

# A Villa on the Riviera

By BLANCHE McMANUS.

THEY tell me America does not use the word "villa" to designate a dwelling house. On the Mediterranean shores of blue, "villa" covers anything that might correspond to a bungalow, a Maine camp, a country house or just a plain dwelling.

When we looked for a little *pic a terre* that should give us a resting place between flights we came house hunting to the paradise of villas, the French Riviera, in climate and loveliness a sister to California, and historically much older and prolific in souvenirs of the past.

As we knew the Mediterranean "coast of blue," like the inside of our pocket, as the Latins say, we knew thus where to go house hunting, also that the best way to salt the tail of the homing bird along the shore of this saltiest of tideless seas is to dribble along in a motor car and investigate any and all "A Louer" or "A Vendre" signs that any seemingly attractive and suitable house might have placarded upon its face.

The windings of charming highways and byways are preferable to unwinding the devious methods of French house agencies, whose *summa bonum* of an attractive offer is a thirty room chateau with four garages and one bathroom—once occupied by a duchess and thus supposedly suitable for an American millionaire, were not for us.

We didn't even find the one bathroom when we finally came to the loose end of a little string of roadway which tied up to the front gate of an old time garden facing an ancient structure perched high upon rugged rocks rising sheer from the sea.

The place pleased us; near enough to a small village for daily provisioning needs and yet in a countryside unspoiled; tranquil for those who cover paper with words and pictures, but within quick motoring distance of Cannes and Nice when one wished social, mondaine contact.

The renting was in the hands of Monsieur le Notaire, French middleman for all affairs of business, official master of all community ceremonies. Our notary was in a neighboring village. We took our villa seriously, purchasing it outright for the very modest sum of 12,000 post-war francs, the house and a hectare (2½ acres) of land, mostly occupied by picturesque rocks and century old knarled olive trees.

Its very age should have discouraged our villa with most who acquire properties on this recherche, flower garlanded coast. For this reason it was to us like the possession of a rare old book, the turning of its mellow pages a continual pleasure.

Just the sight of the time-worn parchments which were shuffled before us at the notary's gave guaranty of its pedigree, while its cover covering, its binding as it were, bore the impress of most of the races of the Mediterranean who through the ages had halted here.

The oldest end of the house was of great, square hewn, red porphyry rocks, which I suspected had been fished off the paved Aurelian Way, that first of great Roman roads which paced off the leagues from the golden milestone of the Roman Forum, well preserved remains of which could still be traced close to our own door sill.

Buttressed up against this was a middle section bearing the tool marks of ecclesiastical architecture, while the other side was probably as modern as a hundred years ago. Here was a deep loggia facing out to sea, with square cut openings, suitable for our rose bowls, and a stone flagged pavement. On the garden front was a white balustraded terrace covered with a quaint thatched roof of the wild bamboo of the country, overlooking shaggy, luxuriant masses of flowers and shrubbery of an old garden. This, with the loggia, gave an open air sitting room to suit every angle of sun and every turn of wind.

There were eight ample rooms with smooth, white walls of a conventlike sobriety, their surfaces unbroken by ornament or molding of any sort, with curved, groined ceilings in the older portions. All was in alignment on the ground floor, but there were alcoves and nooks here and there, up and down irregular steps. The basement hall-

was reached on the water side by a winding stone stair outside the house, worn by the patterings of many feet. This you entered through an arched portal defended by a massive door of wood, iron studded, owing to a key nearly a foot long which turned in its venerable lock with a suggestive grinding.

Inside were many vaulted passages and mysterious nooks, all cut from the solid rock, and, as the cellars are to a house what a prologue is to a book, promised to open up well and sustain our interest. Here was the curve of a Roman arch, there a churchly prop; I expected soon or late to find even a Phœnician forehead. Later the story of the house read even better than I had hoped.

Though the villa had been long untenanted needful repairs were few—a handful of new tiles to be inserted in the delicious rosy gray tiled roof, showing waves of growth in its rambling length; the painter and plasterer to be called in to give a few fresh touches. The plasterer and painter arrived wearing the garb of their trades, long white smocks, carrying clam shaped baskets of tools, working leisurely and intermittently between many cigarettes and much laughter and song, disregarding entirely their recently established eight hour day, taking a two hour siesta in the shade at noon. In spite of this the finishing process made the cover of our book a great success.

