishop of that time constructed the church thus twice prescribed, and transferred to its keeping his episcopal chair. A message from the pope informed him that heaven itself would attend to the consecration. And, in truth, when he presented himself in state before the church, its bells began to ring and its doors to open without hands, a flood of light burst from

a thousand candles which had been set and lighted without hands, celestial harmonies resounded, and supernatural odors filled the air. Of these facts also proofs remain: two of the miraculous candles are preserved in Notre Dame, and its second title has always been "the Angelical Church." Nevertheless, there is one reason why you may doubt even proofs so good: the worship of Mary developed very slowly, and its dominant days were reached centuries after France had been Christianized, and many years after the present cathedral at Le Puy was begun.

IV.

WHEN the worship of Mary did develop in western christendom the shrine of Our Lady of the Peak could plausibly claim to be chief in France as a place of pilgrimage, scarcely surpassed in its fame even by the shrine of Our Lady of Chartres.

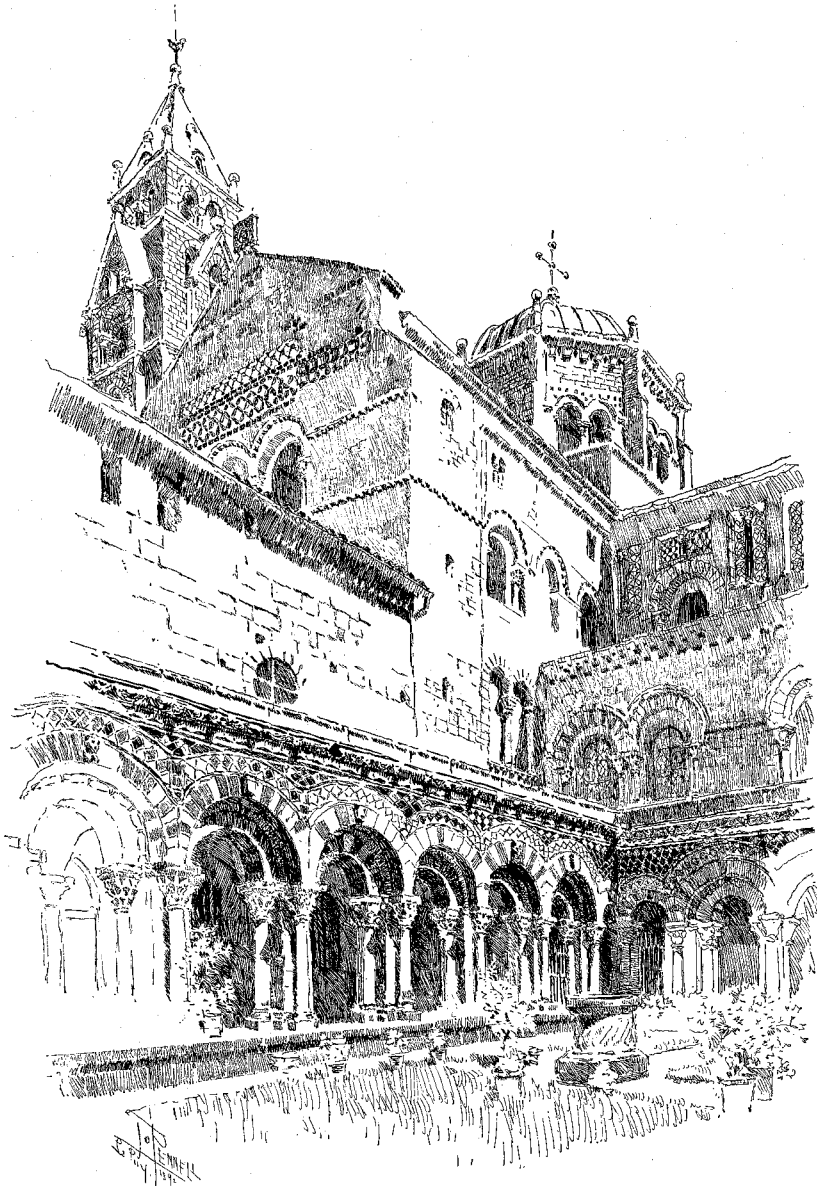
In the year 992 the devout were summoned to remember, on the same day, "the beginning and the end of the redemption of the world:" the joyous feast of the Annunciation, which falls on March 25, chanced to coincide with the most solemn of all fasts, Good Friday. Therefore a very solemn ceremonial, called the Great Pardon, was performed at Le Puy; and it was afterward repeated whenever the same conjunction of ecclesiastical dates came about—sometimes only once in a century, sometimes twice or thrice within a score of years. Thus far it has been celebrated twenty-six times. Its next recurrence will be in the year 1910. If you go to Le Puy in 1910, you may anticipate a spectacle as striking as the one presented every year at Lourdes; and for the mental eye it will have the added charm of an historical suggestiveness extending back almost a thousand years.

