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SCENES AND SHRINES
IN TUSCANY

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SCENES AND SHRINES IN TUSCANY

BY

DOROTHY NEVILE LEES



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TO
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

AND TO

THE REV. A. R. HARRISON

VICAR OF TETTENHALL

MY TEACHER AND BEST FRIEND

I DEDICATE MY BOOK

D. N. L.

FLORENCE, 1906

NOTE

To all those who, by their writings or their sympathies, have helped me in my work, I wish to express my thanks, and am indebted for much information to the *Italian Life in Town and Country*, by Mr. Luigi Villari; to the *Uffizio della Settimana Santa*, by Monsignor Martini; for some details of the life of David Lazzaretti, the prophet of Monte Amiata, to Professor Barzalotti's interesting book on the subject; and to many ancient Italian writers who have long since passed beyond the reach of my thanks.

If any other of the books, prose and poetry, which have interested and informed me during my study of Tuscan life, have influenced or aided me, leaving impressions which I cannot trace to their source, I here offer my thanks to their authors, be they who they may; but my true teacher from first to last has been Italy herself, my best book the open page of the Tuscan country, traced over with the daily doings of the Tuscan folk; and for a book and teacher so beautiful, a leisure in which to study, so blessed, there is but one fitting word, "Laus Deo!"

D. N. L.

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Scenes and Shrines in Tuscany

PRELUDE

It was on a day which now seems very far in the distance that I, a pilgrim, guided by fortunate chance, following in the wake of Barbarians, Kings and Emperors, of Papal trains, Imperial troops, French armies, and the hordes of modern tourists led by Messrs. Cook & Gaze, passed the great mountain gates which bar the way to Italy, the enchanted land of my childish imaginings, the Mecca of my dreams.

Day after day had flashed by in a bewildering succession of new impressions. Brussels, Cologne, Strasburg, Lucerne, had all added to my store of memories; Lake and Mountain and River had, by their swiftly-changing, ever-varied loveliness, almost wearied me with delight.

At last the Alpine peaks and the great Lombard plain were left behind us. The mellow afternoon light brightened to a sunset of orange and crimson, a golden radiance which died very slowly to rose and purple as the train swung through the Pistoiese hills. Shadows gathered in the valleys, in the winding depths of which a stream of water shone here and there like a silver thread. The crests of the mountains, the little white churches,

and old convents and "castelli" which crowned them, were luminous and golden in the lucid evening air.

At a wayside station some black-eyed children sold small, roughly-twisted baskets, decorated with Spanish chestnut leaves and filled with grapes and apples. Italians have the knack of serving the simplest food with grace, of adding charm to the smallest acts of life, and the daintiness of the baskets was a fitting accompaniment to the beauty of the fruit.

I ate my grapes, watching the sunset, the full moon rolling up beyond Pistoia, and the lights which began to shine out from convent and village. And as I listened to the unintelligible chatter around me, to the Ave Maria ringing from old belfries nestling in the valleys or perched on the mountain spurs, I thought of the noise in Piccadilly,—(had I really been there a few days or a hundred years ago?)—and, looking at the fat priest muttering over his breviary in the opposite corner of the carriage, and the guard who smelt of garlic, I felt that this was really Italy, and that, in spite of the garlic, which is anathema to me, it was indeed good to be here.

The train jolted on through swiftly alternating moonlight and tunnels. The solemn mountains, the lonely country, were left behind. The rail ran between rows of suburban houses, green-shuttered and unromantic; ran on and on, then stopped. Certainly it looked little like what my imagination had pictured, and yet the dull, badly-lit station, tumultuous with shouting porters and aggrieved tourists bewailing lost luggage, was indeed Florence,—Florence the Beautiful, the birthplace of Dante, the City of Flowers, the goal of a thousand precious hopes.

Ah yes, it is very long now since I entered upon the

“Vita Nuova.” In actual time it may not be so, but the calendar is a poor means of measuring the great experiences of life, and there are times when for emotions and experiences a day may be as a thousand years.

I loved Florence from the first morning, as, I think, all must do who come to her; and could not weary of wandering up and down, dreaming of Dante and Beatrice, and those ancient cavaliers and ladies who had “intelletto d’amore”: of gazing up at her belfries and cupolas and palaces, lingering in her old quiet churches, watching the people who thronged her busy streets.

Surely no city in the world has the charm which she has. In her very name there is magic, and no other can be quite so fair and lovable as she. How wonderful she must have been in the old days, before they loosed the girdle of her walls, and raised hideous buildings in her ancient centre: before the coming of the Capital modernised her, and the tourists came to cheapen her holy places and the treasures of her art! Yet even now, amid all her modern industries and interests, Florence has something lofty about her; and as in the old days, when, though she suffered much from foes without and faction within, she spent her money for mighty ends and aspired nobly, she still possesses in her age an inalienable dignity, not forgetting—how could she?—the splendours of her youth.

Everywhere Florence offers beauty of the past or of the present. Of the past, in her old buildings, her sanctuaries, the galleries which have made her a shrine of art to which the whole world turns. Of the present, in the paradise of quiet round hills and olive gardens which surround her, the river which she spans with her four ancient bridges, the flowers which ever remind one of her flowery name.

Never shall I forget her as I saw her in one June dawning after a night of storm.

Towards four o'clock the thunder died away in the distance, and as I looked out from my window, the grey light was stealing along the valley, and torn masses of white cloud lay among the hills. The river was in flood, and the swirling torrents of brown water rushed down under the bridges, roaring like some tameless and infuriated beast. The mountains were purple, almost black, and the jagged clouds hung low above them, but in the midst, serene and unshaken, rose the great tower of the Palazzo Vecchio, dominating the still city, and, in the silence and cool which followed the sultry, troubled night, the birds began to sing.

And is it not, in a sense, ever thus that we think of Florence? fronting, after the turbulence and stress of her splendid past, the dawn of the future, with steadfast brows, untroubled by the lightnings which come and go, or the thunder which rumbles around her, while she herself, whatever men may do far down in her streets, is dreaming, profoundly silent, in the blue air which is above men's reach. All night she communes with the stars, and in the morning the sun greets her from beyond Vallombrosa, and at evening salutes her as he stoops behind the western hills; and at that salutation she burns like a golden city, transfigured by his magic, and pales but slowly as the night comes down.

Ah yes, she is beautiful exceedingly, the Queen among cities, the king's daughter, adorned as a bride; glorious without and within.

So many have written about Florence that to add to this making of books seems half presumption; yet can love ever presume? and if I write of her it is because I

love her, and that Italy of which she is a daughter, with a passion which has its roots far back in childhood, which came to me by just inheritance and is enshrined in my heart as a sacred and very precious thing. And if many have written of Florence, does not each look with different eyes, perceiving, indeed, that, and that only, which he has learned to see? Do we not each receive different impressions, coming, as we do, from such varied preparation; finding, in the scenes before us, the realisation of such different dreams?

Of the travellers who come to Italy there are many who have wearied all their days for her: to whom the journey is the granting of a supreme desire, the realisation of a lifetime's hopes.

If to these, when the golden days are over, my little book may bring back some faint vision of a blessed reality, setting before them familiar scenes, and scenes perhaps unfamiliar, since, to the chance wayfarer, the country life and the intimate details are, for lack of leisure, a little hard of attainment;—if this book may be to them something into which they may read their dreams, in which they may revive their visions, then, indeed, it will not have been written in vain.

One whose touch upon my life has ever been a benediction once wrote, "I was reminded of a fancy, which may not be wholly a fancy after all, which occurs somewhere in *John Inglesant*; that the original sweetness in the famous violins is not due so much to the skill of the maker or the virtue of the material as to the music which has vibrated through them; the inspiration and passion of the musicians, which have rearranged their very molecules (as a magnet arranges steel filings), and I think it sometimes happens that we fill a favourite book

in that way with associations and thrills of feeling which make it an enchanted thing. In any case that is the happiest way to read a book: never afterwards does it wholly lose the value we gave it, and, *so* reading, one thinks of Uhland's poem of 'The Ferry':—

'Take, O boatman, thrice thy fee,—
Take—I give it willingly;
For, invisible to thee,
Spirits twain have crossed with me.'

Perhaps I dare hardly hope that this book of mine should come so close to anyone; and yet, who knows? Since the violin which voices all our passions and most precious memories is, of itself, but wood and catgut, so the printed lines of a page may be the string on which we thread our memories, the pasteboard covers but the screen we hold up to shut the world out while we dream.

Another class of tourists there is whom I watch, I own, in amazement, wondering why they come to Italy, since the tastes they manifest would find more gratification at Brighton, if not on Hampstead Heath when Bank Holiday comes round. They hasten through galleries and churches, ruled by their watches, dictated to by the guide-books in their hands. Their methods are so sketchy (from choice and not necessity), that few cities have sufficient attractions to detain them many hours, and one of them has been known to ask if three days was too much to give to Rome! Such come to Florence,—sometimes even spend long times here,—but never, I venture to say, do they see her as she is.

It was lately my fortune—or misfortune?—to follow such a couple round the Uffizi. They were obviously bride and bridegroom, their appearance proved them of the rich and leisured class. They paused before a

martyrdom of St. Laurence, and the husband sought information of his wife, who was quick to supply it.

“You want to know what this is? Why, that poor chap, what’s-his-name?—one of those old saints, who was martyred,—put on a gridiron like a mutton chop!”

So they disposed of St. Laurence, and, wandering on, stopped again before Piero di Cosimo’s strange, whimsical dream of “Perseus,” where it was the bride who trusted for enlightenment to the classical learning supposed to be got in public schools.

It was, however, but a broken reed to which she trusted, for all the response was, “Oh, I forget that old yarn, it’s nothing much anyway. Come along, aren’t we nearly at the end?” And as they passed on, I heard his question, “Do you really *like* these old daubs?” and the candid answer, “Well, honestly, now I am getting used to them I don’t mind them as much as I did at first!”

Yes, Florence herself, as well as her galleries, needs opened eyes, an illuminated vision; and without these none shall see her, for, when she chooses, she can draw her modern life across her face as a veil, and all that the careless see of her may be her shops and her tea-rooms, her tram-systems and electric lights and huge hotels.

Yet, although in Florence and all the great cities, life is already less gay and beautiful and leisured, over-run as they are by tourists, their picturesque places too often spoiled by the action of enlightened municipalities, by modern squares and statues and the raising of monster hotels, there is yet a wealth of loveliness in them; and at certain times in them, as in the country, and in tiny, forgotten mountain-towns, one may still look Italy in the face and feel the spell, sweet and potent, of this ancient land.

Among the people themselves there survives a world of song and legend and quaint custom and picturesque life when one can get at it ; and, living among them, listening daily to their musical speech, watching their faces, noting their courteous ways, I have learnt to love them, and would fain have some record of this fellowship, these good days, to carry with me into the far-off years of age.

Did not Browning write—

“Open my heart and you will see
Graved inside of it Italy,
Such lovers old are I and she,
So it always was, shall ever be”?

And though I have no desire to pose as a second Queen Mary, I, too, have Italy engraved upon my heart, and it is because I love her that I have tried to write this book.

I have not succeeded, ah no ! for there are things too beautiful for the telling : what is loveliest is elusive, and will not be caught even by long patience and much search ; and it is no learning which I have tried to set down, but only that simple daily life, those small happenings, which in Italy are ever picturesque.

Well, if my book should make itself friends, so much the better, but if good fortune do not follow my efforts, at least that best fortune is mine which has lain in the writing of it, the living of it, the garnering of happy memories in it,—and this joy no man taketh from me.

PART I

I

FIRST EXPERIENCES

It was half-past six on a November evening when I arrived at the Costantini door. The cab had dashed through one street after another, some brightly lighted, some dark and narrow, until, before an old "palazzo," the driver pulled up short.

I got down and rang the bell, expecting to see immediately a welcoming face before me, but instead there was a click, the door opened, apparently of its own accord and without human agency, revealing Egyptian darkness into which it needed no small valour to advance.

I looked questioningly at the driver, but he seemed to see nothing unnatural; indeed, he was whistling gaily as he unloaded my boxes; so, timid and hesitating, feigning a courage which I did not feel, I stepped inside.

It was pitch dark, and I stumbled along, my hand on the wall, feeling that this was a poor reception, and that we managed things better in England; until my foot struck against a step, and I paused, uncertain what to do. Before and behind me was the same impenetrable gloom: should I do better to advance or to retreat?

At that moment a yellow flicker in the distance

announced the approach of a taper, and when, in answer to the invariable question "Chi e?" (Who is it?), I, not knowing the pass-word "Amici" (friends), responded "La Signorina Inglese," the little servant, screaming the news to an unseen enquirer above, lighted me by a candle-end up many stairs, unilluminated through all their twisting length (from which doors opened in every direction into the various "quartieri" into which the rambling old house was divided), until we finally reached the topmost storey, the door was shut, and the Costantini family received me into their midst.

When a friend had suggested that I should enter a Florentine family as a boarder, so that I might "pick up the language," I assented gladly, delighted by this opportunity, in a city so full of English and Americans, of getting an insight into real Italian life.

I certainly had it!

Anything more unlike an English family of similar social position it would be hard to imagine. Italians of the upper classes have, through intercourse with the foreign colony, and through travelling, become to a certain extent cosmopolitan, worn off the outer points of difference between other nations and themselves; but the Costantini were untouched by any foreign influence: they were typical, and therefore interesting, and I was burning with eagerness to see what this "new life" should be.

They all gathered around to look at me; the three daughters chattering like magpies, Signor Costantini pouring out, with many courtly bows, what I knew to be words of welcome, but which my tired brain refused to grasp. The little Italian I knew evaded me in these trying moments, and, though anxious to be agreeable, I was fairly confounded for lack of words.

The family, perceiving that I was tired, made signs of showing me my bedroom, to which I responded with an enthusiastic "Si, si, si!" and the eldest daughter, whom I afterwards came to know as "Bianca," conducted me across a stone passage, up two steps and into my room.

I looked around in dismay. A definite idea of what awaited me I had never tried to form, but perhaps at the back of my mind lingered some dim vision of a cosy little place, bright with firelight, curtained and carpeted against the November cold.

This illusion, if it existed, was dispelled immediately. The room was very large and very cold; the one candle seemed only to accentuate the gloom. The frescoed ceiling was lofty, the floor of green and black "terrazzo"—painted and varnished brick—was icy cold. Almost all Italian houses, except in those of very rich people where "parquetry" is popular, have floors of this terrazzo, which is delightfully cool and clean in summer but bitterly cold in winter unless well carpeted; and this my room was not.

One mat of two feet square stood beside the bed, and, ah! how well I came to know that mat on frosty mornings, when, standing upon it, I used, with a skill born of necessity, to slide it beneath my feet from bath to cupboard and from dressing-table to trunk.

Above the bed hung a crucifix, and a dark painting of the "Mater Dolorosa" upon the opposite wall. On a stand by the bed stood a decanter and goblet of turquoise blue glass, in case I should be thirsty in the night.

The one familiar sight in the room was my luggage, containing all my household gods. I precipitated myself upon it. Was it all there? No, it was not! The hat-box was missing and must be traced at once!—but how?

Of Bianca, who stood watching me, I requested in French

the immediate arrival of the box. She shook her head : if she knew no English she knew almost as little French.

I was in a parlous state. My phrase-book was in the hat-box, and, like poor Norfolk, "my tongue's use was to me no more than an unstringèd viol."

Perhaps, dreadful thought, the cabman had gone off with my property ; was retreating farther and farther, while I had no words in which to state my wrongs ! Never had the shining black form seemed so desirable, its contents so precious, as in this moment of doubt.

Certainly it was a dilemma, but somehow or other I meant to penetrate Bianca's brain ; so, advancing to the large box, I measured it in dumb show with my hands this way and that, indicating its length and breadth to her, and patting it with an impressive " Si, si ! "

Bianca nodded, a little bewildered. I wished her to understand that the trunk was there ? Certainly ! she *had* understood : it was too large to be overlooked.

But the pantomime was not played out yet. With dramatic gesture I indicated the dimensions of a box much smaller, and, shaking my head sorrowfully, pointed to the empty space beside the trunk with an emphatic " No, no, no ! "

At last I had succeeded. Bianca's whole face brightened with intelligence : she poured out a flood of rapid words, clasped her hands fervently, and vanished ; to reappear in a moment hugging the symmetrical form of the truant hat-box in her arms.

When she had left me I examined the great cold room in detail.

The bed was nice, for Italians are exquisitely particular about their bed-linen, and, indeed, about all their " Biancheria." There was a commodious cupboard, well

supplied with "gruccie"—the wooden shoulder-pieces which tailors use for hanging coats on, and of which an Italian wardrobe offers dozens, so that every blouse and jacket may hang upon its own. The hot water, for which I had asked with the help of the dictionary, was on the floor in a straw-covered "fiasco," and I afterwards learned that these flasks are invaluable for chemical experiments, to such an extent can they resist the heat.

Three doors opened out of my room in different directions, and, when ready, I tried the first, candle in hand; but, seeing a vast, ghostly-looking "salotto," hastily retired. The opposite door revealed a bedroom as large and chilly as my own; the third proved to be that by which I had come in.

As I opened it, all was dark and silent as the grave. Opposite was the room in which the family had received me; the door was open, but it was deserted, and, like the passage, shrouded in gloom.

No glimmer of light appeared in any direction, and my spirits went down to zero, for I was tired with long travelling, alone, and apparently condemned to dwell in darkness and icy cold. If all the future were to be like this, how was I to face it? I called, tentatively, "Signorina!" There was no answer, and my voice died away in what seemed to be immeasurable space.

Then, for the first time, I was afraid. I longed to escape. I was frightened by the thought of the black, twisting stairs which separated me from the outer world; for I was ignorant of Italian houses, and so did not know that the common staircase shared by many families was the most natural thing in the world. I was frightened by the darkness and silence, the great empty rooms, the passage which wandered off into Heaven knew what black

and awful places. All the stories I had ever read of the haunted palaces of old Italian cities, of girls decoyed and assassinated under plausible pretexts, recurred to me. I dared not call again, for the sound of my own voice seemed to accentuate the loneliness; I dared not explore the passage, for who knew where it led? Cold, hungry, exhausted, homesick and frightened, I sat down at last on the stone steps of my bedroom and gave myself up to grief.

It may have been ten minutes, it may have been half an hour, when a light appeared in the distance, and with rapture I beheld Bianca advancing down the passage, lamp in hand. In an instant I sprang to my feet, and descended the steps with a smile of welcome. Never, by my fault, should an Italian have grounds for calling the English a faint-hearted race.

Bianca, happily unconscious of the agony I had passed through, intimated by signs that my supper was ready, and led me to a large room, where I was quickly established at the table with a plate of macaroni before me and a dim oil-lamp above my head.

The regular family meal being over, I ate in solitary state, but not without an audience, as the whole family reappeared and gathered round me, watching with profound attention every movement, and pouring out a flood of conversation to which I tried to respond intelligently by the alternate—though, I fear, often misplaced—use of “No” and “Si.”

