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THE HILLS OF ARCETRI

THE
HILLS OF ARCETRI
BY
LEOLYN LOUISE EVERETT

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PROLOGUE

IF I had dared I would have liked to call this book "Glamour," but the quality is so elusive and so contradictory that however much I offered it of secret homage I could not shout its name aloud lest it escape me altogether. The desire at any rate expresses the view-point and some part of my attitude toward Italy herself : that she is so beautiful and wonderful one may not take her name in vain. Yet the penalty of being beautiful and wonderful is to have one's name taken—in all kinds of ways ; and having apologized I proceed, like any other lover, to chant it to a tune of my own. What I would like to explain about my particular tune is that it concerns itself not with my lady's eyes but with the way she looks out of them, not with my lady's hands but with their gestures, not with my lady's limbs but with

their motions. You will not learn from any song of mine the colour of her shining hair or the shape of her exquisite face, but if there floats by you in a little wandering breath some faint veiled hint of that allure of hers I shall be wholly content. Surely Italy, pæaned from sea to sea in every tongue, has had of all deities the least of this kind of homage, for the very fact that the charm was so potent rendered it awesome, and if my betters have dared strike at the soul of her, most of us, who for pure love, mark you, however limited, cannot refrain from babbling, have lapsed into rhapsodic catalogues. Ay, but the mere syllables of San Miniato, of Giotto's campanile, of Ravenna, of Santa Maria della Pieve, are so vision-producing, can we do aught save echo them? And we list them—"item, two lips indifferent red"—alas, but we lack the magician's touch that makes those pale lips smile!

To drop the metaphor (with regret, so completely does Italy demand the phraseology of the goddess) and descend to simple fact and simple truth, it seems to me that our ardour and our admiration for the features of her country, the stories of her history and

the products of her arts have tended in a certain sense to blur our real knowledge of her. I trust that the statement does not sound too bold : merely it resolves itself into the fact that, if her supreme contribution to the world is and has been æsthetic, one battle-scene of Paolo Uccello's is in its significance vastly superior to the dates and data of fifty sieges. It is in a glorious flash an epoch, the quintessence, the fine flavour of it, and if you could call each one of the figures in that struggling crowd by name and give his dates of birth and death it would not make the whole by the shadow of one heart-beat more real. It is not that the details in themselves lack interest, (indeed one could hardly say that in all the maddening and magnificent mass of detail in Italy one single item lacks interest,) it is that we are obsessed by them, blinded by them. We see not the tapestry but the stitches, delicate, precise and fine ; not the picture but the brush-strokes, smooth, deft and accurate ; we are weary and stumbling yet eager. The waves beat us to and fro in the sea of her splendour.

So I, considering her greatness and our

littleness, have sought for symbols whereby to express to us, as I am able, those inimitable ways of hers. You need not look for the turret though there are many such and in all the sad long lists of children untimely slain you will not find the name of the baby who walked by the pool. I were more fain to believe, were it not too great a patent of nobility, that the lady slumbering in the citadel were kin to "my last duchess painted on the wall" than to one of the Sforza brood and who would care for the genealogy of an Arab slave—yet listen and you can hear her song yourself!

How little, beloved Italy, from me who would have brought you so much—yet never your due! Of all the flowers I can but say that they have grown in your garden, those of yesterday and to-day, the humblest and the proudest and I have not sorted them or given them long Greek names but I have twined them into this small garland that their perfumes may mingle, for is not the soul of the rose, from Paestum to Persia with all between and beyond, in its breath?

Thus for the sake of that degree in which

they are yours I shall believe that the fragrance may linger, knowing that if the gods will, the passer-by may glimpse the sudden colour-splashed vista of the garden through one fallen blossom.

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GREY

B

A SOFT fine mist of rain
At the end of an April day
Grey from dawn to dusk,
From the first light
In the east,
That showed the villas pale
On the shadowy slopes
All blurred
With the feathery olive trees
And the valleys dark between,
To the rift
In the twilight clouds :
A single line of gold
Threading the cypresses.
The gardens are wild with bloom,
Roses and mignonette,
Spiræa in milky showers,
The trellised wistaria,
(Wingèd and ready to fly
Like the lanterns of Orient elves
Aswing in the drifting wind)
The tulip's goblet
Raised
In all colours of ancient glass
In a toast to the vagrant spring,

The gorgeous iris brave
In the splendour of her shield
As befits a Florentine
Of such lustrous lineage—
And perfume—
Mingled and massed and wrought
To a miracle,
White rose,
Yellow and red and pink,
The exquisite heliotrope,
The young verbena's green,
The first geranium
And last of the lemon flowers— — —