The institution of the Great Pardon caused the worship of Mary to develop with peculiar fervor on the slopes of Mont Anis. When you read how many were the pilgrims who, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, sought the shrine of Our Lady of the Peak, you can understand why her church twice needed enlargement. And if you know the dramatic temper of those days, you can realize how its station on the brow of a steep hill inspired its owners with the idea of its staircase, frankly hospitable at first, and then mysteriously awe-inspiring, giving foothold to thousands at once, and gradually bringing them up from light through darkness into light again—into the church at the very foot of the high altar.

Artistic and religious emotions lie close together, ready to mingle and to interact; and therefore we may believe that, after the number of its pilgrims had inspired the stairway of Le Puy, the impressiveness of the stairway increased the eminence of the church among the many competing shrines of Mary. Surprising indeed are the tales that our little book tells about the crowds which gathered, in late medieval times, whenever the day of a Great Pardon drew near. On each occasion many people were crushed to death in the narrow streets, and no less than two hundred in the year 1407. In 1502 four thousand confessors were needed to care for the pilgrims' souls, and they were stationed, perforce, in the streets and meadows as well as in every corner of every chapel and church. The highways outside the city were so thronged that those who could not find place upon them tramped out broad swaths of destruction through the adjacent fields; and inside the city every one bore aloft a stick with some device which might assist his friends to find him, while no one had space to stoop to recover any object that he might drop. Many details of a similar kind our little book picturesquely tells; and even in the year 1825, it says, one hundred and fifty thousand devotees assembled at Le Puy, and twice as many in the year 1853.

As for the great men and famous who, in all humility, have climbed the hill called Mont Anis and the stair of Notre Dame, their names are far too many to be recited here. Charlemagne was one of the first among them. Six popes are enumerated, and also fifteen kings of France, some of them coming many times, and in company with their queens and courtiers, and others, like Charles VII in his youth, very quietly, to beg Our Lady's help in their sorest need. Cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, abbots who were as powerful, saints who were destined after death to be more powerful still, princes, great ladies, nobles, and warriors of renown—all these came in uncountable numbers from every Christian land. Indulgences and pardons, miracles and mercies, were as plentifully showered upon them as any Christian soul could ask. And the gold and silver, the jewels and robes, the relics and works of art which they gave in return, enriched not only the famous house of the famous Virgin herself, but every church and monastery in Velay.

