

IMPRESSIONS DE VOYAGE – MIDI DE LA FRANCE

Alexandre Dumas

The journey started in Paris on 15 October 1834, on a visit that was to include the south of France, Corsica, Italy, Calabria and Sicily. As Dumas says in his opening chapter, this was to be an artistic pilgrimage with no definite itinerary.

LE PONT DU GARD.

It is impossible to get any idea of the effect produced by this chain of granite which joins two mountains, this stone rainbow which fills the entire skyline, these three storeys of arcades which have turned a magnificent gold colour through eighteen centuries of sun. I have seen a few of the wonders of this world: Westminster, so proud of its royal tombs; Reims Cathedral, with stones made transparent like lace; that city of palaces called Genoa; Pisa and its leaning tower; Venice and St. Mark's Square; Rome and the Coliseum; the port of Naples; Catania and its volcano; I have been down the Rhine, carried away like an arrow, and I passed by Strasbourg and its wonderful tower which looked to have been built by spirits. I have seen the sun rise on the Righi hills and set behind Mont Blanc. And yet, I have seen nothing (though I except the Temple of Segesta, also lost in a desert) which appeared so beautiful, so great, so Virgilian, as this magnificent granite epic which we call the Pont du Gard.

It was just then I remembered the Pont de Remoulins, which was built to save the traveller the trouble of going via the Pont du Gard. In fact, thanks to this industrious combination, where it was formerly 500 leagues to get to Camposanto¹, Trajan's Column and Pompeii, it is now two leagues less, and unknowingly passes close to a marvel that cannot be found anywhere else.

For the rest, these two bridges are each a fine emblem of the two societies which gave them birth, and they offer the perfect contrast between ancient and modern engineering. One, full of belief in itself, resting on a colossal base, believing in the future, built for eternity; the other sceptical, fickle, frivolous, an everyday achievement, built as a provisional monument for a passing generation; one is the Agrippa Bridge; the other the Seguin

In fact, it is said to have been the son-in-law of Augustus, the *curator perpetuus aquarum*, who came among the Gauls to renew some of the hydraulic constructions which the Romans had built. Nîmes, Arles' rival, lacked water, but there was water at Uzès, seven leagues away, with an abundant fountain, sound and flowing. Agrippa gave his soldiers the order to guide this source to whatever point he wished, and the aqueduct arose under the hands of an army, flattening hills, breaking rocks, following the lines of hills, uniting mountains, crossing ponds, passing beneath villages, and finally leading to Nîmes, where it brought this laborious water which had by turn passed through the clouds and beneath the earth. Certainly, modern civilization has made magnificent discoveries in industry and commerce, but if Agrippa had known about artesian wells, we would probably never have had the Pont du Gard.

¹ Dumas probably means Camposanto in Modena, but maybe referring to the Campo Santo, or, Camposanto Monumentale (cemetery) in Pisa.