Ah, but my heart is sad
In spite of the loveliness
For I have seen on the roads
The old ghosts walk and nod
And ponder and shake their heads
(The magnificent men of state
Who watch the centuries
From their immortal tombs)
And their query was ever this :
The fate of the modern world,
This agonized thing
Evolved
From the pride of our desires

And the daring of our brains.
You did not see him there
Draw back
With his fur-edged robe
Just under your motor's wheel
But I know his sombre eyes
And that gaunt keen face of his.
Often he walked this way
In times less perilous
Altho' the invader stood
Upon the mountain's crest
And the sight of Italy
Was madness to his heart—
As it has ever been.
Often he walked this way
With a brow less furrowed
By thought
Tho' the rival factions poised,
With honey on their lips
And poison in their hearts,
Alert and ready to spring.

The marvellous grey old ghosts
With their glories and their deeds
Only breaking their rest
As they contemplate the world— — —

And spring is the breath of life
Over the struggling earth
And the gardens are in bloom.

OCHRE

THE intense heat of noon
Lies on the square,
White and blistering ;
The tall blank faces
Of the houses round
Give back reflected light
From their hot pallor ;
The fine white dust
Is thick on everything,
Even the bright green blinds
All drawn close
Are powdered white—
So that there are no accents
Anywhere
Except one small brave fountain
In the strip
Of narrow shade
The overhanging roofs
Steal from midday.
One little fountain
Dark
And infinitely cool
In its suggestion
And its remembrances
Of woodland springs

That trickle down
From the moist circle
Of the sea-child's shell,
To the smooth little pool
That over-runs
In turn to the scorched pavement
Only breaks
The close oppressive silence,
Fitful and pitiful and sweet
At once—
As if it were a small and pleasant dream
Loitering for unlikely preference—
Not in the pallor
Of some moon-swept night—
But here where summer lays a burning hand
On the choked city
In siesta time.

MAGENTA

AGAINST the hot white summer sky
The splendid surge of the hills
Lies in silhouette.
The old pale villa on the height
Fades amid its cypress trees.
On such a day as this with the drowsy heat
Stirred by a little languid breeze—
Just enough to bear
The sound of the bells of the city
Up between
The tended olive trees—
In its garden walked
A child as lovely as sunrise,
Golden-haired, of a race
Famed for their beauty.
He could not stray afar
So carefully guarded there
In his Paradise ;
Yet there
On the fountain's brink,
In the shade
Of the too secret cypress trees,
A scowling fellow lurked
Bitterly swift and adept
With the knife that flashed in the sun

And stained the inlaid stones
Redder than poppy leaves
With such innocent blood,
Alas !

Milord the millionaire
Has taken the place they say
And the mournful cypress trees
Will be cut down
And the stagnant pool drained free
Of the poisonous vapours it has exhaled to men
For the last five hundred years.

So be it !

I wish we might
Drain the old enmities
And the senseless hates
And the lawless jealousies
Along with it—

But no ;
There is glamour still
And tragedy
Because on those broken mosaics
A baby walked
Five hundred years ago
And was killed.
How we love our grief,

The eternal spectacle
Of our nothingness,
The colour of sorrow,
Its delicate shadings and tones !

Just such a day,
With the clamorous bells upborne
By the fitful wind
And the peaceful curve of the hills
Distinct as a silhouette
Against the hot white sky !

GOLD

c

ON the hill-slopes
They are garnering grain
Between the olive trees ;
Golden and grey
The symphony
Breaks into the song
Of the unseen peasants ;
Strong brazen voices
Chanting
A re-iterant refrain,
Old as the hills themselves
Its origin veiled and lost
In the haze of antiquity,
Brought out of the East—who knows?—
By some Crusading lord
Who trailed in his gorgeous train
An Arab woman wise
In the subtle lore of her race.
He used her as a slave
And when he was ill called loud
For that marvellous skill of hers
Always a hint afraid
Lest she poison her secret herbs
In revenge for a fancied slight
Yet still more afraid of the shade

Of the dreaded pestilence
With only her mystic gift
To hold it at bay—
And life
So sweet and red in those days !
The monotonous rise and fall
May have soothed his pain away
In her first Italian days
Before she stopped to cure
A child in agony
On the very steps of the Church—
Such insolence !
They knew
Only the Devil himself
Could have stopped a heathen there
On such a mission
And so
The festival of the saint—
Beata—Beata—Apollonia—
Was opened auspiciously
When they burnt her
In the square
And her lord looked on between
Fear and relief and knelt
And crossed himself
So much
That his sword-arm ached.