When Pope Urban was planning the rescue of the Holy Land he would have summoned

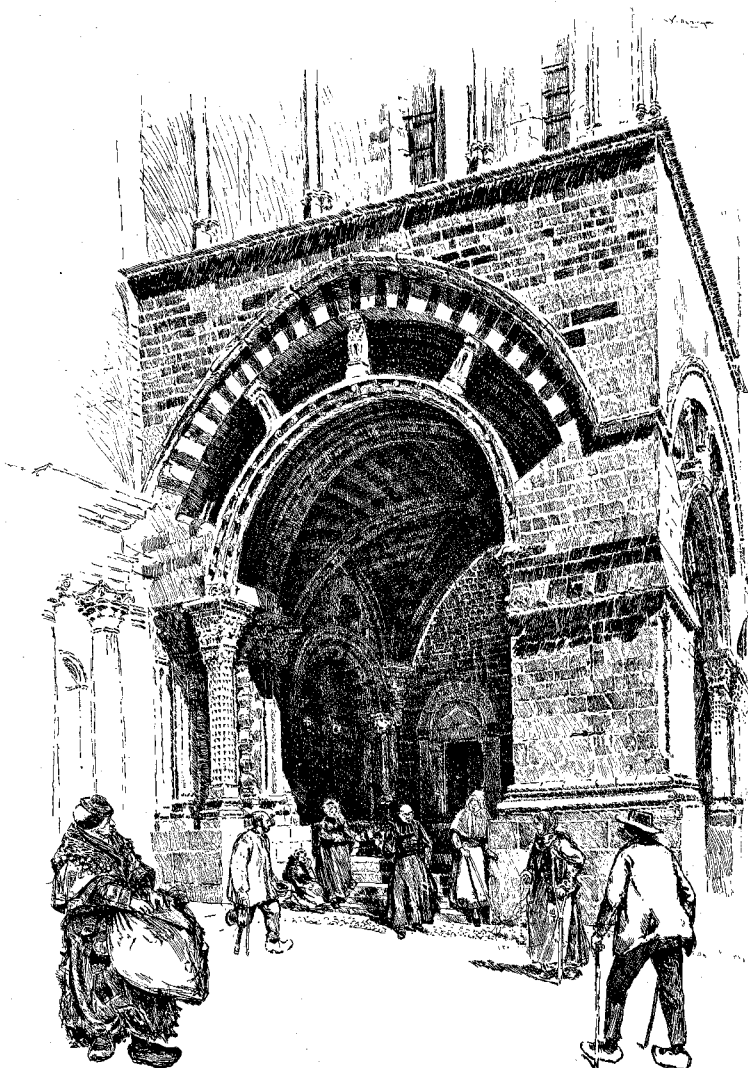


THE CLOISTERS, DOME, AND TOWER OF THE CATHEDRAL.

the council at Le Puy but for the difficulty of the approaches to the town, not yet so well prepared for crowds as they were in later years. His letter naming Clermont instead was dated from Le Puy. Adhemar, bishop of Le Puy, the first person who received the scarlet cross from the hands of Urban, blessed the army of Godfrey de Bouillon when it set sail, and composed the famous chant called "Salve Regina," which was its constant inspiration; and Tasso tells us that this first crusading army contained four hundred warriors from Le Puy.¹ At Le

¹ In Tasso's verse Le Puy is *Pogio*, while its medieval Latin name was *Podio*.

Puy, in devotion to its Virgin, St. Dominick devised the rosary which is now in the hands of every Catholic—an elaboration of the simple chaplet used in earlier days. To Le Puy, to the Great Pardon of 1429, Jeanne Darc sent her mother, with prayers to Our Lady for assistance before she essayed the relief of Orléans. For a time the great St. Anthony of Padua was at the head of the Franciscan house, which was only one among the many powerful monasteries of Le Puy. And in 1380, Duguesclin, the most mighty and the best-beloved of all the warriors then fighting against England for the life of France, lost his own life in the service of Notre



THE SOUTH PORCH OF THE CHOIR.

Dame du Puy, besieging the castle of a robber knight who had harassed her pilgrims.

V.

NOWHERE else in Auvergne are its bold methods of mosaic decoration so boldly and profusely employed as at Le Puy. They are used on the inner as on the outer walls of the cathedral—strong geometric patterns wrought with gray stone, black lava, and red brick. Audacious, gay, and a little crude, we might criticize them as bizarre in a more normal town. But even if we apply this word to them in Le Puy, it means

approval; for in spirit and effect they harmonize perfectly with the general spirit, the general aspect, of the most bizarre of European towns.