The red stone walls of the older part we left untouched, while the rugged gray blocks of the remainder were repointed with cement and color-washed. Result: cream-tinted walls and rose roof, flecked with orange, against a background of turquoise sky and sapphire water seen



Celestine detailed the romances of her country as she prepared the meals.

through a vista of gray-green, feathery olive trees which cast purple shadows over the ocher-colored soil, guiltless of the slightest blade of grass—a chromatic medley, but subdued.

The solid shutters and portals of wood were a silvery gray, with here and there the ancient walls banked with huge bunches of white and yellow marguerites, with the long friends of pink cleanders caressing one of the gables. An ancient well-head covered a spring of pure water.

Inside we left the pristine whiteness, tempered only by rose colored curtains. The flooring of some of the older rooms was of white and black marble tiles. In the later epoch we trod over dark red square tile pavement, while another of the apartments had them of octagon shape. The windows, of the kind known as French, opened inward in double leaves from ceiling to floor and were formed of small panes of glass. These were only to be fastened by an intricate system of defense for night as might be boasted by a feudal chateau.

Came the question of furnishings.

These we carried out in the old Provençal style, in which land of romance our villa had grown and the leaves of its story book had been unfolded. Besides, in France, antique furniture costs less than new and is in every way much more desirable than new. France for the old, America for the new!

Provençal furniture is of two generic styles—fine finished, ornate carvings of great size; secondly, rough hewn, with crude, though interesting, sculptured design, as if whittled out with a jack knife. But both styles, of walnut or dark oak, are beeswaxed by ages until almost of an ebony hue, giving off high lights of gold and deep shadows of

holy women rested on their journey. This central portion of our house was one of these old shrines, diverted by the reverses of history into a mere secular dwelling.

A local guide book described our villa as once having been a Saracen stronghold. This fact was well attested by the foundation stones themselves, suggestive of the passing of the Turkish hordes this way, with later interpolations of Greek traders as before them perhaps the Phœnicians.

One day, when on the water in our little green boat, with its bright orange sail, in viewing the rear of our house from the sea I pointed out the outward slant of the walls of our labyrinth of a basement, the unfailing hallmark of the Egyptian builder, who could never get away from the lines of the cone. Yes, in the time of the Pharaohs this cooler coast of the Mediterranean was dotted with the summer homes of the elite of Alexandria and Cairo. We were living in their shadow.

The garden that rambled down among the brilliant tinted rocks of mauves and yellows gave testimony of the passing of the Italians of the Renaissance, for its terraced paths, bordered with giant aloe, lemons and oranges, hedges of roses and golden Danie showers of mimosa, were laid out in geometric patterns of small pebbles of many chromatic colors in a most ingenious fashion.

Half obliterated were many of these embryo mosaics, and we amused ourselves by replacing the missing pebbles from the Italian motif. Our own little private beach teemed with these brilliantly hued small stones, but by a curious application of French law not one of these might we "lift," at least not publicly to view, so we smuggled them in a few at a time.

Our picturesque gardener, in brown velveteens, with a red sash around his waist, who planted flowers by the curves of the moon and slept most of the time during the day on the sunny side of a wall, related mysteriously that smugglers used the cellars of our house as a hiding place and that the scent of good contraband tobacco hung around them still. It was proved later that as a smuggling authority he knew whereof he spoke.

Celestine, our cook, and the kitchen occupied the Roman wing. According to French tradition, whether chateau or cottage, the kitchen must always be on the left front of the house and command the entrance gate. I have always believed that it was the holding of this point of vantage that makes the French servant so content and continually on her job.

Celestine could not only keep track on all our callers, but was in a position to hail our daily market supply of food as it was brought in from the warm valleys enfolded in the great, gray wall of the Maritime Alps, on the backs of small paniered donkeys, or on pushcarts, to the iron grille, flanked by monumental columns and two tall cypresses, which guarded us from the outside world.

Celestine cooked us delicious Provençal dishes in brown casseroles or on the old clock work spit in the big hooded chimney.

But I often listened as Celestine detailed the romances of her country. As all good cooks, she was sentimental. One day she was preparing a *bouillabaisse* and told us of the lovers, pirates and villains of her imagination. Appropriately these

three elements are always mingled in the true romance.

"It was *dans le bon vieux temps*," began Celestine, as she dissected a lively *langouste*, "when a wicked devil held high carnival of evil in this old stronghold. He wore a turban, long pendant mustachios and carried a broad bladed scimitar and preyed on the white winged *fellucas* as they sailed past off shore, a veritable '*ecumeur de mer*,' a pirate, a beachcomber.