To-day
They have wedded the strange sad strain
To one of the Virgin's tales,
Such simple loving words
Of how she stooped and blessed
The reapers of the grain,
The treaders of the wine,
Out of her tender heart.

But this is a later thing.

As I hear the old wild note
With the dominant ending fling,
The tragic insistent beat,
I know it never gushed forth
From a story pure as that,
All fragrant with humble joy
And tranquil with humble grief.

Old as the cypress trees,
Thro' devious unknown ways
Hidden eight hundred years
Living outcast, alone,
Like its singer
Until the taint
Of its far mysterious lure
Vanished before the Sign

And Symbol of our Hope :
The Virgin Mother stooped
In her azure robe
From Heaven
For ever leaning out
To take in her tender hands
The sorrow of the world ;
And the legend wound itself
Like a vine
Around the notes
And the children sing it still.

This is the deeper life,
History's super-self,
The forever-unanswered things
Glamoured with magic wrought
From the deathless soul of man,
Caught by an instant's flash
In a song the peasants sing
While they garner the yellow wheat.

SAPPHIRE

I

NIGHT settles
In the sweet silence
Of the ancient garden.
The pallor in the sky
Slowly deepens
To sapphire darkness.
The garlanded vines
And the olives
Merge in the shadows
To one soft greyness
Against the transparent and lingering gold
Of the vanished sunset.
In the garden
A little bat hastens
With swiftly marked flight
From the ebony black
Of the splendid magnolia
To the roses that hang
Wan and faint in the gloaming
On the walls that enfold
All the slumberous scents
Of the lemons and box,
Of verbena and lilies,

Of jasmine and pansies,
Of the little old garden
So sweet and so simple,
So tender and smiling
In this, its great age,
As if all its secrets,
Its memories of princes,
Of merchants and nobles,
Of servants and priests,
All its later unlearning
Of glamour and sorrow,
Of splendour and rapture,
Were changed by the spell
Of the first hinted starlight—
So wan and so pale,
Ah paler than roses
In the flush of the heaven—
By the exquisite charm
Of the delicate starlight
Were mingled and blent
And distilled to perfume.

II

The old black courtyard
Always will be sinister.
The little hot and vivid spot of noon
Is like a stain
And the long silver line
The full moon trails
In the half-empty well
Becomes a dagger-thrust,
With, overhead,
The ancient twisted iron
In the dark
A scaffold
For the secret deaths of kings.
Men have forgotten
All the history
That clung about the dying cypresses
Of that small villa
On its lonely hill
And if its mignon galleries were raised
To be the whispered and the shy delight
Of some soft liaison
A weary duke
Stole from the cares of state,
No footfall now
Of his young mistress moves along the halls.

Not one of all the many little rooms
A-mouldering behind the jealous shutters
Remembers that it heard a lover's vow
And from the windows
No fair face looks out
Scanning the climbing road
With eagerness.
If, in the faded fresco
On the wall
Of that bleak silent courtyard,
Cropped and curled
That is his profile
Placed that she might see
And loiter in her amorous domain,
Only the cruel lips
And hawk-like eyes
Bespeak the warrior
Whose doughty deeds
Time has devoured
With all the rest beside.
Would he might speak
And break the subtle vines
Of legend that are growing round the place—
No, better to be silent!
To deny
That blood and sorrow marked it for their
own

With marks so strong and so indelible
The centuries have not erased them yet
Were futile
And no story he could tell
Were half as rich
In prescience and in fear
As the cold weight
Of this oblivion.

There is a thickness in the air
That makes
The darkness deeper
Than it was below
And in the valley
All the lights have grown
Remote and still
Like distant watching eyes ;
Even the fragrance
Of one ragged rose
Clutching at life
Amid the lank rank grass
Is, in the stillness,
Strange and ominous
As if it blossomed from a hidden grave.

The midsummer moon
Is full
Above the cloister.
A little wind
Creeps in and out
Around the belfry
As if it would ring
The sleeping bells.
Their voices would be different
Than in the day—
Remote
With the remoteness
Of this calm exquisite night—
Silvery and faint
Ghostly
Bidding ghostly monks
Arise and pray
As they were wont to do
In the midnight.
The line of the descending road
To the valley
Is wanly white
In the pale moon-darkness
And the arch of the bridge
Is sharply drawn

Like ebony
Across the glimmering curve
Of the quiet river
That loiters
Thro' the velvety meadows.
The words
Of passionate prayer
Are lost
In the silence
But the weight
Of prayer
Is on the heart
Heavy and sweet at once
Both peace and pain.
And black
The wooden crosses stand
In the tangled garden bloom,
Poor mute memorials
Of faith,
All overgrown
With the merciful lavish surge
Of the flowers
That are June :
The remorseless dual truth
That life and death are one
Made starkly manifest
In this sanctuary

Raised
Lest the senses
Should betray
The eternal verities.