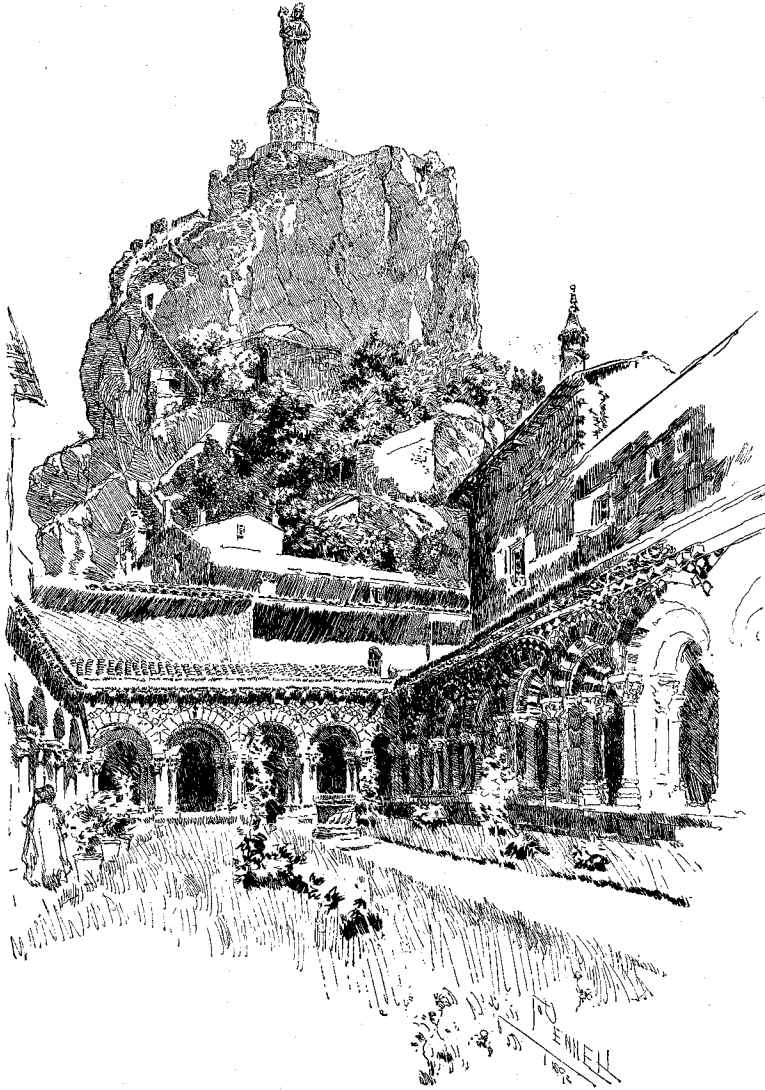
The school of sculpture represented in Notre Dame du Puy and its beautiful cloisters differed from the schools of all adjacent provinces. At first it employed classicizing, Gallo-Roman motives mixed with Byzantine motives. But before the middle of the twelfth century an admirable indigenous art had developed, very delicate, refined, and supple, quite free from any Gallo-Roman impress, and, where it still showed

a slight Oriental impress, recalling Persia rather than Byzantium by its pearly palmettes and its curious animal forms. Before the end of the same century the exquisite manual skill of the sculptors of Le Puy

school of Provence. And when the art revived in Auvergne, it revived as in Provence—as a new art, a Gothic art, imported from the north of France.

The great tower which is conspicuous in every view of Le Puy does not spring from the body of the church, but stands close to its eastern end. It was built toward the end of the eleventh century. It is not beautifully consistent in design, like the tower of Angoulême, and it is not well designed for a belfry. But it is extremely effective in its vigorous variety of feature, and it is admirably designed for a watch-tower to be used upon occasion as a tower of defense. Parts and fragments of other constructions close to the cathedral confirm this proof that it was once inclosed in a system of fortifications.

I have not time to describe all the interesting features of Notre Dame du Puy and its many dependencies, but I am glad that Mr. Pennell shows you (on page 733) the archway of the vestibule which opens from the



THE CLOISTERS AND ROCHER CORNEILLE.

reached its highest level, but their methods of design had deteriorated. They seem at this time to have felt an influence from Languedoc on the south and the Lyonnaise lands on the north, taking thence the semi-classical, semi-Byzantine motives which these districts had never abandoned, and failing to blend them well with their own more truly Romanesque ideas. Another generation saw the indigenous school of sculpture die out in Le Puy, as, at the same time, died the indigenous

south side of the choir; for another such arch as this, with its lower member hanging free,—a purely ornamental feature,—you will never meet with, no matter where your journeyings may take you. I hope that some day they may take you up the steep and winding path in Le Puy, which at one stage will show you the cathedral (as on page 722) in the way that the birds behold it, and from the summit of the Rocher Corneille will unroll a still more magnificent view. This sum-

mit is crowned, alas! by the only conspicuous thing of modern origin in Le Puy. It is a big statue of the Virgin, cast with the metal of Crimean cannon. It is so very big, so outrageously out of scale, that it dwarfs and injures every prospect in which it plays a part. And we resent the fact the more bitterly because, despite their astonishing and bizarre diversity, all these prospects must have been quite free from a discordant note until the modern monstrosity appeared.