What, I wonder, did I not deny or assent to on that first evening? I may have affirmed that in England the Ministers of the out-going Cabinet expiated their errors on the scaffold, and denied that I ever heard of Dante, whose name was mentioned several times by Signor

Costantini in a speech intended, I believe, to welcome me to the city of the poet.

My macaroni was followed by a steak cooked in oil; cheese, and apples, accompanied by red country wine; the whole concluded by a glass of sticky liqueur set upon a plate, but filled so generously that Signor Costantini, seeing my dilemma, took the plate with a courtly bow, and, on it, raised the brimming glass to my lips. But I was too tired to be very hungry, the attention concentrated upon my doings, and the bewildering, uncomprehensible chatter made me nervous, and I was only too glad to go to bed.

In my absence I found that a curious hillock had arisen in the midst of the counterpane, and, on turning back the clothes, discovered a framework of laths, like a large dish-cover, in the centre of which hung a clay pot full of hot ashes,—an ingenious substitute for an English warming-pan; and when I had set this “trabicolo” on the floor, and taken its place between the warm sheets, the heat was so delightful after the cold I had lately suffered, that I forgot my troubles and had not long to wait for the sleep which is the panacea for every ill.

Early next morning I was awakened by the cheerful jingling of the bells of the country carts going by to market. The very sound told me I was in Italy, and, running to the window, I watched them passing far below in the narrow street.

Horses and mules, of various sizes, were harnessed three abreast, wearing scarlet blankets, or costumes made of old carpet, to protect them from the chilly morning air. The horns rising on their backs were studded with brass nails, and they were profusely decorated with scraps of coloured cloth and looking-glass to ward off the evil eye.

I dressed hastily, for the cold was not conducive to dawdling, and went to breakfast alone in the sitting-room, the family habit being to eat in an irregular way in the mornings, taking their coffee and bread in their own rooms or any place convenient, and meeting for a formal meal at twelve o'clock.

Only two regular meals a day are served in most Italian households, one at midday or a little later, and one at seven at night; and though tea among the upper classes has become almost as popular as with the English, it is a luxury of which people like the Costantini do not dream.

The terrors which had possessed me on the previous night had vanished with the darkness, and my spirits rose as I looked out at the blue frosty sky, the sunny hills and river, and heard the cheerful sound of bells from the churches, and the voice of a greengrocer proclaiming the freshness of his carrots in the streets below.

It was still chilly, but I had the consoling companionship of a "scaldino," which mitigated, if it could not dispel, the cold.

The scaldino, upon the perpetual presence of which the family were punctilious, was an earthenware pot with an arched handle, costing about three halfpence, filled with charcoal embers; and was always placed under my feet at table that I might not feel the chill of the uncarpeted stone floor. Wherever I went in the house I bore it with me, and it was the kindly habit of the girls to seize it from me and stir the smouldering ashes with a hairpin from their own heads to stimulate the warmth.

The scaldini are in Italy a regular domestic institution; everywhere they are to be seen in the hands of the people

in the streets. The beggars at the church doors, the market sellers, the servants hurrying on errands, all carry them, and in fireless households they afford the only warmth.

A scaldino is a quaint article, and pleases tourists, but it is a poor substitute for a fire when the Tramontana sweeps over the mountains; and as, although each room boasted a small fireplace, no spark ever appeared in any one, I suffered fearfully from the cold that winter, and used gladly to escape on to the sunny Lung' Arno to shake off, by brisk walking, the numbness which had settled on me in the house.

Many Italians cherish a belief that fires are unhealthy, but I fail to see how it can be healthy to sit in an ice-house and feel, like poor old Falstaff, the cold creep up one's legs! Indeed it is amazing that Italians, loving the sun as they do, can endure the rigours of the winter cold in their unheated houses. For Florence in December and January is as cold as England; dark clouds rest on the snow-covered mountains, frost is frequent, varied by rain and icy winds; and though some who have never been there may cherish delusions as to the mildness of the Florentine winter, those familiar with it know the bitter cold, the cutting winds, and the gloom of the long evenings if passed in dreary, fireless rooms.

My breakfast was brought to me by the second daughter, Isolina, in a costume so slatternly that I fairly blushed to behold her in such a state. She wore, unashamed, a shabby petticoat, a flannel jacket, soiled and faded, and a pair of slippers down at heel. Her hair was unbrushed, her face, I fear, unwashed; and this state of untidiness, I learned, was the usual home condition of the Misses Costantini, although they blossomed into surprisingly elegant young

ladies out of doors. Italians have a taste for negligé costumes in the seclusion of their houses, and, while the rich girl dons dainty wrappers and Japanese kimonos, her poorer sister sinks to mere slovenliness in the intimacy of domestic life.

Italian sisters usually dress alike in a way which, when extended to three, or even four, becomes positively provoking. In some families this rule is observed so rigidly that no one dress may have a bow or button more than another, everything must be precise: and even an extra ruche made of a remnant of the material is stripped off, causing the dressmaker to declare petulantly at times that if she wishes to give satisfaction she had better number every stitch.

As I breakfasted I had leisure to observe my surroundings.

The room was large and well lighted, but woefully bare and ugly. The walls were stencilled green and buff in geometrical patterns; the floor was uncarpeted; there were no easy-chairs nor cushions, no pictures nor flowers nor books. The only decoration consisted in a number of pictorial postcards, chiefly comic, pinned up in groups upon the walls; and I have often wondered how, in a city such as Florence, where pottery is cheap and beautiful, and perfect photos to be had for a few pence of the loveliest pictures, any house could be so full of hideous things. Houses where the mistress is a foreigner, or where the owners are cosmopolitan in their ideals, are often beautiful and full of comforts, well warmed and lighted; but often in the ancient houses an air of chilly splendour is the poor substitute for comfort, and many an Italian's ideal, once he awakens to the bleakness of his own surroundings, is to have an interior modelled on the English home.

The old palazzo where the Costantini lived was in the Oltr' Arno, and must, in its day, have been a very stately place. The rooms were large, the rent small; but these attractions were balanced by the inconvenience of the approach, the absence of all lighting or heating apparatus, and such primitive sanitary arrangements as were appalling to modern ideas.

In Italy, that land of spacious houses, it is the custom to let the majority of them in "quartieri," a "quartiere" being either a whole floor or a subdivision of it: the tenants share the entrance door and stairs, and the stone walls are built so solidly that there is little annoyance from the other occupants.

This system necessitates the presence of a hall-porter, who becomes a figure of importance in the landscape of one's life. With his family he dwells apparently in odd cubby-holes on the stairs, from which he frequently emerges wiping his mouth with the back of his hand; but his official position is in a glass box beside the entrance, so placed that he may keep an eye upon all who pass out or in.

To have an amiable porter is one thing, but a surly one! from such may Heaven defend us, for he can do much to embitter existence; and his wife, if she be so minded, can perhaps do even more.

As he is the medium of most of your intercourse with the outer world, there are many ways in which he can manifest his disapproval if you chance to awaken his displeasure. Delay in the delivery of letters and parcels, carelessness in transmitting messages, a disagreeable manner with the people who come to call: a perverse habit of telling your dearest friends that the Signorina is out when she is really in; or, when she is out,

sending elderly and touchy ladies up half a dozen flights of stairs, to be met by the maid's polite response, "La Signora non c'è," so that they may descend gnashing their teeth, to be greeted by the malignant porter with uplifted eyebrows and a surprised, "Ma è *strano* che la Signora oggi non riceve!" thus giving the impression that they have been wilfully refused admittance, so that they cut you the next time they meet you in the street!

At the Costantini's we were not, however, sufficiently aristocratic to possess a porter; we opened the distant door ourselves by means of a mysterious wire, and drew up our letters and other small necessities by a string and basket from the street below.

A curious feature of Florentine town life, probably of the life of all Italian cities, is the way in which rich and poor live side by side. In many a gloomy byway, among third-rate shops, rises some splendid palace; and wealth and want may meet, not only in the same street, but even under the same roof, for while the "Pian Nobile" is occupied by a millionaire, the basement and upper floors may house the poorest of the poor.

These great houses date from the days when it was customary for an entire family, to the third and fourth generation, to live together under the same roof; which accounts for what seems to us their quite unnecessary size. There was, perhaps, a good deal to be said for the system, at least this argument of an ancient Florentine¹ makes one think there was—

"The father of a family is always more thought of and better known when he is followed by many of his children than when he is alone. A family is honoured according to the number of men in it. The head which

¹ Leon Battista Alberti, "Governo della Famiglia."

is not sustained by all the members, falls; a divided family is not only diminished, but loses the rank and position it had acquired. . . . At two tables, two tablecloths are required; two fires are made, and two fires consume two measures of wood; at two tables two servants are necessary, whereas one servant is enough at one table. . . .

“If it was now dark and a torch was lighted in the midst of us, you, I, and all the others would have light enough to read and write and do whatever was necessary. But if we separated, one going here and another there, I upstairs, another below, a third in a different direction, do you think that the same light would be enough for us as if we were all together? And if the weather was very cold, and we had a great fire lighted, and thou wouldst have thy part here, and another carry his there, should we be better warmed or worse? Thus it happens in the family. Many things are enough for many together which are little when divided in little parts. . . . A different aspect and different favour will he have among his own people and among other citizens, and a different reputation and authority will be his, who is accompanied by those who belong to him,—he will be feared and more esteemed than he who has little or no following of his own.”

This system still prevails to a certain extent in old-fashioned families, where the parents, married sons, their wives and children, and perhaps unmarried members of the elder branches, live together, having—in great houses—their own apartments, their individual servants, and meeting together daily to dine.

The friction involved by such a plan must be, however, terrible, and the lot of a bride no easy or pleasant one,

when, instead of having her own home to direct in her own way, she must play a submissive part under her mother-in-law's rule, and perhaps it is no wonder if Italians declare that good mothers-in-law are as hard to come by as white flies!

Youth and age, however excellent each may be, cannot always live together. The elder lady, accustomed to govern her house for the last thirty or forty years, wants no interference on the part of her son's wife; and the bride is expected to conform to ideals which are necessarily alien to the young. If the family be of the lower classes, she must busy herself in the house under her mother-in-law: if rich, she is left free from all responsibility to devote herself to pleasure; even over her children's education she has little control, and jealousies inevitably arise. The grandmother thinks that her experience should rule everything; the mother believes her modern system to be best. The grandmother, however severe she has been with her own children, adopts, with the next generation, a system of excessive indulgence, looking upon the young mother as barbarous if she scold or punish; and the youngsters, sharp enough to perceive this, appeal from "Mamma" to "Nonna," and all discipline is at end. But the old order is beginning to change even in Italy, and it is now becoming more usual for young married couples to build—probably for the peace of all parties—their own domestic nest.

As the days passed, and I adapted myself to the new mode of life, I ceased to wonder so much at the doings of the Costantini, and grew accustomed to the eccentricities of their ménage.

I found Signor Costantini the most attractive member

of the household, and we quickly became good friends. He was an old, white-haired man with courtly manners, who had once held some small Government appointment in post-office or railway. He had retired on a pension,—I fear a small one,—and no doubt my presence and weekly payments were a help in piecing out two insufficient ends. He was a kind old man, and I remember his telling me in his impetuous way that I was “padrona” of his whole house, that I should be to him as a daughter, and that he should love me as his own; and though I did not desire to be entirely affiliated with the Costantini family, I appreciated the cordial feeling which prompted so courteous a speech.

Signora Costantini was a small, unimportant person, generally occupied in the kitchen. She was extremely untidy all the week, but on Sundays, when she went to Mass, she used to appear in black silk with her hair done up, looking surprisingly nice. She had small authority in the house; her manners were deprecating, as if she hardly expected anyone to listen to her, and I felt about her as Alice of the White Queen, that “a little kindness, and putting her hair into papers, would do wonders for her.” The great excitement of her life was the Sunday “Passegiata” in the Cascine, a pleasure common to most Florentines, for in the ancient marriage contracts of the nobles used to be inserted a clause binding the husband to provide his wife with a carriage, so that she might drive in the Cascine when she chose.

The three Misses Costantini were lively, loud-voiced girls, narrow-minded but amiable—two of whom were studying at the public schools to be teachers; while the eldest, Bianca, a pretty girl of four-and-twenty, helped in domestic work at home. Every morning she

sallied forth to market, chaperoned by the small servant, "Gina," who trotted beside her mistress, hatless, as etiquette demanded, to carry home the things.

As a rule no Italian lady goes herself to market; the necessary chaffering and bargaining is unpleasant, and it is contrary to all the traditions of the land. The cook makes the purchases daily, and the "Padrona" looks through the book of "spese" in which the items are entered, and pays the amount set down,—a system which leaves, obviously, no little power in the cook's hands. In the Costantini household, however, there was no cook, so the duty of catering naturally devolved upon the mistress; as Gina, a little shepherdess of fourteen, imported from the country, was obviously unqualified to fulfil a mission so grave.

The household was completed by "Paniera," the dog, adored by the whole family; a cheerful, bustling little soul, with a pink nose like a peeled "balotta," always beaming with smiles and always in a hurry. Paniera was of a nervous temperament, and the sudden pulling out of a handkerchief, or any abrupt movement, would send her scurrying away, an abject coward, her tail between her legs. It must be owned that she was somewhat ridiculous with her bulging, anxious eyes, short breath and panting tongue; but she had a heart of gold, and was affable almost to excess. She had a passion for reserving fragments of food for future use should a famine arise, secreting them in a mat woven of cocoanut fibre, in alternate bars and holes. But this plan had its disadvantages, as such things as biscuit crumbs and lumps of bread-and-milk were not easily recovered, and more than once I have seen Paniera reduced to despair by the vagaries of an unshelled, hard-

boiled egg, which she had consigned to the safe-keeping of the mat. The more she licked, the more did the smooth, glossy sphere evade her, turning gently on its own axis, being too deeply embedded in its cavity for her to do more than touch it with a moist pink tongue.

The routine into which I fell was very simple. In the morning I breakfasted alone; after which, if the weather kept me a prisoner, Signor Costantini, robed in an old dressing-gown, kindly gave me his assistance in the study of Italian verbs; and at twelve o'clock we gathered for the first formal meal of the day.

The family at table shared an assortment of napkins, but mine was distinguished from the rest by a pink ribbon, since they had observed that I showed a desire to monopolise one of the common stock for private use.

The meal, beginning with soup, omelette or "pasta," was followed by some kind of meat, usually cooked in oil. To vary this there was "Lesso,"—meat boiled with rice and vegetables,—and the popular "Fritto misto," into which anything can go—bits of meat, celery, and other vegetables, rice and potato croquettes, squares of bread, and flowers of the vegetable marrow, all find a place in it, fried to a delicious golden brown. Mutton in Italy is not good, and little eaten; rabbits are despised, and veal expensive; so we rang the changes on lamb,—which seems to be born all the year round in this favoured country,—beef, kid, and pork, varied by poultry, which latter can be bought in detail, a drumstick, a breast, a wing, or even a comb. Salted anchovies also appeared, split open, cleaned, and eaten with vinegar and oil; and at every meal the red country wine was drunk, mixed with water.

In their housekeeping the Costantini retained much of the simple frugal habits described by old Florentine chroniclers. They were rigidly economical, and they ate amazingly little,—from inclination, I think, and not because there was any lack of food. Butter they never ate,—perhaps they did not like it,—and sweets and jam we never had at all. These latter are far less common at Italian tables than at English, partly because of the high price of sugar, partly because it is not the country use; but of fresh fruit there was always abundance, and we ended our meals with this, black coffee, and cheese.

At table the family talked fearfully fast, and all together, pressing food upon me, imploring me not to make “complimenti”; and when I tried to contribute a hesitating remark to the conversation, they united to help me out of my grammatical entanglements, and were jubilant when my stammered meaning was at last made plain.

From midday until seven in the evening the family ate nothing, and this was my daily trial, for I could *not* pass with equanimity over the hour where tea should be. The habits of a lifetime were too binding. Never before that winter did I rejoice at being asked out for the sake of what I should get to eat, and never was I so profoundly grateful to any hospitable people who would invite me to spend the time between four and six at their houses, set me in front of an open fire and give me tea and toast!

There were, however, many sad days when no one had compassion on me, and, driven in from sightseeing by the early darkness, I used to sit in an ice-cold room lighted by one dim lamp, wrapped in a cloak, applying alternately my hands and feet to my scaldino, and looking at my watch every ten minutes to see if by some miracle it might

be already seven o'clock ; while the Costantini girls worked on peacefully, not dreaming how I suffered as the afternoon wore on to evening, since what they had never had they did not miss.

When the evening meal was over, Signor Costantini used to go off to his club or café,—little wonder, considering how cheerless was his home ; and the rest of us, wrapped in shawls and clasping scaldini, sat round the supper-table, talking, turning over the newspaper, or doing a little work.

The girls, who never read anything but their school-books and the local paper, were hungry for tales of my home in England, and as the weeks went by, and the sweet Italian words grew familiar, I was able to satisfy them on many points on which they yearned to be informed.

No, I was not the unique daughter of my parents—Heaven had not been so sparing in its gifts : it *was* the first time I had been to Italy, which I found a country “molto bello” where I would willingly remain. The sun shone never in England? *Ma che!* This was a calumny not to be believed. Since they were so anxious to know, I repeated to them unwearingly how all my relations “called themselves,” until they were perfect in the list, and could enquire after the “Signor Guglielmo” or the “Signorina Maria,” and gave them the information on the English marriage customs, the “dote,” and the voyage of nuptials or “moon of honey,” of which they showed such touching eagerness to learn.

Ah, what cold, gay, odd, delightful days those were ! How courteous, and cordial, and warm-hearted the Costantini were, in spite of their eccentric ways, their slatternly costumes, their inveterate habit of spitting on

the floor! Many English here in Italy have I heard refer to the natives in a condescending manner, which can only be born of ignorance, discuss them in a spirit so "stizzoso" that one wonders why they live in Italy at all.

But for me, I have ever found them a kindly, polite and gracious people, full of a sympathetic charm, which, if not always very sincere, at least oils the creaking wheels of life. And though the Costantini ménage was not my ideal of comfort, though the experience was too odd to be at the time altogether pleasant, I shall always be glad that I had it, always look back with amusement, if without regret, to the weeks when I laughed and shivered as I stammered out my broken phrases over a scaldino that first winter when

"I found my home,
In the great city hard by Arno fair."

II

IN THE FLORENTINE STREETS

WHEN I was a child, one of my favourite toys was a kaleidoscope; I never tired of it; after hours I could hardly put it down, being unwilling to lose the surprise which lay at the next turn of the wheel. It is possibly to some survival of that early taste that I owe my passion for Italian street-life—in the enjoyment of which my English birth gives me a blessed liberty. The two pleasures are, perhaps, very nearly allied; for is not the street-life a kind of vivid, bizarre, many-coloured kaleidoscope, made up of a few elemental factors, varying from moment to moment, and yet, in a sense, eternally the same?

The Florentine streets are, as someone has said, always ready to talk to you; they have more stories to tell than anyone has time to hear. In them a long line of moving figures links us with the past, since along them have gone for centuries all the gladness and grief, the mourning and triumph of the city,—along the same ways, by, in many cases, the identical turnings, and prompted by the same eternal desires, as we go to-day.