SEPIA

D

THIS is a day of dreams.
The mists have folded
Round the city
Like soft white veils.
The old brown gates
And the bell towers
Are lost ;
Only the mountains above
Remain
Intensely blue
Against a colourless sky.

There is a lean grey turret
That looks out from the hill-side
As it has looked for centuries.
To-day it has isolated itself
And returned to the Middle Ages
And remembers only
The stormy noble
Who built it
And the long-dead ladies
Who sat beside its windows
And watched the valley
Below,
The silver curve of the river

And the turbulent city,
Scornfully
With breaking hearts
As befitted princesses.
Its empty mouldy corridors
With the dark stains
Of the dampness
On their walls
Echo to the flying feet
Of little pages
Crying out,
“Beware! Beware!
Old Baldassare
Coming back
Half dead with haste
Says that the Guelfs
Are triumphant in the city!
Next moment the dogs
Will be at the door
And the master away
With Ezzelino of Verona!”
It remembers
No less than sieges
In which it was as warlike,
As capable of defence,
As Buondelmonte’s new palazzo
There, the first square

Beyond the Arno.
It remembers
Old stories
And its old splendours
And is glad
That its windows are closed
And blank
And scornful
So that it cannot see
The new white villa
Perched impudently
On the opposite hill,
A villa all doors
And windows
And unprotected terraces,
No good for anything.

After a while
The mists will rise
And the valley
Will teem with life again
And the new clangours
Of the new civilization
Will rise
In place
Of the old voices
And the tower

Will be a place
Only for an artist
Or a madman,
With the big poderi
And the little poderi
Surging
Fertile and lavish
Up to its ruined portals.

Is it sad
Or is it joyous
That it would take a fortune
To repair those broken walls
Of yours
And retrieve you
From the Middle Ages
Where the white heat mists
Leave you
Dreaming?

CHRYSOPRASE

IN the level evening light
The folds of the hills
Are like velvet
Infinitely soft
And far, very far away,
Where the mountains
Have just ceased
To be white
In this sudden flush of the spring
There is one marvellous cloud
Heaped gold
With purple shadows,
A god-like parapet
From which to lean
And view the puppets.
To-day was festa
And all the warm yellow hours
Of noon
And all the warm rose hours
Of twilight
There have been singing voices
On the high walled street.
Oh rising wind
That comes at nightfall

Out of the hazy glimmer
Of the west
Merciful wind
Summer night wind
With the first warmth,
This young and fervid summer
Met
And kissed
On the hill-top
Beneath the pale waxing moon,
Now in the little pause
We could think
You had blown
All the singers away
And left us isolate
On the edge of the greater dark—
The dark
With no moon
Only the waning bells
The melodious swinging bells
The constant vesper bells
Following out and out
Fainter and more faint— — —
Who knows that we shall not say
In the poignant pang of it,
“How beautiful was the world!”

This marvellous evening blent
So close to the needs
Of the heart,
This beneficent hush
Of night,
Has hidden the lesser things,
Blurred with its mystic veil
All the keen exquisite line
And colour
Of the day.
Only the lovely earth
Lies half
In the arms of sleep
And half awake for the bliss
Of its languorous repose.
Surely we might look back
From that golden parapet
That pales against the sky
Forgetting for evermore
The ardours of the day
And their pangs
Of joy and pain,
Remembering
To hold
For a thousand years
Of time
And the rest of eternity

That vision
Undefined—
The curve and flow of the hills
And the young star in the west
Still vaguely amorous
Of the sunset—
Thus made real
In its deathless loveliness
The perfect fallacy
Of miraculous simple peace
In a world—
Oh gracious God,
Pity us as we look,
As even now we look!—
In a world that lives by war!

RUSSET

THERE is an old old contadino house,
A "casa colonica,"
That has grown
Out of the hill-side
With the olive trees.
Now that the grain is gathered
The overtones
Are all golden-brown.
The reaped fields
And faded walls
And old tiled roofs
At curious angles,
The wall that climbs the slope behind
With its square towers,
The sharp-sprung spire
From the city
Beyond,
All merge
In the yellow light
Of the sunset
To such a symphony
Of warm ruddy colour,
Only the olive trees
Remaining
Persistently

Cool and grey
In the sheen.