It is hard to ignore the many minor marvels of Le Puy, especially the Rock of St. Michel, an isolated needle of stone standing close to the town, with its top entirely covered by a tiny church—curious enough in itself and splendid enough in its outlooks to reward the very laziest tourist, although to reach it he must climb two hundred and fifty steps carved from the sheer face of the rock. But it would be still harder to complete my pages without any mention of the statue which, like the cathedral that contained it, was called *Our Lady of the Peak*.

VI.

THE statue revered by the earliest pilgrims in the holiest shrine on Mont Anis was replaced in the thirteenth century by one that grew still more famous. This "Black Virgin" of Le Puy was a group of the Mother and Child, about two feet in height, the raiment painted in brilliant hues, set with gems, and adorned with mysterious signs, while the faces were black and polished. It continued to win new glories and to dispense new benefits until, in the Reign of Terror, it was burned on the market-place with hideous contumely.

There is good proof that this statue was brought to France by St. Louis, and was ceremoniously installed in the cathedral when he came, in the year 1254, to render thanks to *Our Lady of the Peak* for his release from captivity among the Mohammedans of Egypt. Now, local traditions assert that twelve hundred years before St. Louis's time the temple which contained the druidical stone of Mont Anis was devoted to the worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis, who had won a prominent place in the pantheons of Rome and its subject lands; and that the word Anis itself was derived from her name. Therefore, even a supposed Egyptian origin for the Black Virgin of Le Puy would lay a pleasing hold upon the fancy. But more than this may be told about it, and in the serious words of truth.

Deftly tracing its history back step by step, the chroniclers of Le Puy identify St. Louis's gift with a traditionally famous statue of the Virgin and Child which the prophet Jeremiah carved, during his sojourn in Egypt, to perpetuate the memory of his prophesyings. But when they enter upon detailed descriptions of the group, they prove, beyond a doubt, that it was a figure of the goddess Isis with the infant Horus on her knee. Groups of this sort abounded in ancient Egyptian art. We can readily believe that they were sometimes adopted into the Christian faith, while, in an unlettered age, their origin soon passed out of mind. Indeed, it would be a miracle had this transmutation never occurred, so close is the analogy in idea between the mother and son of ancient Egypt and the Mother and Son of Bethlehem. Very possibly all of those curious Black Virgins which inspired peculiar reverence in European churches after crusading days were the products of long-forgotten pagan artists on the banks of the Nile. But if I could quote in full from my little book the pages—carefully penned, in naïve ignorance of their true import—which describe the Black Virgin of Le Puy, in the words of those who daily beheld her, you would certainly be convinced that she at least was a genuine old Egyptian. And I hope that you will enjoy the idea of this accidental contact, this unwitting union, of a long-dead with a living faith—this proof of the perennial sameness of human needs and aspirations, the perennial vitality of the dreams and the symbols which express them.

Picturesque indeed must have been the actual scene when the ninth Louis of France, the most typically Christian monarch in all history,—king, crusader, saint, and pilgrim,—placed in the shrine on Mont Anis the figure which was the memento of his suffering for the Church's cause. But the imagined scene is incomparably more picturesque to us whose mental eyes are clarified by a little antiquarian lore—to us who can see that, in pure unconsciousness, this loyal son and champion of the Church was restoring the great heathen goddess to her ancient stronghold among the descendants of her heathen devotees. Upon this particular day in the year 1254 the vague and singular smile which curves the lips of every figure wrought with old Egyptian chisels may well have been a little more pronounced upon the lips of *Notre Dame du Puy*.



ENGRAVED ON WOOD BY HENRY WOLF, FROM THE PAINTING IN POSSESSION OF REV. LEA LUQUER.

GILBERT STUART'S PORTRAITS OF WOMEN.

MRS. THOMAS LEA (SARAH SHIPPEN).