The babies are still carried to the old Baptistery, where the babies of the Alighieri, and Donati and Medici were christened. The newly-married couples pass from the same ancient churches where poor Luisa Strozzi and

Ginevra degli Amieri, and all the brides of a former day were wed ; and along the streets, the dead, in torch-litten procession, still go home. For hundreds of years, from morning till night, almost from night till morning, the city has heard the ceaseless sound of passing footsteps, coming,—whence ? Going,—where ?

How many lives one daily touches in the streets for a moment, to touch again, perhaps, in the circle of existence, lives and lives ahead ! What dramas or comedies at every turn, what stories, base or beautiful, on every face !

There are the homeless, who shuffle by with hopeless eyes fixed blankly ahead ; the wheedling beggars, with their ingenious tales ; the busy, active crowds passing to and from their work ; the unemployed, who watch them wistfully ; the loafers, whose world is the street corner ; the artists, followers in the footsteps of the talented lads who, poor in pocket but rich in dreams, walked these streets in bygone days. There are the great ladies on their way to the milliners' ; the nobles, descendants of old historic families, lounging outside the cafés or the club ; the flower-sellers ; the tribe of tourists, guide-books in hand, whose diverging paths have brought them from the ends of the earth to meet in these old Italian streets.

But, to turn a little to the past from the present, there is, for those who walk with open eyes, a ceaseless charm about the haunted streets of Florence, and their very names recall great families and great events.

There are the sombre corniced palaces which bound them, rising cliff-like and throwing heavy masses of shade across the sunny way. They are characteristic of the old citizens who built them, and much of the history of those passionate, vivid, mediæval days may be learnt from a study of their walls.

The heavily-grated lower windows, making them well-nigh impregnable fortresses, and the stone brackets projecting at intervals beneath openings in the walls for the speedy thrusting forth of beams and erection of scaffolding, recall the fierce and terrible life of the Middle Ages, when the city was rent by faction, and the internal struggle between Guelf and Ghibelline, Bianchi and Neri, Pallesco and Piagnone, was only varied by external war with Siena, Lucca and Pisa, and the thundering of the "fuorusciti" at the gates.

The same scaffolding could also be used for the erection of galleries from which to look down on the pageants, processions and tourneys, the civil and religious fêtes which were the joy of the old Florentines. From the hooks hung the gay carpets and rich tapestries which, on festal days, covered the stern old walls; to the iron rings horses were tied; in the sockets banners could be rested on gala days, torches thrust on festal nights. The great lanterns, or "fanale," of cunningly wrought iron at the corners were significant of civic distinction, signs of the city's public recognition of noble deeds, not merely ornaments which all were free to put. On festal occasions they were ablaze with pitch torches, and when Amerigo Vespucci wrote an account of his voyage and discoveries to the Gonfaloniere, Piero Soderini, the latter got a decree from the Republic to send "fanali" to the family palace of the Vespucci, where, in honour of the enterprising Amerigo, they burned three nights and days.

High on the walls are the stone escutcheons and armorial bearings of the families to whom the palaces belonged; in some cases the added arms of a guild or faction indicate that the building had been confiscated by private feud or public force.

Tribaldo dei Rossi tells in his diary a pretty incident which gives a touch of nature to that August morning when, in the year 1489, the foundation-stone of the great "Strozzi" palace was laid.

After describing how he told his wife Nannina to dress her two children in their best that he might take them to the ceremony, he writes—

"I took Guarnieri in my arms and told him to look down there. I gave him a coin with a lily to throw down, also a bunch of little damask roses which I had in my hand. I said 'Will you remember this?' He said 'Yes.' The children came with our servant Rita, and Guarnieri, who was on that day just four years old, had a new cloak made by Nannina of shot green and yellow silk." Strange to think of those frail roses of a long-past summer buried beneath that heavy pile of stone, and of the long, long time which separates us from four-year-old Guarnieri in his brave green-and-yellow cloak!

How fine a show they must have made, those old palaces, on festal nights, the lights shining from their windows; the torches thrust into the many sockets casting a lurid glow over the rough-hewn stone, and the gorgeous tints of such tapestries as may still be seen in the museums; the pawing of richly caparisoned horses hitched to the rings, and the servants in their gay liveries, gossiping on the stone seats where to-day the flower-seller takes his stand, his many-coloured blossoms breaking, a wave of spring, against the crag-like walls.

High above the level of the shop-windows are the old pillared loggias where the Florentine ladies, who seldom went abroad except to Mass, used to walk.

In the ground-floor walls of many of the old palaces the forms of arches, long since closed, may still be traced

in the masonry, and these are traces of the open colonnades which were probably used by the owner, some wealthy merchant, for his business, the upper storeys being reserved for family use; while, beside the door, an opening about eighteen inches high in the massive wall, arched at the top, closed with a wooden shutter and marked "cantina," still affords to the passer-by the chance of buying, direct from the princely cellars, a flask of the prince's own growth of wine, a relic which still recalls the commercial basis on which almost all the great Florentine families rose.

The open doors often afford, even in the heart of the town, glimpses into lovely gardens, from which the cool splash of fountains comes like music into the scorching street; and a branch of fire-red pomegranate flower or festoon of banksia roses, hanging over a garden wall, brings the spring suddenly into some dark and narrow way.

How much individuality they have, these ancient palaces, and how much they must have seen in these long centuries! What stories of love and devotion, what dark tales of poison and poignard could those old stones tell! Life was painted in strong colours in those days,—uncontrolled passion, unlimited rapacity, unbridled ambition, ungoverned hate.

What a history it would be if the great Strozzi palace could tell of the scheming, subtle Filippo; of Clarice his wife—grand-daughter of Lorenzo and aunt of the notorious Caterina of France; and of the luckless Luisa, whose unhappy fate dated from the day when the Bastard Alessandro first caught a glimpse of her face. If the Palazzo Riccardi could relate the doings of the Medici line from the days of the crafty Cosimo, who in

his old age, being carried through his stately galleries, sighed, with the memory of dead sons, that his family had grown too small for his house: of the magnificent Lorenzo, living his life between market-place, court and studio, and of the great men, artists, poets and scholars, who thronged his gardens and halls.

Where, one wonders, was the window from which Lorenzaccio, after the bloody night when he and his hired ruffian, Scoronconcolo, stabbed Alessandro in his bed, looked out, in the cold grey of dawn, on to the Via Larga, now Via Cavour? And which was the window from which Fra Lippi, the wild monk, whom Cosimo had shut up as the only way to keep him to his work, heard the throbbing of mandolines, the "hurry of feet, and little feet," saw the white moonlight shining down the long empty streets, and, knotting his bed-clothes together, slid down and away into the city to follow that siren sound?

The ghosts of past days walk with one everywhere in the streets of an old city; phantom faces look down from the windows; great memories thrill at every step; the shadowy figures of the past seem at times more vivid than the people who jostle us on the side-walk.

We are linked to them by the permanent memories which yet line the thoroughfares, by those very thoroughfares in which we still take the same turnings to arrive at the same ends.

From Dante's house we may follow the very street by which the young Magnifico must daily have crossed on his way to the Palazzo Vecchio. Here, in these narrow alleys, passed those unforgettable figures, who, rich in splendid visions,—and generally in little else,—consecrated their hearts and lives to Beauty, and, tasting the joy of creation, saw desire pass into fulfilment, and dreams

become tangible in form. Here went Giotto in his leather cap and jerkin; passing, with his dry jest, to his fresco-work in the Franciscan Church of the Holy Cross: there, Andrea Tafi, rousing himself in the early mornings to make his way to his mosaic setting in the Baptistery, until frightened back to bed by his lazy, roguish apprentice; for Buffalmarchi, though he hated early rising enough to devise the procession of beetles with lighted tapers on their backs to scare his master from working in the dawn, could creep out of his warm bed and shiver and giggle, as he introduced his demoniacal messengers under poor old Tafi's door. From the Palazzo Medici—now Riccardi—to the Duomo, was the last walk of young Guilianodei Medici on that May morning when, with a false friend on either side, he went forward to fall, at the elevation of the Host, by the Pazzi knives. Along the narrow street which still retains its name of Via della Morte, went poor Ginevra, shivering in her shroud, her white feet treading the broad stones wearily, when she woke on that moonlight night in her tomb beside the Campanile, and found the world had but a cold welcome for one risen from the dead.

But to tell the tale of those who trod these stones before us would require more than the Thousand and One Nights; besides, are not these things written in the pages of Villari and many another quaint and racy chronicler, where all who will may read? Can you not find them, these old Florentines, on the walls of Santa Maria Novella, set there by Bigordi, the garland-maker's hand? and, though they be gone from the streets, do they not survive in faded fresco or glowing colour in many a gallery, on the quiet walls of ancient palace, cloister or church?

Do they not live, above all, in the work of their hands, which is yet our priceless heritage? Florence does not forget the sons who loved her as a mother, sang her glories as a mistress, and adorned her as a bride, but inscribes upon the old house-fronts the names, dates and deeds of those who once dwelt within; so that, alike by the fadeless beauty of their works, by their Mother-city's grateful memory, all the streets yet say "Alleluia."

One of the things in Italy which strikes sharply upon our English senses, is, I think, the way in which lovely things are trustingly exposed in the streets, the possession of the city as a whole. It is possible in Florence, without ever entering a gallery, daily to feed one's soul on beauty. The city which, however falsely, professed itself democratic, has a democratic art: no exotic flower, but a robust growth; a part, and a very sturdy part, of life; manifesting itself, with equal freshness and force, in many forms.

The artists of those days were busy, practical men, who had, as boys, been apprenticed to Art as to any other trade; for in the Quattro-cento "Arte" meant simply craft, and the title was no more the prerogative of the workers in gold and colours than of the butchers and weavers of silk. No bit of work was too trivial for the exercise of talent; while painting the walls of some chapel they did not disdain to hammer out a torch-holder; and the genius which could design a papal tomb would be equally ready to give an estimate for a bridal chest. In those days the best was not hidden away in private palaces to be seen only by the wealthy, but offered freely at the street corners, market-places and churches, in fountain, façade and door.

How they have been respected, too, these treasures, through their centuries of life!

Those exquisite, flower-like babies, which Della Robbia set, four hundred years ago, to extend pitiful, pleading hands from the Loggia of the Foundling Hospital; those pointed lunettes, with their soft blue and tender milky white, which dream away their beauty above so many church doors, in so many quiet old streets; has no Florentine boy, with all his passion for stone-throwing, ever been tempted to throw a stone at *them*? Did that salutary example of the young man who, far back in the Middle Ages, cast mud at Our Lady's image, and was straightway dragged away and hanged, inculcate a wholesome dread of sacrilege, which survives even in the sharp-eyed imps who run the streets to-day? Or is beauty so much a part of the Italian's daily life that he takes such wall-flowers as much for granted as he does the stones beneath his feet?

The old Piazza, which, with the militant beauty of its great tower, is still, as ever, the centre of the city's life, full of great and grim and splendid memories, offers to-day an almost unique specimen of an open-air museum, free for all who choose to come. There, ancient tapestries are yet hung on the Feast of San Giovanni; there, masterpieces of Florentine sculpture are ever before the people's eyes. Men sleep through the hot hours in the shadow of the "Perseus" into which the truculent Benevenuto Cellini welded his enthusiasm, his genius, and all his household plate; and which, though it came into being amid such frenzied excitement, now stands "with brow and sword, supremely calm." Street urchins clamber about the pedestal from which Judith gazes down with stern, set brows. Old crones gossip and gesticulate; wheedling pedlars entreat the unwary tourist to buy "Mosaic and postcard, verree cheap!" under the great

loggia where Dominicans and Franciscans gathered on that fatal day when Savonarola refused the trial by fire, and on that other day when Florence sent its prophet to his death.

A modern medallion set in the pavement of this piazza marks the place of his martyrdom, and year by year on the 24th of May, where the white smoke rolled and the red fire rose, the Florentines lay flowers in memory of him who, burnt to ashes and borne by the river to the sea, has not even a grave.

Whoever wishes in Florence to see scenes and shops which are characteristically Italian, should seek the objects of his desire in the narrow, tortuous by-streets, and not in the Tornabuoni and Cerritani, which are now the fashionable quarters of the town. It is true that they are the ancient boundaries, north and west, of the tiny, fortified city of Dante's day; that the palaces of the magnificent Lorenzo's age still line them, lending them an inalienable dignity; that the shops are full of old Italian furniture and pictures, enamels and brocades; but though the hands may be the hands of Esau, the voice is the voice of Jacob, and their life is essentially twentieth century, however ancient the setting of it may be.

The crowds who throng them are cosmopolitan, and come, as often as not, from London, Boston, or New York, gathering from far, beauty-seeking pilgrims to Beauty's shrine.

Florence, above all Italian cities, conquers and holds the hearts of men; there is something winning in her fairness, there is magic in her very name; she is the enchantress, causing unquiet spirits, in an alien country, to feel themselves at home.

It is an interesting subject, this invasion of the Old

World by the New, with a psychological value, a definite place in the spiritual economy of the world.

What is it which brings the Americans, above other nations, in such numbers, to the Holy Land of Art? Is it that, in the stress and swiftness of their lives, they feel something impelling them, as birds of passage in the spring, to come and fill their souls with that simplicity and peace which seem the secret of fourteenth-century Art? Do they come to seek, in a land older than their own, that calming contact with the past which their own, with all its achievements, cannot give?

Year by year they arrive in thousands, following the star which shines ever above the Land of Heart's Desire; and, having seen and felt, either go back to their own country to radiate an influence which must prove one of the great educating forces of the New World, or, remaining to marry, as so many do, give as well as get, by instilling some of the vitality, the strong life of a younger people, into the older Latin race.

Interesting as the Tornabuoni and Cerritani streets may be, however, for the confusion of tongues heard there, and the racial problems suggested, as well as for the splendour and dignity of the palaces with which they are lined, it is in the older, poorer quarters that the real Italian life may better be seen.

If you would see something of old Florence, which the tourist is too busy to see, and the resident almost too accustomed to notice, go into the twisting byways where the sun penetrates as hardly between the high dark houses as into a well, and where the ancient towers still menace each other, jealous-eyed, across the street. Into the "Chiassi,"—spanned by their bridges,—so narrow that it is little wonder that arrogant son of the Adimari, who

rode down them with his lordly toes turned out, gave such unforgettable offence to Dante, as, looking askance at the lad's ostentation, he had, poet and statesman as he was, to make room for this young cock-o'-the-walk to pass.

There, in the black throat of some deep archway, under the vaulted roof of an old palace, or in some cut-throat alley which you can span with your hands, you may see a withered crone sorting charcoal, or hear the rhythmic beat of hammers on the anvil, and, looking into some dim cavernous workshop, see, by the red glow of the charcoal braziers, an interior which would have delighted Rembrandt's heart. From a cellar below the street level will bob up the head of some disciple of St. Crispin, busy with last and awl, and singing lustily, since, for some inexplicable reason, cobblers are a merry race. Above his head you are sure to see an artless little print of his patron saint, since every trade is under the protection of some saint, be it Crispin for cobblers, Joseph for carpenters, Antonio for cab-drivers, or Lorenzo for the sellers of maccaroni; and in almost every workshop a picture or image is to be seen.

In such parts may be seen that old life of the "Vicinato" which has survived since Dante's day,—dirty, picturesque women sitting outside their doors, preparing food, eating curious messes of broth and "pasta" out of earthenware pipkins, with hunches of dark bread; nursing their black-eyed children, mending—not too often—their ragged clothes.

You will see them shuffling to and fro in their wooden "zoccoli," and forming, for all their squalor, patches of bright colour in the dark places; and you will hear them talking in loud, animated tones, and shouting bits of news of the most confidential nature across the narrow streets.

You may see them rubbing their clothes with ashes upon boards over great earthenware pots, before taking them to be rinsed on the Arno banks ; and, following them to the river, see them busy on the stone steps which run down to the edge of the water, in faded woollen dresses, toned by sun and rain to lovely, indescribable tints ; with gay-coloured handkerchiefs on their heads, and bare brown arms ; hard at work in cheery, chattering rows.

It is a scene to delight an artist,—the grey stone steps and walls, the bright petticoats and skirts,—for, with the Latin love of colour, their garments are far more often red or blue than white. Here a portly stone post will be draped, like a dressmaker's skirt-shape, with a red petticoat patched with brown and purple ; there a pair of green-and-yellow pantaloons sprawl in a negligée manner on the steps.

What a charm there is about this riverside life, about this Arno which is, after all, the living chain which links the ages ! Lorenzo dei Medici, Savonarola, Michaelangelo, if they did not see all that we see in a city so strangely altered, at least saw, and would recognise, this. They, too, looked across to the rows of creamy palaces of Oltr' Arno, with their mellow tints and peeling plaster, their quaint archways, and jutting balconies, and windows from which one might drop down a line into the river and fish up one's breakfast from the cool green depths. They saw, as we do, the visionary city in the water, and saw it illuminated with yellow, flower-like lights as the lamps appeared at nightfall in the windows above. Saw the water deepening to tawny brown and yellow foam as the heavy rains washed the sand down from the hills ; and saw it green and clear as jade on still days, when little white ripples wash against the piers of the bridges, such as

Botticelli must have seen a thousand times as he lingered, where the jewellers' booths now stand, "in sul passo d'Arno," before he set them to break for ever upon the enchanted shores to which his foam-born Venus is wafted by the winds. They saw it grey and cold beneath leaden skies; dreaming silver in the sacred hour of dawn; rose-flushed when the sunset burned red behind the Carraras; white under the magic of the moon. They saw, as we still see, the water dwindle to a thread in summer, leaving a parched expanse of pallid shingle; saw, too, what, since the raising of the modern Lung' Arno, we no longer see,—the fierce torrent, rain-swollen, rush along the streets.

The fish of the Arno have the same dangers and the small value as the fish of any stream which traverses a large city; but the river yields something of greater value in the sand which lies in its bed. The extraction of this furnishes employment to a large number of "Renaiuoli" or sand-men, who form picturesque groups with their boats and queer-shaped nets. In summer, under the scorching sun, these poor fellows work naked, save for a cotton shirt, and their bronzed arms and legs are effective figures in the landscape as, their boats moored in mid-stream, they haul up the heavy loads of sand.

From the river banks he who would study the lives of the people would do well to pass to the Mercato Nuovo, where, if it be morning, the day bright, the sunbeams pouring down out of a deep blue sky and throwing heavy masses of shade across the street, he will see an unforgettable scene.

The Mercato Vecchio, happy hunting-ground of artists, is gone; but the Mercato Nuovo, built in 1547 by order of Cosimo I., remains, and there, with much vociferous bargaining, a brisk trade is carried on in straw hats,

“trine a tombola,”—a coarse hand-made lace,—and on certain days of the week in flowers and plants.