"On one of his raids he had captured a fair maiden, a little angel and beautiful. She was kept a prisoner and the monster tortured her to wed him, but her lover came to rescue her. And because they were both young and pure in their love the *Trois Maries* came to their aid and propelled the lover's boat, as their own had moved across the sea, so that the pirate crew could neither see nor hear the approach of the brave lover under their walls. The demoiselle was thus able to descend surreptitiously by a secret stair and escape triumphantly. Later the wicked pirate was taken by his own men, who had mutinied, out to yonder rock, there chained and left to die of hunger and thirst."

Thus concluded Celestine with a relish, while I shuddered and glanced at the barren red rock out to sea called still the "Tooth of the Pirate." "*Bien sur*," added Celestine, "as not a thing eatable grows on it, he naturally died." Such is the *simplist* formula for romance in this fair land!

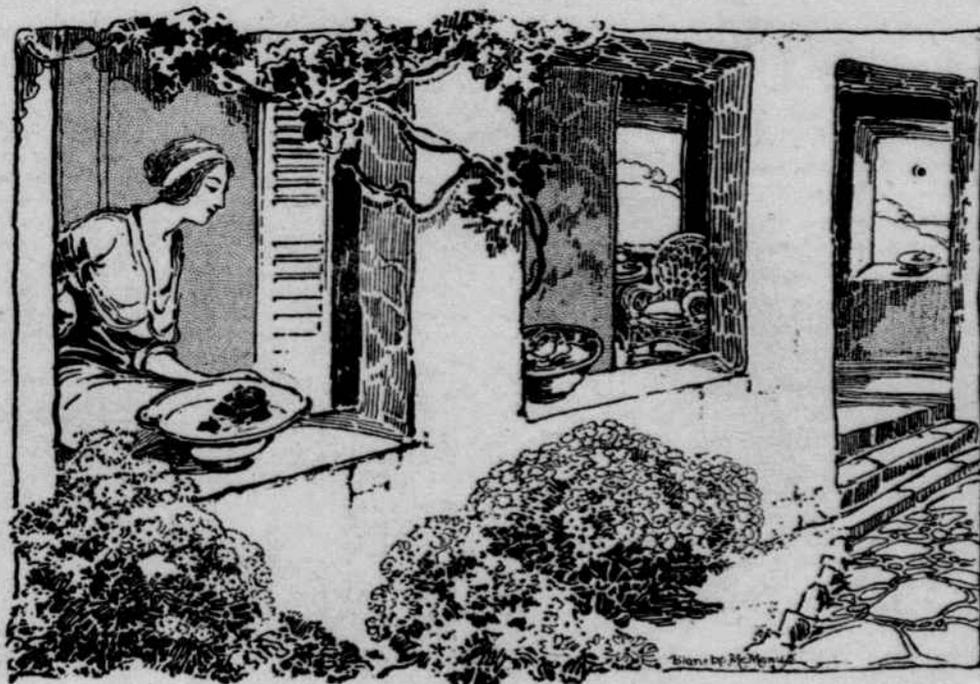
I reflected that it takes all sorts of people to make a home. It was a hot August night. I was alone. My husband had gone to Paris. I looked from my window out into the lovely transparent blue of a moonless summer night.

Just below, where the water softly lapped the old foundations of our villa, I saw a small boat. Something moved in the boat and a corresponding movement was made on the bottom step leading to our bathing beach. All, however, was too dim to be distinguished plainly.

The boat was the green fishing boat with big red, triangular ball of Pierre, who furnished our table with its daily stock of fish, Pierre the picturesque, whom I had often painted in his red Phrygian cap and big sabots drawing lazily his brown nets under these same windows of our house.

To-night it was not a matter of fish that interested Pierre. There passed from the man sinking in the shadow of the house a small but weighty, chinking bag, with a few other odd gold pieces glittering in the swarthy palm. The swarthy palm belonged to Maurius, our gardener, so well posted on the ways of smugglers and so well versed in the curves of the moon, both for planting flowers and for smuggling gold.

The light went out and I remembered how the Government had lately been put to its wits to find out how it was that gold was being drained from the country, knowing that there was plenty of French gold circulating, more or less sub-rosa to be sure, but circulating, across the Italian border. It had been impossible to find a trace of the culprits. Here was one! Then I returned to bed and dreamed that every one of the rose-colored and orange tiles that covered our villa's ancient roof became each the head of a man, left profiles, men of all races and of all ages and all nations.



The square porch openings were for our rose bowls.