It has an outside staircase
That runs up obliquely
To a little window
With a roof of its own
And always I think
Of "The Jewels of the Madonna"
And wonder for what loves and hates
So simple and so poignant
A scene is set.

One night
In the dark
Of the moon
A girl with a candle
Went up that flight of steps.
Her figure against the wall
Stood out
In moving silhouette
And she was "Maliella"
For ever;
With "Gennaro"
Below in the garden,
(That is only a little bare space
Won from the terraced olive trees

But with an archway
Such as "Rafaele" looked thro')
With "Gennaro"
Sick with love
And the splendour of mystic sin
Wrought out of his pain
From the blasphemous words
On his rival's lips.

I suppose
She is a good simple girl
Who works in the fields all day
And sleeps without dreams at night.
There are many such
Who pass
Thro' the street on holidays
Singing
Because their hearts
Are blithe and pure—

But for me
She is "Maliella" still
And shall be evermore—
Wild heart and desperate
Caught by the garish lure
Of one day's coarse revelry
In the web of eternal doom—

Because I saw her pass
With the flickering candle-light
Across her bosom's curve,
A circle on the wall
In which she moved,
Alone
Up to her little room.

MAUVE

ON this hazy humid autumn day
The great clouds
Are piled high
Billowy white
With scowling black above
Lowering—lowering
Over the misty hills
Where fog, like spray,
Drifting thro' the obscure valleys
Slowly winds
Up toward the summits
In phantom draperies.
A solitary spot of sun
Gleams wanly
On little Settignano
Straggling irregularly
Up the slope,
Brave little Settignano
With her memories.
Oh my Tuscany,
My changing subtle country
Of song and silences,
Of tragedy and jest—
Unvarying merely
In the degree of beauty

For ever ultimate,
To-day your finger
Is on your lip
And you have drawn about you
The splendid concealing mantle
Of history
So that we stand
Only at the threshold
Of your domain
And wonder
That we ever dared—
Greatly vaunting
In our brief day!—
To call you our own.

PURPLE

NOW the grapes hang
Heavy and purple
On the garlanded vines
And the wind is cool
From the circling hills.
The haze of the heat
That hung so close
Day after day
On the shadowy slopes
And along the line
Of the river,
Jade
And silver,
Has fled
And the farthest height—
Look!—gives birth
To a citadel town
Supremely brave
Against the sky.
My ear hears echo
Of a tale
Of a noble lady,
Lovely as death
Pallid and wan
As a past desire,

Who dwelt immured
Where her jealous lord
Could feed his hate
On her solitude.
She met her lover—
God knows how!—
Some autumn night
When the moon was low
And the night had absorbed
To its secret soul
The sombre bulk
Of her palace-tomb—
A common ebony
Shot thro'
Like the streak
Of the moon
On the stagnant pool
With that passionate desperate love of hers
A noble lady
Lovely as death
Pallid and wan
As a past desire— — —
Nobody knows
When her lord returned
Or when he strangled
Her perfect throat—
For men were masters of that craft

In the ancient days
When life and death
Went hand in hand
And were amorous!
Ah but he ordered
A splendid tomb
Where she lies so quiet,
As if asleep,
Placid at last
And adorned with flowers
Blossoming ever in the stone
And guarded by singing cherubim
Bringing their homage
To her pain,
Her silence
And her solitude
Briefly enforced
For evermore.

If you follow and follow
A winding road
Dusty white between olive trees,
Where the regal grapes
Hang over the wall
And the peasants sing
For the joy of the wine,
You will come at last

To her dwelling place
Isolate
On the top of the hill,
Supremely brave
Against the sky,
A citadel for an outcast queen
Slumbering thro' eternity.

ROSE

O H my belovèd !
I have seen you rise
From the mists of the valley
As Aphrodite
From the sea,
Infinitely beautiful,
Every tower
A song
In the sunshine
And all your clustered domes
And turrets
And high airy loggias
Redolent of praise !
I have seen the hills
Rejoice in you
And the olive groves
Stir to enfold you
And all the garden-country
Wherewith you lie
Encircled
Laugh in the pure delight of you !
It seems as if the very clouds
Might stoop from heaven
To weave their filmy draperies
About your shining cupolas
Like garlands

In homage.
I too have made
Of my heart an altar
And stood beside it
Chanting
The glory of you
And on it I have burned
The myrrh and sandal of my days
In contemplation
Of your ageless splendour

Forgetting the sins
Upon your lovely head,
Your unruly desires
And stormy passions,
Your selfishness
And your sorrow,
Because it were banal
To forgive
One who, like Helen of Troy,
Has stirred the heart of the world
Thro' the leaden centuries
By the vision
Of her immortal loveliness.

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