It is a stately building, raised some steps above the street, open at the sides, and with rows of columns supporting a vaulted roof. A white disc of stone in the middle of the pavement marks the place where debtors used to be exposed. Close by the water trickles ceaselessly from the great bronze boar which, if not the original “Porcellino” celebrated by Hans Andersen, over the back of which generations of little Florentines scrambled, is yet a worthy copy of that majestic beast, now taking his rest in the Uffizi hall. In niches at the corners of the loggia are white statues of patriots and writers, sharply silhouetted against the sombre stone. Below them, and around the bases of the pillars, bloom masses of flowers, varying with the season: carnations, frail Lent lilies, and sturdier daffodils; roses, masses of violets, sheaves of Annunciation lilies and iris, branches of lilac, white and purple; of the delicate blossoms of apple, cherry and peach. Pots of bamboo, palm and maiden-hair, azalea and small orange and lemon trees, stand in the background; while the stalls, presided over by vivacious country-women, are piled with Tuscan hats of every conceivable colour, scarlet, white, yellow, purple, blue and green.

Near by, in some quiet corner, a “scrivano,” or public letter-writer, is sure to have set his desk,—a man whose business it is to read and write letters for those who cannot write themselves. What a varied experience his must be, of romance and tragedy, gladness and grief! Beside him is probably seated some old woman listening eagerly to the letter which brings news from a far country; or some burly contadino, more apt with the

plough than the pen, slowly and ponderously dictates his thoughts.

Close at hand stands one of the characteristic cook-shops, which are very picturesque, with their open fronts and great furnaces, their white-tiled walls, and archways upon which are exhibited glittering copper pots and pans of every shape and size, and the ancient platters of a past age. They are exquisitely clean; decorated with evergreens and paper flowers; and a tempting smell from the rows of fowls cooking before the clear fire, and the crisp slices of bread and mixed vegetables frying in golden oil, floats out into the street.

The scene around the market is bright and animated, and he who will take his stand there for half an hour may see plenty of characteristic Italian life.

Pretty country girls, descendants of Tito's "Tessa," pass bareheaded, as no woman of the lower classes wears a hat; a scarf or handkerchief, at most, being tied over the crisp waves of hair. Indeed, I know a groom who told his mistress, as a proof of the high social position of his sweetheart, that he was engaged to "una signorina, ma una vera Signorina, chi porta il cappello!" A priest goes slowly by, open breviary in hand, his lips moving, for the rule of the Church requires the Canonical Hours to be read daily, and, if not aloud, at least every word must be formed with the lips; so that along the streets, in train or tram-car, they seize the opportunity of fulfilling their rule. Or it may be a friar who passes, with coarse robe of weather-worn serge, sandled feet, and the thrice-knotted cord, which tells of a threefold vow; or a Sister of Mercy; or a Franciscan Sister of the Stigmata, in brown dress and flapping hat of yellow Tuscan straw.

If it be winter, the women at the stalls, those who pass,

are all clasping scaldini; while the men wrap themselves in picturesque cloaks, or greatcoats with fur cuffs and collars,—coats which, in the case of the country-men, are usually of a bright terra-cotta red; and if it be wet they will all carry enormous green or yellow umbrellas. Indeed, so universal is the use of the umbrella, that I have seen a street-sweeper with the “stalk” securely buttoned in his jacket, so as to leave both hands free, pursuing his work peacefully, protected by the large mushroom above his head.

The cab horses, too, have their summer and winter costumes. For the former a plume of pheasants’ feathers a couple of feet high, proudly erect between the ears, and, when the master can afford it, a net with many dangling tassels to keep off the flies: for the latter a scarlet blanket, which makes a gay patch of colour on chilly days, although, if a heavy shower overtakes a white horse in a new blanket, the effects are disastrous, as for days the poor creature probably goes about, its lily-whiteness changed to a rosy red!

The Florentines may well be proud of their public carriage service, which is excellent. Every driver possesses two carriages; a closed one for bad weather, and a Victoria, above which, in the dog days, an immense white or green umbrella is fixed.

They are a cheery race, these city Jehus, all wearing, according to municipal regulations, a top-hat, which they are only allowed in the fiercest of the summer heat to exchange for linen or straw. They drive with much dash and spirit, and a vast amount of whip cracking, which serves to announce their coming to unwary street-crossers, as well as to stimulate the energy of their prancing steeds.

Florence, like most Italian towns, is infested with beggars; for although legally only the deformed or maimed may ask for alms, and the law decrees that everyone else must *offer* something for money required, this is a poor expedient; for the venerable person with the tray of minute woolly lambs slung round his neck, or a dozen match-boxes in his hand, is in reality quite as persistent a beggar as the legless man who hitches himself with surprising swiftness from one side of the road to the other, entreating alms "per l'amor di Dio e della Santa Vergine Maria."

It is a law more honoured in the breach than the observance, for at every church door there are whining women with babies, or children who seem to have learned the professional begging tone from their birth; and, although the fact that only the crippled or maimed may claim assistance from the State must naturally cause much misery, one cannot but feel that the giving of chance coppers in the streets is the least efficient of all means for really helping the poor.

The Florentine street-stalls are quaint and picturesque, and vary according to the season of the year.

In summer they are decked with garlands of lemons and green leaves, charming as a Della Robbia border, and devoted to the sale of cooling drinks. By August lemons have given way to the "popone," a great water-melon, and the stalls are covered with green leaves upon which deep red slices with black seeds and green rind are exposed for sale, together with the green globes of the uncut fruit. In response to the cry "Cocomeri, chi vuole cocomeri?" the people crowd to buy the cooling fruit, of which a huge juicy wedge costs less than a halfpenny, and street urchins go about their errands biting into great

crimson crescents, the sweet juice dripping down their cheeks.

By and by, with the cold weather, come the stalls of hot chestnuts, of yellow beans or "lupini," and piles of oranges which have come from the sunny South to brighten the market-steps and street corners on wintry days.

Such things are characteristic of special seasons, but there are some which belong to all times, to every day of every year.

There are the flocks of pigeons which haunt the Uffizi and the Duomo; seeming, beside the latter, to have taken, in their iridescent plumage, the beauty of the dawn-coloured marbles where they make their home. So tame are they that they will settle in scores on the head, hands, and at the feet of anyone who will feed them; and so tranquil is their existence that, no matter how busy the traffic, they seldom trouble to hasten their cool pink feet.

There are the flower-sellers, with their engaging manners and radiant smiles; there are the women, chatting from the windows, leaning on cushions laid along the sill, but safely caged within the iron bars which are everywhere set to Italian casements, and to which Michaelangelo gave, they say, the curved form of a kneeling figure from which they have kept their name of "Inginocchiata" ever since. There are the baskets let down by a string from the windows of high houses to receive letters, papers, and food supplies, as no postman or errand-boy could be expected to run up and down the endless stairs.

One of the strangest of the daily sights of Florentine streets is the passing of the Misericordia Brothers in their black hoods and gowns,—curious survival of mediæval

days among the trams and electric lights of this cosmopolitan city.

In 1240, so runs the story, a certain Luca Borsi, one of the porters whose work it was to carry bales of cloth for the weavers and merchants, was sore troubled by the continual swearing of his companions, as they hung about in the Piazza waiting for an errand, and prevailed upon them to fine themselves for every curse uttered, and, further, to spend the money upon litters; and each, in order, to take a turn in carrying the sick and wounded, dying and dead, so often to be seen, untended, about the streets of a mediæval town.

The order prospered, for, as an old writer quaintly puts it, "much time having passed in this devout exercise large sums accumulated"; the work was extended, nobles and servants alike enrolled themselves among the Brothers of Pity, all rank being set aside in the service of the poor and needy, and prince and poor man, alike hidden beneath their black hoods, walked side by side.

Now some say that this pretty story of the excellent Luca is unfounded, and that the Misericordia came into being during the plague of 1326, being an off-shoot of another Brotherhood, the "Laudesi" of Or San Michele. But who can tell? It really matters little, for the work done is in any case equally great. Through centuries the Brothers have tended and carried the sick and dying; in the plague of 1340, their footsteps were the only ones to break the silence of the stricken city; it was they who nursed the sick, gave food and clothes to the destitute, cared for the countless orphans and buried the dead. And ever since they have been quick to help in every accident, summoned by the ringing of their bell.

In all weathers and at all times they go out on their

errands of mercy, with their hand-litters, carrying brandy in case of need, and a stole, crucifix, and holy water, so that should any person die on the way they may yet have the consolations of the Church.

Everywhere they are made way for, as they race from the river to the hospital with some poor, would-be suicide, or carry some sick or wounded man; and hats are raised as the cowled figures pass, for the Florentines are, as they well may be, proud of this ancient Brotherhood.

There is ever someone on guard at the chapel, and when a call for help comes the bell is rung to summon the Brothers on duty for the day. From shop or street or dinner-table they rush, hastily don their robes, and set off on their errand. No reward or gift may be offered, even to those who watch all night by the sick, save a cup of water; their recompense is in the words of the salutation of Brother to Brother, as they return to the chapel, their errand accomplished,—“May God reward you.” “Go in peace!”

The lover of the streets will find Florence, perhaps, at no time so much her old self, so truly Italian, as in the summer, when the ubiquitous tourists are all scattered, the residents gone to cooler places; and the city is left, half deserted, to silence and to heat. Lung' Arno, where all winter and spring carriages and crowds have passed to and from the Cascine, is parched and empty, the sun beats pitilessly down upon the quiet streets and the green thread of water in a sandy bed to which the river has shrunk. Day after day dawns blue and misty; by eight o'clock the heat is unbearable, and all who cannot remain in the closed house during the hot hours creep along the narrow streets in the shade of the overhanging eaves. The children in

the poorer parts roll about almost naked; men and women alike fan themselves vigorously, and it is comical to see great carters and sturdy workmen flirting coquettish paper fans.

The churches are closed from midday to sunset; the streets almost empty; but with the evening cool the people reappear, windows are opened, and until late at night the townsfolk gather outside the cafés to eat ices and listen to the bands.

In the poorer quarters on such nights the whole population is out of doors in search of a little cool, which, in those close, crowded houses, must be difficult to find. They sit, chatting, in groups on every doorstep; some even carry out their mattresses and sleep upon the ground.

On these summer nights in the old side streets of Florence, the modern days of the Capital, of United Italy, of the invading tourist, fade; one is back in the Middle Ages, bound by the spell of the past.

A cloaked figure passes in the shadow, taking shape for a moment in the dim light of the lamp which burns before Madonna at the street corner. It might be Machiavelli going home after some supper in the Rucellai gardens, to the old house in the Street of the May; or Ghiberti tramping along to visit his furnaces, where the great Baptistery gates are taking shape.

The moon rests in calm white sheets in the piazzas, and the shadows of the old palaces on the ground are almost as dark and solemn as the frowning walls themselves. A party of young men pass by singing, the music sweeping up to where a woman leans from a cinque-cento window far above. So, for centuries, the serenading bands have gone about the city, and their lady-loves looked down from

the same old casements—as Dianora looked down in the Via dei Bardi on a breathless night five hundred years ago.

In such moments one is face to face with a Florence which is in no guide-book, a Florence to be caught, unawares, when, for an hour, she is reborn of mystery, of silence and of dreams.

Almost by chance we gather our loveliest and most enduring impressions; and the tourist is generally too busy with the details of church and gallery to spare much time to woo the spirit of that real, living Florence which is so shy and elusive that only by stealth may she be surprised. It requires a happy conjunction of mood in the seer, and aspect of the seen; and though the traveller may have the gift of learning, and know all the history of the city, and all churches and pictures, and have laid to heart the blessings and cursings of Mr. Ruskin, and bowed his neck to the yoke of Baedeker and Cook, and have not imagination, it profiteth him nothing, for he who comes to Florence without imagination shall never see her as she really is.

But if the gods have dowered you with this power, and you have ever looked down on the city lifting her brows in some blue dawn to the light which strikes from far beyond Vallombrosa; or in the magical moment of her transfiguration at sunset, when the yellow of her buildings blazes till she seems a city of pure gold; or on some enchanted night of summer, when the dark has veiled all that is trumpery and modern, and you see only her soaring dome and her towers springing towards the stars, while the breeze stirring the lemon-trees bears you a breath of fragrance, and from somewhere in the darkness comes the throbbing, sweet and a little piteous, of mandolines: if you have once seen her so, you can never again forget her,

for she is tenacious of her old power in her age as in her youth, never losing her hold on hearts ; and she will win your heart and keep it, and you can never again forget her until you forget all things, and, called by death, mothered by the warm red earth, you turn from the light and look no more upon the sun.

III

MAFALDA

MAFALDA is the perfect age, which, translated into figures, means simply that she is six years old.

Far be it from me to suggest that her charms will lessen with time, and I realise that the inevitable must be faced, and that, nothing untoward intervening, she must be successively seven, eight, nine, and even ten. Doubtless "what cannot be eschewed, must be embraced," but I can only say that I shall never quite reconcile myself when she ceases to be six and attains some less fascinating age.

Of course every period of life has its own attractions. It is undeniable that Helen, whatever she was at the beginning, must have been past her youth before the end of the Trojan war; that Diane de Poitiers was adored by men all her life, and that Ninon de Lenclos was said by St. Evremond to have been chosen by nature to prove that it was possible not to age: but to me there is a peculiar completeness and charm about the age of six, and I try to forget that Mafalda's seventh birthday is not many moons ahead.

Mafalda, apart from her six years, is a fascinating person, and undoubtedly possesses the "fatal gift," though a detailed list of her charms would prove as inadequate as Olivia's "Two lips, indifferent red: item, two grey eyes with lids to them." She has a round face breaking

unexpectedly into a pointed chin; great blue eyes under black brows, and dark hair which, demurely parted in the middle, is tied back on either side with a black velvet bow, disclosing tiny gold earrings, and cropped just above the shoulders all round.

Mafalda, on her first coming to this planet, was given over, like most Italian babies, to the care of a "Balìa," since it is rarely that a mother of the upper classes nurses her own child. A Balìa, a strong healthy woman, always from the country or the mountains, is at once taken into the house, and, leaving her own baby with a neighbour, remains with her nursling for at least a year.

She is dressed with much splendour, according to the means of the family to which she goes, her costume generally consisting of a gay-coloured stuff gown, an embroidered and laced apron and fichu, and an immense bow or ruche of sash-ribbon fastened on the head with gold or silver pins, from which broad streamers hang to the hem of the skirt,—these ribbons being usually blue or scarlet for boys and pink for girls.

It is a pretty sight to see the Balias out walking with their little charges in their arms, for many of them are beautiful women,—what mother could resist choosing a pretty nurse for her baby?—and all are strong and glowing with health.

Mafalda's foster-mother was a majestic Venetian, of beautiful features and incorrigible stupidity,—the latter being a quality common to many of them, for the majority of these women are terribly ignorant, unreasonable as children, and often so capricious as to be most trying in the house. Yet, whatever their whims, everything possible must be done to content them, as the baby naturally suffers if they fret or pine.

Their wages vary from twenty-five to fifty francs a month, with their costume; and, in addition to this, they expect innumerable gifts; indeed, many purposely present themselves to take up their duties with no spare clothing whatever, and the mistress must at once provide them with all they need.

One of the drawbacks of a Balia is that, once attached to a family, she is generally attached for life, as she is constantly reappearing on visits to her nursling, and there are requests for old clothes for the little foster-brother or sister; later on, appeals to start him or her in service, or to help with the younger ones, and so on without end.

Mafalda and her "Tata" throve so well together, that it was impossible to send them out alone, as the two full-moon faces in close proximity produced such an effect that mischievous boys used to make fun of them, and though Mafalda bore this with calm dignity, the poor nurse, unused to a city at all, much less to finding herself so conspicuous, returned home more than once in tears.

When Mafalda and I first met, the days of the Balia were already far in the background, and she was an accomplished little person who conversed in French fluently, and spoke a broken English compared with the sweetness of which the tongues of men and angels alike fell short.

Mafalda was at a stage in the study of this language when she translated as literally as possible her Italian idiom, and, having acquired her knowledge entirely from her elders, discoursed with a lofty choice of words unknown to English babies of her age.

My first introduction to her was as, seated on a minute straw bench, she presided with marked business ability

over a "Drogheria" or grocer's shop, set upon the low table before her. She eyed me a little doubtfully in the beginning, but when she saw me making friends with her puppy, who rejoices in the uncommon name of Plumcake, reduced by his mistress to the caressing diminutive of "Plumcakino," she showed signs of thawing, and graciously entered into conversation.

"Is very pig, the little dog: he upset it, the milk, and made a blot," she observed, pointing a stern forefinger at the ill-bred Plumcake. "Ah, bad that thou art!" relapsing into her native tongue, "thou art a dog perfidious: what will say Clemente when he shall see that which thou hast done?"

I suggested that with my handkerchief we might wipe up the few drops—all that the doll's jug had contained—before the severe eye of Clemente could light upon them, and this evidence of a resourceful mind so enchanted Mafalda that we quickly became the best of friends, and she confided to me many interesting details about her habits and life.

Mafalda's parents, stirred by admiration for English customs, have set up what they call "La Nursery," an institution which has only found its way to Italy in recent years. Even now Italian children are far less strictly confined to nursery life than their English contemporaries, as, not only do they lunch with their parents, but usually, from the age of three or four, dine with them at night, this late dinner being followed by bed at nine or ten,—an hour which shocks the notions of English people, accustomed to see the Pinaforites disappear at seven, after a bowl of bread-and-milk. Indeed, there is little doubt, I think, that England is the ideal land for the education of children; that in no other country is the standard so

simple and wholesome; and one has but to read the descriptions in French and Italian books, to see the popularity of the English governess in Italy, and to remember that an English lady directs the royal nursery, to realise in what reverence the English system is held.

Italian children are, however, very charming. They are taught pretty, ceremonious manners,—for manners in Italy are an art to be studied,—and little boys soon learn to kiss the hands of ladies, and little girls to courtesy to their elders with old-fashioned respect. They are less independent than English children,—even those of the poor being seldom allowed out alone; and at school closing time there is quite a crowd of relations or servants waiting to take the children home.

This accompanying to and from school is a serious matter in Italy, where, morning and afternoon, the streets are full of children, dinner-basket in hand, being conducted to or from their school. Here, a party passes under the care of an old woman, commissioned by the parents of some special street to escort their little ones; there, a boy of twelve or thirteen, still wearing socks, according to the Continental custom, accompanied by his mother; or the daughter of a small shop-keeper, a well-grown girl of fifteen or sixteen, followed—for the sense of her own dignity demands this attitude—by a hatless servant of half her size, who carries basket and books.

The girls of the upper classes are kept very strictly, though a trifle more liberty begins to be allowed in cities where there is a large Anglo-Saxon colony; but the chaperone still reigns supreme in Italy, and even boys of the aristocracy are seldom allowed out alone before sixteen. These latter are either sent as boarders to a college directed by priests—in which case they wear a

uniform and walk out demurely, two and two, under the care of a master (all wearing black kid gloves), or they attend one of the public lyceums daily—in which case they have usually a tutor at home to help them with their preparation and escort them to and fro. They play few games, and in neither case does the life compare with the splendid freedom, the traditions and *esprit de corps* of an English public school.

Mafalda does not attend school, though at times there is a talk of sending her to the nuns, to whom she goes twice a week for teaching in preparation for her first confession,—what will she have to confess, I wonder!—and her “Cresima,” which events will take place when she is seven years old.

