

STORIES FROM FRENCH HISTORY

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Stories from French history by Eleanor C. Price

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BY
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CHAPTER I

CÆSAR AND VERCINGETORIX

The grandeur that was Rome.

EDGAR A. POE

Le granit immortel d'un magnanime exemple.

ARSÈNE VERMENOUEZ

AT the beginning of what is known as French history stands the great fact—one of the greatest in the annals of civilization—that Rome invaded and conquered Gaul.

That triumph is bound up with the name of Julius Cæsar; but it had really begun long before he crossed the Alps, about the year 58 B.C., to enter on the first of the eight campaigns that his conquest cost Rome. Something like a hundred years earlier the people of the ancient lands and settlements of Southern Gaul, where the mountains descend in sun-bathed loveliness and glory of colour to the Mediterranean Sea—the lands whose seaboard we call the Riviera, *the coast beyond all others*—had asked for help from Rome against enemy tribes. The Romans came, and remained; these regions were too like Italy to be lightly returned to their original owners. Aix and Narbonne, the first Roman colonies, soon became chief cities in the territories later called Provence and Languedoc, 'the Province' ruled by Roman power which stretched across the river Rhône from the Alps to the Pyrenees.

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Here was the favourite seat of the Romans for something like six hundred years, long after the whole of Gaul had been more or less colonized—down, indeed, to the fall of the Empire and the sweeping barbarian invasions from the North and East, which for the time being destroyed civilization and by more lasting changes transformed Gaul into France. In old Provence, where it was once supreme, are the chief visible relics of that Roman power whose hidden vital influence will last to the world's end. Here in the clear dry air, above the blue tideless sea, far removed from the mud and mist of the North, among the palms and vines and figs and olives, the red rocks, the dry white stony beds or winter torrents of the streams, the Romans built their villas of dazzling marble and set their stately gardens with statues and fountains. Here were and still are the great aqueducts, such as the Pont du Gard, marvellous works of engineering to bring water from the mountains ; the triumphal arches, the pillared temples on the hill-sides, the baths, the amphitheatres, the streets of tombs such as the Alyseamps (Elysian Fields) of Arles. In many cities of France, as well as in Britain and other countries colonized by Rome, mighty remains are to be found in their age and decay ; but the bones of the Roman Empire, a writer on Provence has strikingly said, “ pierce through Provençal soil in many places as though that giant grave were still too narrow for the skeleton of a past than can never wholly die.”

The Romans brought law and order, justice and good government. Theirs was the idea of the one ruling state, yet of the freedom, dignity, and independence of each member of that state. That these doctrines did not exclude tyranny and slavery is a fact leading to questions too deep to be discussed here. But one answer may be given : the Roman Empire at its greatest knew nothing of Christi-

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anity. When the knowledge came, bitter persecution followed it ; for the freedom of a Christian was seen to be something different from that of a Roman citizen and was mysteriously alarming to the rulers of a heathen state.

Rome did not destroy the countries she conquered, but added them to her Empire, giving their people the advantages enjoyed by her own citizens. She imposed on them, willing or not, her language and her laws, and organized their trade, education, and local government. Splendid roads ran from point to point of the Empire, mountains were crossed, forests pierced, rivers bridged ; thus there was constant communication by chariot, horse, or running post between the cities, and regular intercourse with Rome. The Roman settlers intermarried with the natives of their colonies. The Latin strain is strong in France to this day: in the south, women's classical Roman faces often show descent from the conquerors of two thousand years ago.

Cæsar found in Gaul a large and beautiful country guarded by mountains and seas, its plains varied by hills and valleys, among which a thousand lesser rivers and streams flowed into the great four that were then, as now, the characteristic boundaries of its provinces and populations: the Seine, the river of Paris, in later centuries the chief waterway of French civilization ; the wide and winding Loire, river of the west, flowing to the Atlantic through a land of fertility and romance ; the Garonne, rising in the Spanish mountains, and in Cæsar's days better known and more navigated than any except the noble Rhône, that divides the southern provinces in his magnificent course from the Alps to the Mediterranean Sea.

