

An Old Normandy Town.

A WAY from the scenes of strife now unhappily raging in France there is one town near the coast which was visited by the present writer before the disastrous war broke out. Indeed, no one can go to Normandy without calling at Caen, whose historic associations are linked with those of England. Moreover, it contains some of the finest churches, built in a style of architecture which has given it a name, and distinguished for grandeur and strength. For these characteristics it is superior to the Romanesque, which it succeeded. The walls are remarkable for thickness, and are frequently of great height. It would appear that Caen was especially favoured by the builders of the day, and their elaborate decoration is very marked.

As we all know, Caen is intimately associated with the early life of the Conqueror. Here he created the centre of his kingdom, and here may be found the two great monuments of his work—the Abbaye aux Hommes and the Abbaye aux Dames. The first, called the Church of St. Etienne, was dedicated with great pomp in the year 1070. Here William the Conqueror was buried, closing a strange and tragic life with a protest from one, Ascelin, a rich burgher of Caen, who, standing up as the leader of a party bitterly opposed to the acts of the late Duke, exclaimed: "That earth which you disturb is the site of my father's house! That man, for whom you pray, took it from him by force, and, without heeding his just claims, built thereon this church. Therefore, I do reclaim this ground, in the name of God. I forbid you to cover the body of the robber with my soil, or to bury it in my heritage!" We are told the Bishops were awestruck, and agreed there and then to pay Ascelin the sum of sixty sous for a grave, with a promise that his further requests should be granted in due course.

This church, known as the Abbaye aux Hommes, or St. Etienne, is a fine type of Norman architecture, with its grave and stern beauty, its harmonious lines, its grand style. "It is

a mistake," says Mr. Percy Dearmer, "to suppose that what we see is the Conqueror's work, appropriate though it may seem to him. Very little of the original masonry can be seen. The present west front was built up against the original one in 1090, when the lower part of the towers was made and the aisles vaulted. In 1160 the nave was vaulted, the walls refaced, the enormous triforium added. The choir was built about 1210, and the spires belong to the same period."

The abbey buildings are now used as a school for six hundred boys. There is a good deal of decoration in the *Parloir* and there is some excellent panelling of a quite late period. In the cloister is a clock, and under it a list of the Masses to be said at certain periods. But perhaps one of the most interesting things to be seen is a hanging staircase, the work of a monk who did all his forge work in the abbey itself.

The Church of the Abbaye aux Dames is usually known as La Trinité, and contrasts strongly with its companion, St. Etienne. Its capitals are elaborate, both externally and internally. The most interesting part, however, is the crypt, to view which special permission has to be obtained. You must apply to the *concierge* of the Hôtel-Dieu at the side of the church. Visitors are not allowed to enter the choir. It contains the tomb of Queen Matilda, who founded the hospital, whose work of mercy is now carried on by nuns.

But for elegance and beauty of design the premier place among the churches of Caen must be given to St. Pierre. The spire, which is separated from the main building, is a magnificent piece of architecture, and though built in the early fourteenth century, is in the style of the thirteenth. It consists mainly of eight triangular stone sides, meeting at a height of 250 feet. When you view it from the main street, you would imagine it was of recent construction, and yet, apart from the ravages of storm, it has once undergone a bombardment. Let us hope it will not suffer a similar fate during this century.

Besides the churches, Caen has other objects of interest, not the least important being its *hotels* of the Renaissance

period. These were built by the merchant princes who flourished in the sixteenth century. The Hôtel of the Valois is now used as The Bourse, and is the most imposing of these palaces, for so they may be called. But, indeed, Caen is full of beautiful buildings, and its courtyards must, on no account, be missed. "The best charms of the town cannot be ticketed; we must wander about for ourselves, and invite our souls."

J. C. WRIGHT.