At present she struggles at home with syllables and pot-hooks, and, for at least an hour every morning, is an earnest student, sitting beneath the Tree of Knowledge and gathering such apples as her baby hands may hold.

On such occasions as it has been my privilege to lead Mafalda along the thorny path of learning, this is the order of the day—

I lift her to her place at the table, but cannot at once content her. “It goes not well, I am too down: I arrive not,” she protests; “more up!” So I elevate her on cushions until she admits that now she “stays well.”

Then she contemplates her copy-book, which displays printed squares in each of which a cross or hook must be set in imitation of the model, with eyes rounded by dismay.

“But how it is difficult, this! What to do? I have not understood, I!”

I explain, at length, the system and means of accomplishing the exercise, while Mafalda listens with her head

on one side, and finally squares her shoulders and puts pen to paper, with the disastrous consequence that a large drop of ink slides off the nib and expands into a neat circle on the page.

My attention is called to this mishap by a piercing wail from Mafalda. She clasps her hands with impassioned gesture, exclaiming—

“Santo Dio, I have made it, a blot!” Then, fearing reproof, “But I have not done it *apposta*: it is my misfortune: I have not *colpa*, I!”

I point out that if she plunged her pen less deeply into the glass hat which serves her as ink-pot, these misfortunes would not befall her, and suggest that she should employ the safer means of a pencil, but this idea she scorns. To write with a pencil would be humiliating to one who has once known the joys of ink.

“No, the pencil, I want it not. Also, is broken, the sharp. I want the wipe-it-pen: then, all will go well!”

There follows a long silence; the pen moves slowly along two lines of monotonous hieroglyphs; then comes the crisis,—her own name printed in large pencil letters to be traced in ink.

Bracing herself for the effort, she presently, her cheeks hot and flushed, calls my attention to the result of her labours, while she herself surveys her work—“Mafalda,” laboriously inscribed in tipsy capitals—with satisfaction.

“You have seen, you, how I am brave for the writing?” she observes complacently, as she lays her book aside.

When the time comes for reading, Mafalda responds without enthusiasm. She wearies of syllables, and finds little to stimulate imagination in the bald statements offered by her primer. Her discursive fancy is ever

seeking occasion to leave the subject in hand and enter on the pleasant paths of conversation which she so much prefers.

After a sufficient exercise in "Ba, Be, Bo," I choose a story, Mafalda looking on with keen interest, and protesting, "You have skip it a page!" if I do not turn over every leaf.

"Lo Zio ha un cane," she spells out laboriously, but the word "Zio" unhappily catches her attention, and suggests an agreeable pretext for a pause.

"You know him, my Uncle Carlo?" she asks engagingly.

No, that pleasure has been denied me; I do *not* know her Uncle Carlo.

"Ah, what pity! he is a man *molto simpatico*. Also he has the little dog. You know, you, how he calls himself, the little dog of the Uncle Carlo?"

No; nor do I wish to know, and I urge Mafalda to turn her attention to the printed page, which, having gratuitously informed me that the dog "calls himself Cioccolattina," she does.

She plods on for a few minutes, then stops short.

"But is *noiso*, this," she protests. "I can no more. *Proprio, non posso piu!*"

"Just to the bottom of the page," I urge. "Come, what is this word?"

"In this moment, I know not," responds Mafalda petulantly. "It is from an hour I am here, and am tired, I!" And when a person of six is reduced to this state of exhaustion, who can be so heartless as to deny her the joy of putting her limbs to motion and indulging in a breath of fresh air?

Mafalda is on terms of close intimacy with the servants;

but I pity them at times, when they are waiting at table, as there is no conversation into which their small mistress will not draw them.

"Clemente," she enquires of the big footman, when that functionary is handing the soup-plates, "knowest thou," with a nod in my direction, "that to-morrow is the birthday of the Signorina?"

Yes, Clemente admits the knowledge, and adds politely that the best wishes of the household ("la famiglia," as the servants generally call themselves) will be with me on that auspicious occasion; to which I bow my thanks.

"But knowest thou, Clemente," pursues Mafalda, toying with her spoon, "how many years will have the Signorina?"

Clemente affects not to hear, and tries to divert her thoughts.

"Signorina Mafalda, if you make not attention, the soup goes on the frock clean, and what will say then the Signora Mammà?"

"It makes nothing," responds Mafalda, with an airy wave of the hand which brings about the foretold catastrophe: "I asked thee, Clemente, if thou knewest how many years will have the Signorina, and thou makest the deaf, and talkest of soup. Thinkest thou that she will have twenty, or ten, or" (rising with a leap to the highest number within her powers of counting)—"fifty?"

Clemente, fairly cornered, coughs discreetly, fidgets nervously with his white cotton gloves, casts down his eyes, and is understood to murmur that young ladies have no age.

What an awkward position for a respectable footman! How are the mighty fallen!

It is I who relieve the situation. The total of my

years is not yet such that I need blush for or wish to hide it. I burst out laughing, and Clemente meets my eye with an expression of relief.

"The Signorina is yet very young," he observes approvingly, as he changes my plate.

Not always, however, is the intercourse between Mafalda and Clemente so amicable. There are times when I hear him reading her a lecture upon the impropriety of her behaviour, and the fate in store for "Signorine impertinenti."

If Mafalda enters into argument on these occasions, she is lost.

"What words are these?" I hear her cry hotly. "Instead art thou the impertinent, and I shall recount it to Mamma!"

"And I," retorts Clemente loftily, assuming an air of immense dignity, "shall recount it to Papa!"

As Mafalda knows well that her mother will be slow to attend to accusations against a trusty servant, and her father quick to listen to any complaints that trusty servant may make, she finds it politic to change her position, and appease her adversary by voluntary aid in laying the dinner-table, or by an offer to water the lettuces which are the pride of his heart; but as she waters with such zeal as almost to wash the plants out of the ground, this kind offer is usually refused.

The routine of Mafalda's days differs little, owing to her parents' admiration for "La Nursery" and its system, from that of her English contemporaries. She rises at what she terms "seven and a half" and takes her bath, on emerging from which she dons a long gown and hood made of "towelling," called an "accappatojo," in which her faithful Santina rubs her dry. These garments are

used at all the "Bagni di Mare," where the bathers may be seen strolling about on the sands after their dip, folded in stately robes, white or coloured; and Mafalda, who uses hers all the year round, looks, with her cowl drawn over head, like an adorable baby monk.

The duties of the toilet performed, she breakfasts, seated on a stool, at a tiny table, on a large cup of "caffè latte" and a roll of bread, after which she is ready for gymnastics, study, games, whatever comes in the programme for the day.

She lunches at twelve-thirty, and at four or five o'clock has what she calls her "Merenda," by no means the regular "tea" of English children, as it consists only of a piece of bread-and-butter, or bread-and-jam, which she eats without any formality, in nursery or garden, wherever she "finds herself" at the time.

Of course Mafalda has a birthday; but she has more—a saint's day, and this is observed as the greater "festa" of the two.

She herself arrived in November, but "Santa Mafalda" is celebrated on the second of May, a month more suitable for rejoicing, and on this occasion Mafalda entertains parties of small "Anna-Marias," and "Giancarlos," and offers them a delightful "Merenda" of biscuits and whipped cream.

Indeed, in "festas" and presents Mafalda is more fortunate than most English children, for not only has she two "birthdays" a year, and Christmas and Easter, but at the Epiphany she receives presents in memory of the gifts which three travellers once brought to a little Child.

It is not, however, a benevolent "Santa Claus" or a radiant Christchild who brings them, but the "Befana,"

a big, ugly old woman, who comes down the chimney, and fills the shoes with toys or cinders according to the behaviour of their owner through the preceding year. For Mafalda, and other little Florentines, she leaves her gifts in the night; but in the "Veneto" the children gather round the wide fireplaces in the old houses, awed by dreadful wailings and cries which come down the chimney, together with pieces of coal and cinders, and it is only after this tremendous prelude that, at last, the gifts drop upon the hearth.

Mafalda is musical, and sings in three languages, her favourite song being "Mon père m'a donné un mari"; but she is equally willing to raise her piping voice in the "Clair de la lune," "Quand trois poules vont aux champs," "In winter I get up at night"—one of the delightful songs taken from Stevenson's "Garden of Verses," or the child-songs of her native land. She also plays, in a masterly manner, the creations of her own soul, and is fond of performing a duet "at four hands," when, to my treble melody, she contributes impressive chords in the bass.

Her terms of endearment are generally couched in the diminutive; she addresses her mother as "Mamma mia," and, when she wishes to be particularly affectionate, pats my cheeks caressingly and calls me her "little one," although I am about three times her size and more than three times her age. She has a hospitable heart, quick to receive new friends, and, on returning with me from a picnic, where one of the party had been a pretty English girl, confided to me that she "would like to kiss that face round and those cheeks pink all the time," being evidently of Boccaccio's opinion—

"Bocca baciata non perde ventura,
Anzi rinnova come fa la luna."

She quickly honoured me with a place in her esteem, and, passing our days together, we became so closely united in affection and interests, that we might be described by the Italian saying of "two souls in one nut." Together we explore the country, Mafalda stepping out as bravely as if she wore the "seven-league boots," and search the fields for "grilli" as Ascension-tide draws near; together we relax our minds after study with "Les Malheurs de Sophie," of whose thrilling adventures and grievous and manifold sins Mafalda never wearies, much preferring her (although she speaks of her with some severity as "that Sophie, a child impossible") to the somewhat cloying sweetness of "Les petites filles modèles"; together we produce works of art in chalk and water-colour, and execute bold designs on canvas in scarlet wool; together we seek Mafalda's cot at night, and I sit beside her while she prays to her "Madonnina," and offers the childish petitions—more beautiful than she will know for many a day to come—"For all who suffer, for all who sin, for all who weep, for the 'poveri morti.'" The childish voice repeats slowly the tender words taught her by her mother; and if she does not yet know what it means to sin, to suffer, and to die, is the prayer therefore less availing for those who know?

When she has finished and "crossed" herself, the work of undressing and "pleating" her clothes is done quickly, and I tuck her into the crib above which hangs the picture of the "Mater Purissima," and to the bars of which are tied quaint little bags holding relics of the saints.

Five minutes later Mafalda is sleeping peacefully.

The night-light, floating in its vase of oil, gives to the quiet room something of the mysterious sanctity of a

shrine, and sure I am that, whether it be the Madonna and saints to whom she prays, or the Good Shepherd and white angels who guard her through the dark hours, kind and loving faces must gather around and smile upon a little life so innocent and sweet.

IV

A TUSCAN SPRING

I WONDER if, out of Paradise, there is anything more beautiful than a beautiful spring in Tuscany? It may be that I am dowered with too little imagination, but I confess I find it hard to picture any lovelier thing.

The Italian winter is a time of negations, when Nature sleeps, and, instead of the positive pleasures and pains of the northern season, there is simply *less* of everything pleasant,—of blue sky, sun and flowers; but when the voice of spring calls across the land, Tuscany arises, fairest, surely, among all the daughters of the earth.

One by one through the cold months I had welcomed her heralds, while listening for her voice from very far away. I had watched tiny ruby and emerald buds jewel the trees, and noted how the country air became gradually less silent, stirred by the hum of insects and the twittering of birds. I had gone out with Mafalda to gather the first frail catkins under the pale sun of February, and the violets which carpet the banks in early March. Together we had watched the drops of water form at the ends of the slashed, tightly-bound vine stems in sign of germination, had seen the peach and almond burst into rosy blossom among the olives, and—since English garden-treasures grow wild in Italy—picked sheaves of golden daffodils, of red and purple anemones, of yellow and

scarlet tulips and crimson gladioli among the springing corn.

Yet, though many messengers came, spring herself tarried; the skies were dark, the fine days rare and capricious, the winds a little bleak; and it was not until the end of April that she was with us in all her splendour, blossom-laden, as, four centuries ago, Botticelli painted her, with flower-strewn draperies and smiling mouth, and blue enigmatic eyes.

As I awoke in the early morning on the first of May, I mused over the springs I had spent in Tuscany, wondering if I had been as grateful as I should for so inestimable a blessing, or made the most of this joy for which many vainly sigh.

How strongly, yet how impotently, the passion for Italy burns in the hearts of many! What would many a one give to feel, but for once, the rapture of a Tuscan spring? And who can wonder if it be so, since surely a dry crust under the blue sky of Italy is better than a fatted calf in any less favoured land!

Goethe tells, in the "Italienische Reise," that once in his life the desire for Italy attained such force as to become suffering well-nigh unbearable; the casual mention of Italian things or places, the very sight of a Latin book, caused him unendurable torture; until at last, conquered by his longing, he slipped away to calm its fever in the Land of Heart's Desire.

Many such there are still, in far-off English cities full of noise and smoke, who would think the doors of Paradise were opening did the way lie clear for them to pass the great mountain-gates which are set to the northward of this lovely land: and I, I have been made free of all this beauty, dowered with this unspeakable privilege for—

how many rounded years? Certainly, if I am not happy, I ought to be! Life, which gives only thorns to some, has given me, with my thorns, many roses, which will retain a lingering fragrance to solace me even in those still years of age which now seem very far away.

It was the thought of my privileges, of the folly, nay, downright sin, of wasting in bed one unnecessary hour of such loveliness, which drove me out early on that May-day into a cool radiant world, bright with sunlight, sweet with roses and lilac, loud with a riot of joyous song which, from cypress, ilex and myrtle, seemed to echo Lorenzo de Medici's old Carnival ballad—

“Quant' è bella giovinezza,
Che si fugge tuttavia!
Chi vuol esser lieto sia,
Di doman non c'è certezza.”

No, of to-morrow there is no certainty. Who knows whether for me spring will ever again come round? In any case, youth will not last for ever. Without doubt I did well to rise betimes, and so secure at least one more perfect hour, whatever the future might give or steal.

Why do we not all rise with the sun? I wondered, as I leaned over the low wall of the garden and looked down the slopes of podere and up the opposite pine-clothed hills.

A small green lizard lay upon the broad ledge at a little distance, basking in the sun, while half a dozen of the same fraternity darted in and out of the crevices in the crumbling stone. In the fields below the maples were clothed with tender foliage, draped with fair tendrils by the clinging vines; the cherry trees were decked like dainty brides, in a splendour of white blossom; the olives

glittered silver in the early sunlight, their grey, twisted trunks rising from an emerald sea of young corn among which the scarlet poppies leapt like flame. The grassy banks were bright with a myriad buttercups and dandelions; in places the ground was carpeted by patches of deep crimson clover; along the green paths among the olives grew hedges of pink roses and stately ranks of iris,—the Florentine emblem,—blue and purple, with sharp sword-like leaves. The laburnums dangled their golden chains; the lilacs, a mass of white and purple, filled the garden with perfume; the acacias were in flower,—frail tassels of white bloom fringed with lace-like green; pale clusters of wistaria hung thickly against the wan, time-stained plaster of the Villa, and mingled with the long festoons of Banksia rose, white and yellow, which drooped about pergola and wall, clung to old moss-grown statues, and even wound about the cypress trees. Far above, the larks were pouring out their joy in the soft illimitable blue; around the loggia the newly returned swallows were skimming; in the garden the insects were busy about the freshly opened buds. Everywhere there were roses, roses. Down in the Florentine streets the flower-sellers would be offering them, yellow, pink, cream and crimson; on the altars of Madonna in the cool dim churches they would be laid, since to-day was the first of the month of Mary. Everywhere, alike in town and country, there was song and scent and joy and loveliness, and to me, at least, the world was “very Heaven” upon this first of May.

Strolling across the shimmering garden, between the glossy-leaved and golden-fruited lemon-trees, which, in their great earthen pots, had been carried out from their winter quarters to border the terraces and walks, I came, near the house, upon Adolfo, the gardener, padding about

on bare brown feet, filling the old majolica pots for the *salotti* with roses and lilac.

Adolfo is a hump-back,—a “gobbo,”—and, therefore, according to some quaint Tuscan superstition, believed to bring luck to whoever meets him, just as hay-carts in town, or a priest, a dwarf and a white horse in close proximity, are supposed to do. He married at nineteen, on which occasion he presented his wife with a small ring, while her gift was strictly utilitarian, consisting of six pairs of socks. They married for love, and were so poor that they had only straw to sleep on,—not a brilliant beginning by any means, but even so a change for the better for Theresa, who lost her mother as a little girl, and, since her father’s second wife used to beat her, went as “garzona,” or help, in a peasant family, where they gave her rough board and food, and, as wages, one franc a month.

Adolfo now, after eleven years of married life, is grey-haired, and to all appearance a man past middle age. His ambition is to possess a perfectly symmetrical family, boy and girl, boy and girl, the names as well as the children being arranged in pairs. He is already the proud parent of Guglielmo and Guglielma, Ubaldo and Ubalda; but though Fernando is quite eighteen months old, Fernanda has not yet arrived. However, I do not doubt that she will do so, as the contadini usually have amazing families, and probably, sooner or later, Adolfo’s desire will be gratified,—though it would thwart the purpose of a lifetime if, instead of Fernanda, a boy appeared upon the scene.

Adolfo, hearing my steps on the gravel, looked up from his work with a pull at his old straw hat.

“Buon giorno, Signorina.”

“Buon giorno, Adolfo. Che bella giornata!”

“Bella davvero, Signorina!” Adolfo evidently meant to enlarge upon the subject, only too delighted to be able to exercise his tongue at this early hour of the morning, when he generally, perforce, works in silence. He was, in fact, burning to exchange ideas, but his desire was not reciprocated. I knew that he wanted to ask me if the sun shines in England,—it is the question of every Italian who has not been there,—and as they do not believe me when I tell them, they might as well not ask at all.

It is always a surprise to them to hear that, since the sun shines upon both just and unjust, it also shines at times upon the English: their politeness but slightly veils their incredulity,—and as for London, they picture it under a perpetual extinguisher of fog, and pity us profoundly in our northern gloom.

No, certainly I was not going to waste such a morning in discussing the English climate with anyone. Besides, it was time for Mafalda to be out, so I called her through the grated window, and stuck a branch of lilac in the casement as a hint of the joys awaiting in the garden world.

The bough stuck in the window recalled, naturally enough, the ancient May-day customs with which the Florentines welcomed in the “Primavera”; when the young men of the city went forth in the dawning to gather hawthorn in the sweet, budding woods, and returned to offer it at the casements of their lady-loves, heralding, with songs and dances, the Tuscan spring.

The Florentines were always lovers of the “Primavera.” Of this there is witness enough in their ancient street named for the May-time, and in the descriptions of their old chroniclers of the feastings and pageants, the “dances

of pretty maidens" and "games of well-disposed and gallant youths," which welcomed in the spring. In those times, we read in Villani, "the Florentines abounded in delights and pleasures, ever feasting together; for every year at the Calends of May almost the whole city went about in bands and companies of men and women, with dances and many delights": and it was at such a festa that Dante, in his ninth year, first saw Beatrice, when, as Boccaccio tells us, he "received her image into his heart with so much affection that from that day henceforward, as long as he lived, it never again departed from him."