Gaul was a wild country in Cæsar's days, largely covered with forest, and inhabited by Celtic tribes with a certain civilization of their own not unlike that of the ancient

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Britons. They were ruled by their Druids ; but a religion of terror did not crush the independence of mind, the restlessness, the curiosity about nature and man, or weaken the love of fighting and the obstinate courage which in former centuries of wandering had made these Gauls a dread to Southern Europe and Asia. Cæsar found a more stationary people, in a country whose rough divisions were marked then, as now, by striking differences in character. The men of the south were the most prosperous and the most talkative ; those of the west the most imaginative and least practical ; those of the north and east the strongest, bravest, most industrious. There was no general government of the country, such as the Romans brought and imposed upon it : the towns, large thatched villages, often fortified, on hill or river-bank, among cultivated fields or hidden away in a forest clearing, were independent communities of quarrelsome folk, constantly fighting among themselves or with each other. The difficulty of bringing these tribes into obedience to the supreme power of Rome may be measured by the eight years' campaign of Rome's most brilliant commander.

Tall and splendid men these Gauls were : fair, blue-eyed, red-haired, with long fierce moustaches, of which they were amazingly proud. The chiefs were gorgeous in gold-embroidered garments, with collars and bracelets blazing with jewels. When mounted on great horses, brandishing swords or javelins, and wearing on their helmets the skull of some bird or animal with stag's horns or falcon's wings extended, their height and appearance might well strike terror into ordinary foes. The small, dark men of Italy, running and driving into battle with shining armour and short Roman sword, might seem overmatched by these tremendous warriors. Cæsar, with his bald head and thin, aquiline face, keen, grave,

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and thoughtful, appeared a mean opponent for such a magnificent young chieftain as Vercingetorix.

And in fact this famous leader of the Gauls made a fine defence against the Roman invaders, for he had military genius as well as dauntless courage, and he was a real patriot, even though his country meant little more than a group of tribes and scattered communities. His own tribe, called by Cæsar the Arverni, inhabited the mountains of Auvergne, the beautiful central province of France which takes its name from them; the dwelling of Vercingetorix was a hill stronghold called Gergovia. The story goes that his father, a great chief, was murdered here by the partisans of a jealous brother. This brother was ruling in his stead when the resistance of Central Gaul to the Romans broke into flame.

It was mid-winter. From the high plateau where Gergovia stood—all grass and brambles now—mountain and plain lay wrapped deep in snow. The thatched roofs of the little town were heaped with it; all the warmer for old men, women, and children, who crowded together round central fires in the large huts, sleeping or drinking heavily or singing songs and telling ancient tales of the glory of the Gauls long ago when they stormed over the known world and, led by their brave chief Brennus, took Roman senators by the beard. The name of Rome had a different sound for them now, in spite of their boasting, and the chief of Gergovia wagged a prudent head of disapproval over the talk of the young men, led by his nephew Vercingetorix. What were these foolish, fiery dreams of resistance to Rome? They would end by bringing fire and sword on the whole country. They would end in the extermination of the Gauls. Why not make terms with the invader and live side by side with him in trade, as many Gaulish cities were already doing? These young

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hot-heads should be stabbed or burnt alive, or at least driven away into the forests to live with the wild beasts, their brethren !

Even while the old man grumbled, gulping down his strong drinks and stretching his feet to the crackling fire, the young men with their leader were out in the snow, watching the northern sky, listening for a voice that should travel along the hill-tops to bring the message they expected, signal for a general rising. Through the stillness of the winter night under the stars it came, the shout handed on from man to man over a hundred and fifty lonely miles. In the town of Orléans on the Loire, called by the Romans Genabum, where they had made one of those trading centres which the old chief approved, the Gauls had risen that morning and had killed all the Roman colonists.

With rage and terror the chief received the news, brought to him triumphantly by Vercingetorix. What vengeance would not the Romans take for such a so-called victory ! That they might have no excuse for destroying Gergovia, his innocent self, his followers, and his property, he ordered that Vercingetorix should be driven instantly from the town. Had not the young men of the tribe stood behind Vercingetorix his life would have been in peril.

The little band dashed away into the mountains, and for a few days or weeks Gergovia heard no more of them. Then they returned with a troop of fierce young spirits like themselves, and took the place by storm. There was slight resistance, for Vercingetorix was more popular with the tribe than his cowardly uncle could ever be. History does not tell of the chief's fate, but life was of small account in those days, and revenge was a duty. He disappears. We know that his nephew was proclaimed chief, and that Gergovia became the formidable centre of a rebellion