Sometimes, owing to the spirit of faction abroad in the city, these festivals used to end in violence, and one of the fierce brawls between the Bianchi and Neri began on May-day, 1300, when, in the Piazza Sta. Trinita, the merry-makers were dancing on the rough pavement as best they might, in the shadow of the tall houses, a lightsome crowd, with garlands of greenery, with songs of "trovatori" and "improvisatori," while the people stood by looking on.

But a number of young gallants of the Cerchi arrived on horseback, being armed because of the Donati. And as they stood looking on there appeared also a party of the Donati, who, either not recognising the Cerchi, or perhaps because they recognised them, spurred on them with their horses. A tumult naturally arose; the young girls, in their flowing "Zimarras" and silver garlands, were hurried away by their terrified parents, and a pretty little skirmish followed, where several were wounded, and the day which had begun with rejoicing ended in mourning and blood.

As I leaned over the wall, recalling these old days and waiting for Mafalda, I heard singing from the podere

below,—not the untrained notes of the peasants, but a beautiful voice, pure and rich, and the words of the song floated up to me—

“ Il primo giorno di calen di maggio
Andai nell' orto per cogliere un fiore
E vi trovai un uccellin selvaggio,
Che discorreva di cose d'amore,
O uccellin che viene di Fiorenza,
Insegnami l'amor come comincia,—
L'amor comincia con suoni e con canti,
E poi finisce con dolori e pianti.”

Who could it be singing like that? I put the question to Adolfo, who, delighted to enter into conversation, was ready with the whole story at once.

It was the Regina of Dolfi, she had nineteen years, and she had always sung;—oh yes, from the time when she was little,—but little! And eighteen months ago she had gone down to Florence and lived with a dressmaker, who, for help in her work, gave her food and lodging. And they said in the city that she had a fine voice, and if she were trained could sing in a theatre: so a teacher, “una maestra molto brava,” began to teach her. She stayed there a year, working hard. There was only a little closet under the stairs where she could practise, and there she used to sing and sing whenever she was not running errands or at work. Ma, che vuole! the Maestra asked, after the first, twenty francs a month for teaching her,—she might as well have asked for the moon, as Regina had only the clothes she stood in. Her brothers could not help her, nor her old father, and her sister wanted her at home to mind the baby and help in the fields, so here she was, as the Signorina saw!

Poor little Regina! It was a sad little story; just one glimpse of the world to stir ambition and make her discontented with the old life without opening a way into the new. Ah, well! who knows? It is spring, and spring is the time for hope, when all beautiful things seem possible, and perhaps this little singer may yet find a friend and an open door.

She did not sound very sad as she sang among the vines on that May morning; but how should she, in a world so lovely? Indeed, as I listened to the song coming up through the olives and roses, I wondered how anyone could desire to leave this glorious country to be shut up in narrow streets. But few of us, perhaps, know in which direction our truest happiness lies, and to Regina, no doubt, the stage of a theatre seems far more beautiful than the sunny fields.

As for me, if I am not happy I ought to be. Horace desired four things for happiness,—a modest country house, a little wood, a fountain near the door, and a garden of fruit and flowers; and all these I have in the fullest and most generous degree.

There is the great Villa, quiet and spacious, a house of old romance: across the valley, clothing the hills, are the still, fragrant pine-woods, where I can lie all day and watch the sky: beside me I hear the splash of the fountain in its mossy "vasca": around spreads the garden where roses and asparagus, lilies and strawberries, thrive side by side. Yes, it is certainly well that I am happy, for I should be dreadfully—and rightly—ashamed of myself if I were not.

At last Mafalda arrived, a little flustered, since it appeared that, going in search of me in the opposite direction to that which I had taken, she had encountered

the turkey-cock, and they had had a difference of opinion about the right of way, whereupon he had assumed a menacing attitude, very alarming to the spirit of even so valiant a six-year-old as she.

According to Mafalda's account the impression conveyed was that, after sternly regarding the turkey with a gaze to pale even his fiery wattles, she had, deciding, on ripe consideration, that discretion was the better part, retreated with dignity. Forming my own conclusion, however, from her flushed face, her admission that she had "made it a fall," and her confused references to the sudden appearance of Santina and half a dozen of the kitchen and stable attachés,—unaccountable if Mafalda really retired in the ordered and stately way she would have me believe,—I imagine I was not far wrong in thinking that she had fled roaring in the direction of the house.

I did not, however, betray my suspicions, and we sat down on one of the old stone benches to "bunch" the lilies of the valley I had gathered, and entered into conversation as to the doings of the day.

"It is a day very nice!" Mafalda observed complacently. "How I am glad when it makes the fine weather. The days wet I like not; non li posso soffrire: they are *too* noisi!"

This is a point upon which we agree, for since I have come to Italy I can hardly live out of the sun, and a week of rain seems to plunge my whole soul into gloom.

Mafalda's idea of an agreeable morning was to take Lucas and his little carriage, and visit a distant contadino, where she had learnt from Salvatore, the bailiff, that there had been the joyous event of the birth of twelve infant pigs.

Well, I was quite willing. So after we had breakfasted,

Lucas was led to the door, magnificent in new harness, and with a pheasant's feather at least two feet high erect upon his head.

Lucas is a donkey of character. His strength of will is "multum in parvo," for he is at the same time the smallest and most obstinate ass I have ever seen. One of his peculiarities is an extreme sensitiveness about his little hoofs, and he generally causes quite four men to "sudare" together before he will allow them to be washed. The "Ciuco," as they call him familiarly, is not popular in the stable; he is too opinionated; and, from the resentful eye with which Ulysse, the under-bailiff, regarded him as he led him to the door, I imagine that there had been a previous tussle—in which Lucas had not come off worst.

Mounting into the low cart, I took whip and reins; while Mafalda, seated at my side, holding the dangling ends of the latter and provided with an olive switch, firmly believed that the well-being of the whole turnout rested with her, and gave herself all the airs of an experienced whip.

After some encouragement and expostulation, and a stimulating poke in the side from Ulysse, Lucas consented to set off at a brisk walk down the olive-bordered road, and we passed along very happily, Mafalda loudly chanting—

" Connaissez vous l'histoire
De ce petit Lucas,"

—an unprincipled and ill-bred little person, who, at table "léchait tous les plats," and was consequently sent to "coucher avec les rats," and from whom our Lucas has derived (I admit, undeservedly) his name.

All went well as long as the road ran along on the level, but at the first hill the "Ciuco" stopped abruptly, and there was no possibility of doubting what he meant. Obediently I descended, and, relieved of this weight, he was setting off up the slope when, out of the corner of his eye, he perceived Mafalda, and instantly stopped again.

Well, of course it was a piece of weak indulgence, but —there was no reason why Mafalda should *not* stretch her legs, so I lifted her down, and we both toiled up on foot, I holding the reins loosely while Lucas zigzagged to and fro across the road.

From his expression I imagine he expected me to carry him, or at least to push his cart, and on finding what he had believed was a feeling heart to be a "very pebble-stone," he assumed the drooping aspect of an elderly, overworked donkey, heroically sacrificing his last strength to gratify a cruel mistress.

This desire in Lucas for pity I cannot away with. No one is more attached to, more patient with animals than I am, more fearful lest they should be over-burdened or overworked; but why a young, well-nourished donkey should not occasionally take some trifling share in the world's work I do not see, and it rouses me to fury when the people who pass Lucas treading wearily along the road, murmur, "Poverino, così piccolo di lavorare," and look at me reproachfully as if I were a tyrant overtaxing his feeble strength.

So exasperated was I by his conduct, that at the top of the hill I treated him with some severity, which had an effect so beneficial that, surprised out of his languor, he took us at a quick and pleasant trot all the way to our destination, to Mafalda's intense delight.

Having visited the pigs and other live-stock, and seen

the latest baby, so fine a child as to justify his mother's description of "un pallino di lardo!"—a ball of lard,—and received a gift of young bean-pods,—curiously enough an Italian dessert delicacy,—we turned our faces homewards through the fresh green woods, fragrant with flowers and musical with song.

Mafalda, a little sleepy with the morning air, had ceased singing, and leaned drowsily against my arm. Lucas moved forward steadily if slowly; and as for me, I had no wish to hurry through a world so beautiful.

Was it not in some such grove as that which we were passing that Botticelli saw his vision of the Primavera? in myrtle thickets such as these that the old Quattro-cento poet heard the birds which "carolled to the Tuscan spring"? and in such a tangle of rose and iris and buttercup and lilac and wistaria as ran wild everywhere, that early painters learned that spirit which fills the old pictures, and which, with their quaint stiff little flowers, are quick even to-day with a joyous sense of spring?

As she, the great "Rinascimento," had come to us now, so she had come to them once, so she has come year by year, through all the four centuries which lie between us, and for thousands of forgotten years before: so she will come, year by year, eternally fair and fresh, long after our little day is over. For seed-time shall never fail, nor hope die out of the world; and when she ceases to come as we have known her it will only be because, the winter being finally over, and the time of flowers and the singing of birds for ever established, she reigns in a Paradise of un fading fairness and never-tiring joy.

V

THE HARVEST

WHEN ancient painters loved to set the glowing colours of their saints and angels upon a golden background, did they first, perhaps, learn the loveliness of such setting from watching the bright figures of the harvesters among the golden corn? I wondered, as I sat on the bank beneath an olive tree, slowly eating a handful of great Casentino cherries, and watching the reapers lay the corn low with steady rhythmic stroke. The peasant girl, standing bare-footed at a little distance in a picturesque dress of blue and crimson, her wide-brimmed hat of Tuscan straw rounding her head like a halo, and her baby in her arms, might well, with the sea of ripe corn behind her, have inspired the genius of an old master, and been reproduced, a little stiffly as becomes Madonna, upon some altar-piece. And although learned people would certainly laugh at my surmise, and talk of Etruscan and Byzantine influences, and a hundred other theories, doubtless with right and reason, I should like to think that some of that golden loveliness which lives in early Italian pictures was learned by their painters in the harvest-fields.

The heat of the day had been intense. Since eight o'clock in the morning we had not ventured out of the shade, for the summer sun is far too powerful to be trifled

with, and the true Italian does not "bask" in it, but keeps out of its way as much as he can. Even the reapers rest in the midday, for the sun strikes fiercely, and deaths from sunstroke had been happening every day. Therefore they went out to work in the morning twilight, continuing long after the moon had rolled above the Eastern Apennines, and in the burning noontide hours the land was silent and deserted, save for the sawing of the Cicale in the plane-trees and olives, where they throb through the hot, dreamy hours like a pulse.

The air in summer is loud with their whirring. It penetrates even the cool, spacious rooms of the Villa, where, with closed "persiani," we pass our days in dim green light, until evening sets us free.

It was still hot when Mafalda and I went out at six o'clock and took our way along the narrow farm-road to the harvest-field.

We seemed to have passed into a world of gold and silver, for the yellow grain rippled in waves around the olives,—trees of silver rising from a sea of gold, in which, here and there, the poppies flamed.

Above, the sky was of a soft and profound blue, and the sun, stooping towards the western hills, sent a flood of level light across the land.

Finding a suitable bank, from which I could look across the corn slopes and the Valley of the Arno to the far blue mountains, I sat down to watch the reapers and eat my cherries, while Mafalda busied herself in searching for Cicale, or, failing to entrap the living ones, for their empty shells.

The Cicale, gladdest of insects, cling to the bark of the trees, whirring, whirring through the hot hours, until after a short space of rapturous life the beating heart of

joy is stilled, and the little body, a mere fragile shell, remains upon the tree.

Mafalda is learned in the ways of Cicale. She knows how to detect the greyish body on the grey olive branch; how to approach cautiously and seize it unawares; how, if it remains obstinately silent, to tickle it beneath to make it sing; so I knew she would be happy for hours searching for them, and shaking the trees to make them fly off in a booming throng.

The harvest was a little late. Reaping should begin, according to ancient usage, at the feast of St. John the Baptist, but a rainy spell had delayed it, and the first swathe had not fallen before we were in July. Yet even so, Italy was far ahead of England; and needs be, since in autumn, while the English farmer is getting in his corn-harvest, the Italian must be gathering his grapes.

The scene before me was a charming one, for rural life in Tuscany is wonderfully picturesque. The men in cotton shirts, with long woollen scarves of bright colours twisted about the tops of their trousers, and large straw hats, reaped with scythes and sickles, harvesting the bread of another year—as it had been ordained that they should do—in the sweat of their brow. Of machinery they know little. The Italian peasant adheres to the agricultural methods of his forefathers, and continues faithful to the customs which have been handed down from age to age: and though associations are now formed in Tuscany for the study of agriculture, the *Georgics* are none the less still descriptive of Italian rural life.

The ground is first broken up with a primitive, home-made plough of seasoned wood, drawn up and down the furrows by patient, mild-eyed oxen under their yoke of lime or beech. Certainly it is a team which, for the slow-

ness of the beasts and rudeness of the implements, would rouse an English farmer's scorn.

These oxen, which tread deliberately among the vines and olives, muzzled that they may not tear off the young shoots, are the pride of the contadini. They are stall-fed, for there are no meadows for pasture in Tuscany, and the sight of a herd of cows grazing in a green meadow is unknown. The milking-cows, where any are kept, remain at home like respectable matrons, passing a life of cloistered seclusion in a stall thick with cobwebs, and the contadini believe that it would be almost certain death to them to walk abroad. The oxen are under the yoke all day, doing the entire service of English cart-horses, and only retire to their stables at night, when it is the work of the women and children of the family to provide fodder, which consists, according to the season, of vine and oak leaves, or clover and grass.

The grain, after the ploughing, is sown by hand. The sower goes up and down the field, flinging with wide, generous gesture the seed, which, gathered to the heart of the earth, is to arise, after silent months of preparation, as the bread of the future; and when the corn is sprung up, it is reaped by the sickle, which cuts the stalks with clean and sharp stroke.

There were several strangers working among the reapers, for, as harvest draws near, and extra hands are needed, labourers—men from the mountains whose crops ripen later, or men who have no crops of their own to reap—collect in the cities to hire themselves, and in the great Piazza of the People at Florence they gather in crowds, their few possessions tied up in coloured handkerchiefs, their scythes and sickles slung across their backs, waiting, like the workers in the old parable, to be hired.

There is little fear of their not finding employment, for time is precious, and in the stress of harvest work is continued even on Sundays, so great is the people's fear lest some untimely storm or change in the weather should rob them of their crops.

The grain, when gathered, is threshed out before each peasant's house in the "Aia" (an open terrace of stone or potter's clay), being either beaten by the men with hand-flails, or trodden out by horses or oxen tramping round and round upon the straw. This work becomes second nature to the animals, and just as an old cavalry horse has been known, at the sound of bugles, to rush on to a parade ground and join in the manœuvres, so a horse after threshing in his youth has been known to dash into a threshing floor, his discomfited rider on his back, and, from old habit, take his place among the others in stamping round and round. Many a time, riding on some still mellow day in August along the winding roads among the mountains, one comes suddenly upon an open space where, knee-deep in straw, the horses or oxen are threshing; and the picturesque costumes of the people, the golden grain, the old scriptural scene of the oxen treading out the corn, is unforgettable in its poetry and charm.

So, too, are the processions to be met trudging home in the evenings. The sacks of winnowed grain are slung across horses and donkeys; upon them the little children, too small to walk, are perched; beside and behind, a straggling caravan, walk men and women, carrying tools, flasks and baskets, charming figures in the waning light.

Of course, to a well-regulated mind—which mine, I confess, is not—it is all dreadfully behind the times. England is more practical, more progressive,—but in the mechanical methods of agriculture there is some loss if

much gain ; and I thank Heaven that in this Italian land life is less hurried, less steam-ridden, and that so sweet a joy has been accorded me as to witness this lovely and leisured gathering of the fruits of earth ; to see men commit their seed to the field upon which the priest has given his blessing, and to see the cross set in every harvest sheaf as an acknowledgment that all increase cometh of the Lord.

Can the labourer who rides round the fields on a sowing machine, who later in the year makes the same circuit on a reaper and a gleaner, and presently threshes out his corn by steam, feel that love of the land which yet lingers in the hearts of those who till every hand's-breadth with toil and much patience ? or retain any of that poetry which seems to lurk, under all roughness and ignorance, in the hearts of those who live, in truth, *on* and *by* the soil ?

Perhaps the system of land tenure in Tuscany serves to foster the peasants' love for the fields in which they labour, for they are not mere hirelings, sweating in another man's service ; they have a vital interest in the ground they till and the trees they plant.

Of land-leasing in the English sense there is little : on almost every estate is established the system of "Mezzadria," a division of labour and capital which arouses in the contadini, as part-proprietor, a genuine interest in crops and cattle.

Every estate worked upon the "Mezzadria" plan is divided into various farms or "poderes," varying in extent from seven or eight to thirty acres, or even more.

Upon each podere stands a house, stables, and out-buildings, all provided by the "Padrone," and for the use of these and the land the contadino gives his work, so that a farm is often handed down from father to son, from

one generation to another, and the peasant learns to love the land he cultivates as something of his own.

This system of half-and-half tenure was instituted, writes one of its Italian supporters, "in the palmy days of the Roman Republic, when the plebeians obtained civil rights, but fell into disuse when slavery became general."

It was re-established in the fourteenth century, and perhaps the peasants' custom of speaking of themselves as their *Padrone's* "*gente*" (Latin, *gens*) is a survival of the Roman origin.

It is a system which has many advantages.

The people, if poor, have at least a roof to cover them, a piece of land to till. They learn to love the soil they cultivate with something of the old pagan passion for the earth, which is, after all, natural to all men, since we, too, are of the clay from which the Potter shapeth the world. The bitter, grudging feeling, often aroused in a day-labourer towards his master, is unfelt, for the *contadino* and *Padrone* share both gains and losses, and the former in desiring his master's prosperity is also desiring his own.

The *Padrone*, in addition to land and house, provides such oxen, horses and donkeys as are necessary, presses for oil and wine making, and tools, carts, and other stock; but if an ox or other beast dies, the loss is shared.

The *contadino*, on his side, pays, instead of rent, one half in kind of every crop—corn, grapes and olives; and in money, one half of any profit made by the sale of animals, vegetables, eggs and milk. A bailiff, known as the "*Fattore*," keeps all accounts, and once a year a professional accountant goes over the books and reads out to each man in the *Padrone's* presence all the items to his

own credit or his master's during the year, so that either can correct any mistake.

Of course this system, like all others, is capable of abuse, especially when an absentee landlord leaves all in the hands of his factor, who in such cases, by skilful adjustment of the books, makes his profit from master and peasant alike.

“Fammi Fattore un anno
E se non mi aricco, mi danno,”

is a saying supposed to express the usual way of bailiffs, but where the factor is an honest man there can be little doubt that the system works well.

Certainly in Tuscany it seems to,—this Tuscany which surely deserves the old description of “a land of wheat and barley and vines and fig-trees, of oil, olive and honey,” so fair and fruitful is it. The peasants work their *poderes* as if they were gardens, turning every inch to account, and never do I go out to the Villa without being struck afresh by the marvellous detailed beauty, the sheer loveliness of this land which is as the very “Garden of the Lord.”

It is a country exquisite, poetic and luxuriant; but it has nothing of the austere and solemn grandeur of more desolate regions, that majesty of the mountains which raise their heads into regions where only God and the angels dwell; scenes so grand that before them one stands silent as before the sea. No, this the Valley of the Arno has not, but as a Paradise of sweet and ordered loveliness it cannot be surpassed.

Certainly, everywhere, on that July evening, my eyes were met by beauty: on the right the pine-woods swept up to the sky; to the left the plain lay, glorious in the

setting sun; the golden corn, the trees of ripe crimson peaches, seemed to speak of hopes crowned and promises fulfilled; the sawing of the Cicale of the splendour and ecstasy of life.

Every now and then Mafalda trotted up that I might hear the singing of some specially gifted Cicala, or a peasant passed with that bright greeting of "felice sera," which they never fail to give. Otherwise I was undisturbed, and glad to be so, for there are hours in life more precious than years, hours of which memory makes ever a little space of sacred silence in the midst of mediocre days. There is a stillness, a mysticism, in the golden heat of an Italian summer which is, to me, at least, more profound than the stillness of a dim church or a dark night. One feels during the long July days as if time were in a sense suspended, so remote does the outer world seem, so very far removed all jarring voices, and the immense quiet and solitude of the country, blotting out past bitterness, wraps one's soul in an impregnable peace.

At last the sun dipping below the mountains, and the bells of the Ave Maria floating up the hill, warned me that, however long the summer days may be, there cometh a time when it ringeth to supper and mosquito-netted cots, and I called Mafalda, who, weary of Cicale, was gleaming with all the ardour of an infant Ruth.

She, however, rebelled openly.

How could the harvest go on without her? she, who was gleaming the corn to make a "panino,—but a panino of a squisitezza such!" for my breakfast to-morrow? No; it was a thing impossible that she should leave the fields!

"Go, you, if you have hunger; for me, I have to do, and I rest here, I," she declared, with a gesture of

dismissal. But when she perceived that this lofty manner was unavailing to secure her desires, she tacked about, patted my "cheeks round," called me her "little one," and enquired, with injured pathos—

"Does it not seem hard to you
When all the sky is clear and blue,
And I should like so much to play,
To have to go to bed by day?"

As I had myself taught her the verse, I could hardly resist this poetic appeal, so Mafalda's spirits were restored by the promise of a walk after her supper, and, as she told me complacently, the other children would think it was "the grown-up people's feet" when they heard her "passing in the street."

Strict truth would have impelled me to say that here in the heart of the country we have no streets, and that the only children in the neighbourhood—all happy-go-lucky little peasants—would probably be skipping about long after inexorable fate had drawn Mafalda's "Zanzara" nets; but this would have been tactless, so I held my peace.

It was already dusk when we reached the house; the evening colours were dark and soft, with deep misty purples gathering among the trees, and the peasant women, passing barefooted with their copper pots to the well, or carrying great bundles of fresh-cut grass for the cattle, were wonderfully picturesque.

By the time we set out again with the dogs, the after-glow had quite faded. So dark did it seem on leaving the lamp-lit house that the grove of cypresses at the gate showed little blacker than the sky itself, in which shone a few big stars. It was profoundly still, save for the splash

of the fountain, the song of the nightingales, and the hooting of the owls.

As we turned the corner by the church, a flickering oil-lamp, burning before an image of Madonna in a little shrine, shone like a benediction upon the lonely road.

By the time we reached the harvest-field the full moon had risen and shone upon the road, which wound, a glimmer of white, among the poderes; the wan light silvered the olives, and threw mysterious shadows across the fields; while beyond the valley it seemed as if the hills were sleeping, almost one could see them breathe.

The reapers were still at work; their voices came to us, softened by distance, across the field.

In the reeds beside the stream the frogs were croaking; the fireflies were flitting like red sparks among the corn, and now and then a glow-worm skimmed by—a tremulous, intermittent gleam of emerald light.

Did Mafalda know the legend of the fireflies? Ah well, perhaps she is too little to understand it,—and yet how beautiful it is. For the fireflies are nothing but the love-words which, in this Southern land, are so burning and sweet and passionate, that Eros the love-god, grieved that they should pass into nothingness, ordained that they should live for ever in the warm purple darkness among the roses and pomegranates, the olives and corn.

As I watched them, in their mysterious dance, and thought of Romeo below a window in old Verona, and Ippolito waiting in the Via di' Bardi for Dianora's sign, and a thousand other lovers of a past and present day, the superstition seemed to hold a profound verity, and I was glad that there was present no American cousin to class these living sparks under the universal name of "bugs"!

Mafalda had a legend of her own, of far more practical

application, and, grieved by my ignorance, explained to me that, though we thought what we saw were "Lucciole," they were really fairies, and that if a little girl caught one and put it under a glass, in the morning the "Lucciola" was gone, but instead remained a little silver piece,—a thing very wonderful, but not to be doubted, as it had happened to her "mamma" when *she* was a little girl.

Of course Mafalda wanted to catch a firefly, and, this wish gratified, and the tiny quivering light loosely imprisoned in a handkerchief, it was an excellent pretext for inducing her to turn her steps towards the house, so impatient was she to prove the magic of her Lucciola,—a magic which, I explained, was never worked for little girls who were not in bed by ten.

Twenty minutes later she was sleeping peacefully, and, having replaced the firefly under her inverted tooth-glass by a little silver coin, I carried the tiny creature into the garden and loosed it over the terrace to join its fellows, and as I did so the last ox-wain rolled slowly by to the rick-yard; the contadini, seeing me, called up their "felice notte," and then all was still, while the harvest moon shone upon the lonely fields, where, through the short summer night, the fireflies danced among the corn.

VI

A VISIT TO DARIO

WE were in trouble and he delivered us; that was how the friendship with Dario began.

We had lost our way,—Francesca (who is two and a half times Mafalda's age), and Lucas and I together,—and found ourselves at half-past twelve, far from home, upon a long stretch of unknown road which wound among the hills. A contadina, with the courtesy which characterises the Tuscan country-folk, left her work to show us a "scorciatoja," or short-cut; but even this proved very long as well as very rough. Lucas toiled on, dragging his cart, and trying to set his tiny hoofs to the best advantage in the corn-stubble and down the wooded hills, while Francesca and I plodded behind with the contadina: and the hour grew later, and still, nailed to the trees, were the unfamiliar "Bandite" ("trespass boards") of other estates, which told us that home and luncheon were yet far away. At last, from a hilltop, we saw, across the valley, the welcome sight of a familiar farmhouse, and the woman was inspired with the idea of calling the men of the family to our aid. Indeed, there seemed little hope that we, unaided, could persuade Lucas, who evidently considered himself the most aggrieved of donkeys, to adventure the stony descent and clamber up the other side. So we all began to shout "Oh, Sorbi! oh, Dario!" at the top of our voices, and in a

few minutes saw the latter precipitating himself recklessly down the opposite slope,—barefooted among the rocks and brambles,—probably thinking someone was at least being killed.

There was immediate relief in his presence, and, saying a grateful good-bye to our late protectress, we went on hopefully under Dario's care.

This ministering angel at once assumed the direction of Lucas, whom he treated in a most masterful manner, stimulating his courage by loud cries and ejaculations, almost lifting the carriage over the boulders, and leading the poor little ass down steep and stony places which I should hardly have ventured to present to his resentful eyes.

Arrived safely on the opposite hilltop, Dario was urgent that we should honour his home by refreshing ourselves; but the lateness of the hour made that impossible, so, promising a speedy visit, we urged Lucas at his best pace down the white, winding road towards the house.

The promised visit was not, however, forgotten, and a few days later we set out, on foot this time, to pay it, knowing that nothing else would so much gratify the Sorbi family, nor so well requite their timely help in need.

A grey stone house on the edge of the woods, a cart-track winding down to it between rows of olives, was what we saw as we emerged from the scented shadow of the pines.

“If he is at home, what shall I call him, I?” asked Mafalda, lagging behind, while Francesca ran up and down the grassy banks gathering frail pink cyclamens. “Shall I say ‘Signore’?”

“No, my sweet one, call him Dario! He would think you were laughing at him if you called him anything else,” I assured her, for Mafalda is a punctilious little soul in matters of etiquette, and would not for the world be found wanting in courtesy or respect. When, in the evening, the time comes for confidences in the chimney-corner, she asks with extreme politeness, “You permit that I sit upon it the knee?” and only after leave has been given, with my assurance that nothing will please me better, does she clamber up, and, with one arm round my neck, settles herself comfortably to listen to stories, or to describe to me the wonderful things she sees in the glowing caves between the logs.

Dario and his father-in-law, old Sorbi, were mending a waggon on the Aia, the former chanting lustily one of those untranslatable “Stornelli” which are the growth of the Italian soil. Song is the habit of Tuscan peasants and servants, who sing alike at work and play for gladness of spirit; and Dario, especially, inherits this gift from his grandfather, who was one of the old minstrels who used to roam the country from fair to wedding, improvising rhymes and songs.

Both he and Sorbi at once dropped their tools and hastened forward with brilliant smiles of welcome, and quite a pleasant bustle of excitement pervaded the little homestead as we arrived on the doorstep with half a dozen dogs.

No courtier could have done the honours of his house more simply or more graciously than did these peasants. With frank and charming courtesy they offered us their best, both of accommodation and refreshment. Dario, hastening to and fro on bare brown feet, brought rush-bottomed chairs from the house and ranged them under

the loggia; then, responding to our tentative suggestion of fruit with a cheery "Eh, altro!" seized a basket and disappeared into the podere, to return in a few minutes with the freshest of green and purple figs.

"La Sorba," an old woman whose wide straw hat framed a face like a ruddy, wrinkled apple, fetched glasses and a great straw-covered "fiasco" of wine; while the "Sposina," Dario's wife, and daughter of the house, smiled shyly at us from the doorstep, where she sat with three black-eyed children clinging to her, and the last baby in her arms. It must be owned that both she and "La Sorba" were, like most peasant women on six days of the week, very slatternly, with old petticoats, loose, coloured bodices and uncombed hair, but none the less were they very picturesque. The quaint costumes of the contadini have, alas! disappeared; but whatever the Tuscan peasant dons as a working dress seems to acquire a certain intangible charm. While the clothes they proudly put on for Sunday—the loud stripes and plaids, the bright printed calicoes, the yellow boots—are hideous, the weather-worn garments of every day, faded and mellowed by the weather, make patches of warm colour, purple, red and orange, among the olives and vines.

The scene on that autumn morning was a quaint and pretty one, essentially Italian in all its details, as was the old farm with its thick walls of rough stone, and its loggia with rounded arches—one of the characteristic features of a contadino's house.

A stone stair up the side of the house, opening at the top on to a balcony, led into the large dim kitchen, where a faint oil-lamp flickered before a picture of Our Lady. A small iron-barred window beyond gave a glimpse of far blue hills. There was a hooded stone fireplace, over

which was fastened a bough of olive blessed at the church last Palm Sunday; a rough wooden table, an old cupboard, and a few stools. A bundle of hemp hung in one corner; from the beams were suspended strings of onions and bunches of dried herbs. Clean it was not, certainly,—indeed, I doubt if the peasants ever wash their houses,—and the stone walls and rafters were blackened by wood smoke; but it must be remembered that water, especially in summer, is scarce in Tuscany, so that cleanliness requires an effort greater perhaps than the people have any inclination to make.

Outside, under the loggia, stood a scarlet ox-waggon, and some huge earthenware vessels, coloured an exquisite blue from having contained the sulphate of copper with which olives are syringed as a protection against blight—a blue with which the peasants sometimes dye their old straw hats. Against the wall hung a sickle and other tools, and several flasks made from dried and emptied gourds. Beyond lay the Aia, a large yard irregularly paved with grey stone, where fowls were pecking; on the low, broad wall which surrounded it were spread trays of figs, split peaches, scarlet tomatoes and orange-tinted pumpkins, drying in the sun for winter use. In the thickness of the house-wall a little shrine had been hollowed to hold a figure of “Madonna” with the “Gesulino” in her arms, and before it stood a handful of wildflowers in a china cup. Beyond the Aia lay the podere, a serene world of grey and green; the olives varied in tint, now green, now silver, as the breeze swept over them; the vines burned bronze and crimson; and shutting in this peaceful nook were the pine-woods, and range after range of purple hills. Certainly, seen on a sunny day in such surroundings, the peasant’s seems an

enviable lot, spent in the pure air, in the midst of lovely scenery, his labour to till the soil from which he was taken and to which he must, by and by, return. Sunshine around him, songs on his lips, gaiety in his heart,—these are the first impressions made by a Tuscan peasant.

But in reality it is a hard life of incessant toil, alike for men and women. The contadino, from dawn to sunset, must dig and plant and sow and reap: his wife must nurse, cook, clean, feed the beasts, cut grass and fodder, help in the work of the fields. Even the children must work as soon as they are big enough to weed or pick out stones.

The peasants live poorly, the most prosperous having three meals a day, but eating little save polenta made of maize flour; beans, mixed with salt and oil; bread, and occasional additions of vegetables, maccaroni and cheese. Few of them keep cows, and so have no milk, though a goat sometimes supplies a little for the children. They use oil for cooking; and butter is almost unknown to them, as even those who have cows do not make it, but sell the milk direct to the Padrone or to some large dairy in the town.

It was a gay little meal which we had there on the old Aia,—the fruit of the land, offered and received with the simplicity of Arcadia, and eaten on the soil where it was grown, in sight of sky and hills.

The red country wine, the round amber-coloured loaf of dark bread which Dario sliced with a sickle-shaped knife, the fresh figs and clusters of white and purple grapes, were all simple things, yet surely, in their fresh perfection, food fit for the gods.

Wine for the children is usually a forbidden luxury, but on this day of days they were allowed it as a treat,

and considered Dario the most amiable of men when, far from pouring out a grudging finger-breadth, he filled their glasses with an unsparing hand and a cheery "Non faccia complimenti! fa bene! fa bene!"

Old Sorbi, a short, sturdy man in a soft felt hat, stood by, entertaining us with his views on the weather, the crops, and the coming fair at the Impruneta; while Dario enlivened us from time to time with a burst of vivacious talk.

No, in answer to Mafalda's shy question, he had no sheep. There was no one to mind them: but the Padrone had promised that when the "bimbo" there, with a jerk of his head towards his eldest grandchild, a round-eyed, barefooted boy of seven, should be big enough to mind them, he should have a flock. Meantime, he had oxen, and a pig,—if the Signoria wished to see the pig?

The Signoria did, and the creature dear to St. Anthony's heart was accordingly ushered on to the Aia, grunting cheerfully, and eager to accept fig-skins and crusts of bread.

Old Sorbi is the "Capoccia" or head of his family, a dignity strictly observed in every contadino household. It is an office which usually, though not necessarily, descends from father to son, and gives the person who fills it full authority in all family affairs. It is he who manages everything, keeps the money, rules despotically younger brothers, sons, and daughters-in-law. It is he who represents the family legally to the Padrone, and is responsible in all things for the land, utensils, and beasts. The other members of the household may offer advice, may join him in consultation, but it is emphatically he who acts.

The head of the women, or house-mother, is called the "Massaia," and is usually an elderly person, who may be mother, wife, or sister of the Capoccia. It is she who controls the feminine branch of the establishment—subject always to the Capoccia's approval; she who apportions work to the daughters and daughters-in-law, oversees the cooking, the sewing, the straw-plaiting, and all such woman's work.

Family affections are usually very strong among the peasants, as well as affection for the land on which they were born. They live together in patriarchal fashion; the old father, with possibly a younger brother or two, three or four stalwart sons, and their wives, who come to settle in their father-in-law's house and share the work in-doors and out,—mere farm servants without a servant's wage. To these may be added a tribe of children; and yet, wonderful to relate, considering how trying such an arrangement must be to the temper, and what friction must at times ensue, they live, as a rule, in good-fellowship and peace. Occasionally, when a clan becomes too numerous to be accommodated by the house, or supported by the crops, a branch settles on another farm on the same estate, or, where that is impossible, as near the old home as they can.

The ambition of a contadino is to have many sons to work the land, as otherwise labour must be hired, and where that cannot be afforded the peasant's lot is indeed a hard one.

When a contadino possesses, like Sorbi, one daughter, it is usual to marry her "in the house"; that is, to take her husband into her father's house to help her father in the work, and some day to succeed himself to the proud position of "Capoccia," and see his own

sons grow up as heirs to the goodly acres and the old stone farm.

Dario might well have good hopes of this happy consummation, being already the father of three chubby boys and a "mimina"; and he surveyed the little group on the doorstep proudly, as a man who had well fulfilled his mission,—for where could old Sorbi have found a worthier son-in-law than he?

Mafalda, having heard rumours of a new-born calf, grew restless with excitement, and a visit to the byre was accordingly suggested, where, by its creamy mother's side, lay the tiny, wistful-eyed creature, a red string tied round its neck to keep off the evil eye, for the contadini, though they do not care to admit it, are full of superstitions, and cherish many an old legend about ghosts, witches, fays and elves.

Woe to the unfortunate person who acquires the reputation for having the evil eye! He may be the gentlest of creatures, overflowing with the milk of human kindness, and blameless of any ill-will towards his neighbours or their goods. To have been present two or three times when misfortunes have occurred; to have, in a careless moment, suggested the possibility of some evil happening which afterwards came to pass,—these things are quite enough to start the rumour which will grow faster than Jack's magic beanstalk, and, wherever he passes, "horns" will be surreptitiously made to ward off the mischief which his presence would otherwise bring.

Old Sorbi gazed proudly at the calf and its mother, and with even more affection at the pair of great white oxen in the neighbouring stall; one of whom, lying on his bed of dry fern, rose indolently at the sound of his master's voice, first kneeling, and then straightening

his hind legs with deliberation, until at last he stood erect.

The contadini have usually a passion for their oxen, treat them with the utmost kindness, and talk to them as if they were human, for, as Sorbi told us, with a sounding slap by way of caress on the shoulder of the nearest, "It is they, Signorina, who earn the bread. 'Chi ha carro e buoi, fa bene i fatti suoi';"¹ and Dario nodded approvingly as, with a handful of straw, he occupied the shining moment in grooming their glossy sides.

Dario is a tall, able-bodied fellow, but his head was much below the level of the oxen, who looked, as the peasants say, like mountains, so enormous was their height and bulk.

The last words of old Bacchiche, one of the contadini, to the sorrowing sons gathered round his bed when he was cut off untimely by pneumonia at the age of seventy-seven, were, "Ragazzi, rispettate sempre il bestiame e i padroni,"² words entirely typical of the attitude to life of a peasant of the old school.

The sons to whom this exhortation was addressed, grown men of forty or fifty, had been in subjection to their father all their lives as completely as children. In obedience to him they had trudged week by week to a distant and lonely church, because he believed that the village church, which stood several miles nearer, was a place of temptation; since a village meant a wine-shop, and evil companions who might tempt these blameless youths from the paths of sobriety and virtue.

In vain their comrades twitted them with their submission; they had been trained to respect their father's

¹ "Who has cart and oxen, does well his business."

² "Boys, always respect the beasts and the masters!"

will implicitly, even in the matter of the wives he chose for them, and were so well accustomed to order themselves lowly and reverently to all their betters, first of whom stood the Padrone, that there was hardly need of their father's dying words.

On our return to the Aia, "La Sorba"—peasant women being generally referred to with the utmost simplicity by the feminine form of their husband's name—invited me, in response to some comment on the size of the house, to visit the upper storey and see for myself what a Tuscan farm was like.

Mounting the flight of stone stairs, we passed from the kitchen through several rooms, all comfortless and bare. The old people's room contained only a bed, a chair, and a chest on which stood, under a glass case, a plaster "Bambino Gesù"; the next was as scantily furnished; in the remaining rooms were tools and piles of grain.

I asked "La Sorba" if she had any of the jewellery which the contadini used to hand down from one generation to another; for the Sorbi, being a prosperous family, were likely to own such things.

"Eh, altro!" she responded, with a proud nod of the head, "the Signorina shall see"; and leading the way to the chest of drawers, she drew out a necklace and earrings of garnets and pearls, a string of corals, and two silver daggers for the hair.

They were typical peasant ornaments of the ancient days, quaint and charming, of no little value, and I should have liked to possess them for myself!

"There was Pietro, my brother," she told me as she laid them back in the boxes; "he took a wife of a rich family,—her father was a *fattore*, and she had more things in her dote than I. But when she died, and the child,

Pietro sold them, 'For,' said he, 'who is to wear them now?' A pity, was it not, Signorina? And the dealers gave him very little, though they say the Signori in the city pay dear to have such things."

They do indeed, and the dealers must make good bargains, buying as they do from the contadini,—who generally only under stress of debt or illness part with these family heirlooms,—and selling to the rich English and American travellers in search of curios.

At last the height of the sun in heaven warned me, even without an appeal to Dario, that it was close upon midday, so, calling the children, who were examining the baby with interest, we said our farewells, with much exchange of "complimenti," good wishes, and promises of a speedy return.

The rural feast had been a charming little episode, a pleasure to those who received, a pride to those who gave; and as, at the turn of the cart-track into the woods, I looked back at the farmhouse, I saw the whole family still grouped on the Aia, to watch us and smile a last good-bye.

Ah, the dear Tuscan peasants, how I love them!

There may be much to criticise in them, but there always is in children; and what are they, after all, but children of a larger growth? Of course they are very ignorant, very pig-headed. They will keep a child sick of diphtheria shut in a close room where no fresh air may penetrate, refusing to let it go to the hospital, because they have heard that in hospitals the windows are opened and the children die of cold. When the poor mite dies of suffocation, they do not think it owing to negligence on their part. No, the "buon Dio" wanted the "Angiolino" and has taken him, and blessed be all the

saints that he died in his own bed with his own family at home!

Dirty they are, certainly, and superstitious; very passionate; subject to swift rages and violent jealousies; rough and untaught: yet, in spite of all these defects, I love them; partly, perhaps, because they are the survival of an order of things which in our own country, with its progress and higher education, is passing fast away.

They live their simple lives, their daily round of rhythmic toil, between three points—the home, the Church, the Campo Santo. Born on the soil, they are contented to live by the soil, seldom desiring to strike out a new line as servant or artisan. Their primitive souls are free from all touch of modernity; they cling to their ancient traditions and customs, and to the old home among the olives, where often generations of a family are born and die. They find joy in their simple work; they love the ground they cultivate; the only excitements which break the monotony of their lives are the weekly “Messa,” a vintage- or marriage-dance, or a country fair.

They are usually, at least when young, sunny-tempered, debonair, vivacious, pleased with little, gay on almost nothing. They are warm-hearted, and, to their Padroni at all events, manifest a charming cordiality of manner, a rough but sincere courtesy which prompts them to offer their best. They are generally very poor,—though the term is, after all, relative, and to a Calabrian or Sicilian peasant the possessions of a Tuscan would be wealth,—but, if poor, they are seldom discontented. They are industrious, and, as a rule, sober; drunkenness—for which the Tuscan euphemism is “raising the elbow”—being not a common vice. They are both proud and respectful,—perhaps respectful to others because proud themselves.

They are unstudied in manner, graceful in gesture and attitude, as may be seen by a glance at any Tuscan taking his "siesta" in the shade. They always retain a touch of natural dignity well becoming those whose ancestry runs back to old Etruscan races, and who have the blood of Cæsar's armies in their veins. They are devout in their primitive way, desire the blessing of the Church on their crops and cattle, and cherish a profound belief in the protection of Mary Virgin and the saints.

Ah yes, with all their faults—which I do not deny—they are lovable. They charm by their very simplicity and spontaneousness in an age so little simple as our own. And, for all their failings, is there not ever in their ready smiles something of their Southern sunshine? are they not the true sons of that dear soil which once mothered all Europe, and of which, for many of us, are born the loveliest and most precious of our dreams?

VII

A COUNTRY SUNDAY

THE rain, grazie a Dio, was over. It had fallen steadily throughout the previous day; but Sunday dawned blue and radiant, and a glittering freshness was over all the earth.

A wet Sunday in the country outrages one's idea of the fitness of things; the very words "a country Sunday" suggest calm sunlight, bells pealing from the village church over the meadows, rest and leisure after the toil of the week.

From time to time a faint chime reached me across the hills, calling up suddenly visions of England, with a stab of desire; and the lime-trees, the sloping graveyard, the old belfry of a church in a far-off village had grown for a moment so vivid as to blot out the present, when Mafalda joined me, sweet as a jessamine flower with her shining morning face, clean pinafore, and her usual enquiry, "You have sleep well, you?"

The sky was deep blue, but a bar of cloud in the east did away with all chance of the contadino getting his cow for *that* day, and Mafalda agreed with me that that short-sighted person had made an imprudent and too-precipitate bargain when he agreed to give his "Padrone" an egg every day that there was a cloud in the sky, on condition that, on a day of perfect blue, he should receive

a cow. Poor man, he believed his fortune was made, and that his cows would quickly multiply, but even the Italian sky is rarely blameless of a cloud somewhere, and, so far as Mafalda and I know, that legendary person is still paying his daily tax.

We were on the broad terrace on the house-roof, looking out over the great sweep of woods to the north-east, where the ranks of moss-green pines, each one calmly erect upon its slender leg, glowed in the morning sun. The olives, a glitter of white and silver, seemed, as the breeze caressed their delicate twigs, like fairy trees. Among them rose the dark spires of the cypresses. Haze rested about the feet of the mountains; the dreams of night had not yet lifted from their peaks. But gradually the lines and mouldings sharpened, and on the near slopes the old villas and little churches shone dazzlingly white in the sunshine. The pigeons cooed fatuously on the old lichen-grown tiles, or made a circuit on crisp white wings in the blue air and then flew back to the shelter of the loggia, where the slender columns cut sharp purple shadows against the plastered walls. The sun was hot, but the breeze came a little sharp and fresh over the mountains, on which yesterday's cold rain had fallen as snow, and lay like the kiss of God.

It was an exhilarating morning. Down in the garden, where the fountain splashed and the lemons shone like gold in the sunlight, a family of collie puppies were romping; the elder dogs lay and watched with sleepy indulgent eyes; lithe green lizards darted to and fro on the broad wall. Looking over the stone parapet we could see Martina, the tortoise, pacing along the path below us, as if some sense of the splendour of the weather had penetrated even her chilly heart.

Martina is a recluse. Not only is her shell always cold and clammy to the touch, but she has a dry, snake-like expression in her eye which repels any friendly advance. Her husband, Martino, who lives with her in the garden, is, on the contrary, a social being; indeed I have never met a more agreeable tortoise than he. When called, he hastens to respond, and never, so far as goodwill and cheerful alacrity can aid him, needs to be told twice; though it must be owned that, if his spirit be nimble and willing, his legs are incurably slow. Nothing pleases him more than an invitation to walk with his friends in the garden, and he follows as obediently as a dog. It is true that he makes fewer turns in a given time, but he follows perseveringly, and, looking back, one sees him, his shell and whole person proudly raised, stepping majestically along the gravel walks.

Amiable as his natural disposition is, Martino, when roused, is apt to be "fuocoso," and manifests his wrath by withdrawing his head, raising himself on his hind legs, and, bending low in front, butting like an ox at the offending object, be it a stone or the shoes of man.

From the stables, above the puffing and brushing indicative of horses at their toilet, rose the voice of Fiore, carolling lustily. He and his brother—who wishes to be either a friar or a footman—are the poets of the place, able in improvising new songs as well as in singing the old.

Much poetry of the Tre-cento still lives on the lips of the people in the "stornelli" and "rispetti," which they sing in the fields and vineyards and around the hearth on winter nights,—things which their fathers have told and taught them, which have been preserved and transmitted through five hundred years or more.

Song with the Tuscan is as natural as breathing. He sings to serenade his mistress, he carols as he goes about his work, he chants stinging and cunningly-woven epithets in the hearing of the person he wishes to insult.

A *rispetto* is usually a love-song, in six, eight, or ten lines, breathing, in passionate and chivalrous language, love, longing, disappointment, disdain or despair.

The old *rispetti* are full of tenderness and simplicity; they abound in exquisite phrase. The peasant or carpenter hails his mistress as golden-mouthed, whiter than the snow of the mountains when the moon is at the full; she has dreaming eyes which gaze on Paradise. Even the stars caress her with their gentle light.

A delightful story of Sacchetti's proves that so long as six hundred years ago the people's taste in songs was poetical, since they chose the words of their great poet to sing about their work. "For one day," so runs the tale, "when Dante had dined, he went out, and, passing by the Porta San Pietro, heard a blacksmith beating iron upon the anvil and singing some of his verses like a song, jumbling the lines together, mutilating and confusing them, so that it seemed to Dante that he was receiving a great injury. He said nothing, but going into the blacksmith's shop, where there were many articles made in iron, he took up his hammer and pincers and scales and many other things, and threw them out into the road. The blacksmith, turning round upon him, cried out—

"What the devil are you doing? are you mad?"

"What are you doing?" said Dante.

"I am working at my proper business," said the blacksmith, "and you are spoiling my work, throwing it out into the road."

“Said Dante, ‘If you do not like me to spoil your things, do not spoil mine.’

“‘What thing of yours am I spoiling?’ said the man. And Dante replied, ‘You are singing something of mine, but not as I made it. I have no other trade but this, and you spoil it for me.’

“The blacksmith, too proud to acknowledge his fault, but not knowing how to reply, gathered up his things and returned to his work, and when he sang again, sang ‘Tristran and Launcelot’ and left Dante alone!”

The “stornello” usually consists of three lines of equal length, preceded by a short exclamation, generally the name of a flower, and these stornelli are sung alternately by two or more singers—forming a kind of conversation in song.

It was a stornello which Fiore was singing; the words floated up—

“Fior’ di Limone,
Limone è agro, e non si puol mangiare,
Ma son’ piu agre le pene d’amore.”

But I do not think the pains of love were pressing very heavily on Fiore, for all his impassioned singing, to judge from the laughing face which he raised in answer to Mafalda’s call.

“He make it a bath to the Lalla,” she told me gleefully, her round face pressed between the pillars of the colonnade. “I also, I have make it the bath, this morning.”

“Yes; all by yourself?”

Pride and truth struggled together for a moment, but truth triumphed; Mafalda shook her head.

“I soap me, I; but Santina, she wipe me,” she confided.

“But Santina, she is not brave to wipe: the fingers of my foot she wipe never well, and how it is noiso, that!”

This I could well believe. If it were so, Mafalda had just cause for complaint.

“I am in *ritardo*, this morning,” she went on to explain, “because from my shoe was gone away the button-it. For that, I arrive not here more quick!”

Well, better late than never. So, granting Mafalda’s request, “Give it to me, the hand,” we went down amicably in search of our coffee and rolls.

We breakfasted joyously in the “berceau” on this magical morning, beneath the heavy clusters of grapes, which, if they were an attraction to us, were also, unfortunately, an attraction to the wasps; these vindictive insects behaving with an audacity which almost reduced Mafalda to tears.

The church-bells from time to time rang out a cheerful peal,—a performance which must be repeated seven times, at intervals of a quarter of an hour before the time appointed for service, so as to warn the *contadini* in their distant houses, where clocks are seldom known, that it is time to be wending their way to church.

The bells broke out into a final impassioned appeal; one of the servants, who had been commissioned to warn us when it was really service time, hastened out with the news that the congregation was entering; and escorted by the “Fattore,” as a fitting mark of respect, we hurried across the courtyard, through the gates, past the picturesque old well where maiden-hair ferns lined the cool depths, and arrived, hot and breathless, in our gallery, to the interest and delight of the *contadini* below.

It was not a beautiful or dignified building on which I looked round; indeed, it was rather a mean little house

of God. The interior was whitewashed, the altar poor and homely, covered with red twill edged with cheap lace and decorated with hideous artificial flowers in painted wooden vases; common prints of the Stations of the Cross hung on the walls; a confessional box stood on either side. But it is rare in Italy for any place to be quite barren of beauty, and in one corner a mellow glow revealed the presence of an old faded fresco, little more than the memory of a vision once seen there by a long-forgotten painter; while above a side altar, on a golden background, a sweet and nimble angel announced to Mary Virgin, in the stiff blue robes of the Tre-cento, the glad and mysterious tidings of the birth of the Son of God.

The "Messa" had already begun.

Before the High Altar with its lighted candles, its paper lilies and roses—far more desirable in the peasants' eyes than real flowers—the priest was reciting the Office in a loud, monotonous tone. Behind him knelt an old, gentle-faced, anxious-looking contadino in a linen ephod, who led the responses, and from time to time rattled a bell.

We were a little late, but not the last, for Ulysse Cafysse, the under-factor, a small man, with crooked legs, and bright, bird-like eyes gazing in opposite directions, sidled in, crossed himself hastily with holy water, made a funny little genuflexion to the altar, and subsided on a bench.

Presently we all rose from our knees, and, with much pushing of forms, settled ourselves in our seats and composed ourselves for the sermon.

This afforded time to observe the doings of one's neighbours, and, leaning forward a little, I could see the whole congregation gathered at my feet.

All who were not kept at home by illness, sick beasts, or babies, were present, and the vacant places were few.

The women, each with a rosary and Mass-book full of small religious prints, were gathered in the back part of the church; some of them wore picturesque black veils (brought to church folded in a pocket-handkerchief, and shaken out and adjusted on arrival), but many were bare-headed, showing, among the girls, rows of wonderful Sunday coiffures in all shades from black to golden, the hair being as a rule coarse in quality, but beautiful in colour and quantity, owing to exposure to the sun and wind.

Soon after marriage these wonderful puffs and braids disappear, however; perhaps vanity is killed by the hard life of ceaseless work and the care of many children; certainly, whatever the reason, among the married women the hairdressing is of the most rigid simplicity, without any eye to effect.

The younger girls wear their hair brushed smoothly back, tightly plaited, turned up from the neck like a door-knocker, and tied on the top of the head; for among the contadini a child with unplaited hair—once past the stage of cropped locks or short curls—is rarely seen; and the frizzed crops which stand out from the heads of English Sunday-school scholars are unknown, happily, to the Italian peasant child.

The Sunday costumes of the contadini, it must be owned, leave much to be desired.

The women are charming on weekdays in their working clothes, of which the bright colours have been blended by sun and rain into warm soft tones, and which, however shabby, however common in material, are always picturesque. But on Festivals they appear in gaudy

flannelettes and merinos, spotted, squared, or striped. A red skirt with a purple band at the bottom, a striped blouse of blue and yellow and a flowered apron, all in the most slashing tones and patterns, is the style pleasing to a peasant girl, and will be worn with a large coral necklace and earrings, if she be the happy owner of such things.

The older men were grouped on the benches in front of the women, forming a solid phalanx of married respectability between them and the forms at the back and to the sides of the altar, which is the place "where the bachelors sit," and keep a watch upon the pretty girls.

From the congregation I turned my attention to the "Prete," who, as seen in church, appears a most venerable person, a model father of his people; his doings beyond this consecrated place are not, however, all that they might be, and his people find him more vexatious than smoke in the eyes.

There are many "little rifts" which disturb his peaceful intercourse with his parishioners, one being his grievance that none of them die, and therefore he cannot profit by their burial fees. At times he has even remonstrated with them in church on this want of consideration, whereupon, not unnaturally, an indignant murmur went round the benches, "May you be the first!" His days are mostly spent in "sport"; that is, the luring of blackbirds and thrushes by means of blinded birds. He does not teach the children, nor does he visit his people unless they are dying—when he would go gladly if they ever gave him a chance. He officiates at two services on Sunday; I believe says his Mass alone every morning, hears confessions if anyone happens to desire him, and there his pastoral work begins and ends. He is, perhaps, hardly a favourable

specimen of the parish priest, who, in places where the modern socialistic spirit has not penetrated, is often not only the teacher of the peasants in religious matters, but their counsellor in all secular affairs. But a large majority of the Italian clergy are drawn from the lower classes, and are men of little learning or culture; so that, although among the higher orders are to be found well-educated men, it is not so among the rank and file, who are little superior to the peasants to whom they minister. A large proportion of beneficed priests are miserably poor; many have not even benefices, and live by their Mass, which they can say once daily, receiving some small payment to celebrate it for some special departed soul or in honour of some particular saint.

As the sermon went on, the priest's eloquence rose to fever pitch. Throughout his address he had been inciting his people to join a pilgrimage to Rome, the Mecca of the faithful; and, wishing to describe how the choice would be made among the number of candidates, he explained with much gesticulation, "I shall put the women in a bag and draw them out!" and it was comical to picture, not the names, but the women themselves crushed together in a kind of lucky bag, and drawn out one by one.

From this he passed on to describe the ecstasy they would feel on finding themselves, after their toils and privations, in the presence of the Holy Father. For some time he dilated rapturously upon this satisfaction, and I was expecting that the peroration to which he was tending with so much eloquence would be a burst of rejoicing over this great spiritual privilege, when, instead, he exclaimed in a final passion of enthusiasm, after describing the toils and sacrifices of the journey, "And finding yourselves at

last in that Holy Place, you will cry, 'Benedetti quei quattrini che ci hanno portato qui!'"¹

At this thrilling moment a little boy in a sailor blouse and kilt of crimson merino, perched beside his father, fell off the seat with a crash, and had to be replaced and comforted. His small niece, almost equal in size and age, seated demurely among the women, as became her sex, and wearing a pink-and-white turban with nodding tassel, was deeply interested in her uncle's misfortune; while a bald-headed baby, rejoicing in the name of Adolindo Grassi, who had of necessity accompanied his mother to church, was so much agitated by the sudden noise near him as to burst into a lamentable wail.

The respective ages of relatives among the contadini, owing to large families and early marriage, are often amusing. Fiore, a well-set-up young man of three-and-twenty, possesses nine brothers and sisters, of whom the youngest is a baby boy of a month old; and nothing is more common than for nieces and nephews to be older than their uncles and aunts. One baby of recent arrival was even, owing to its own mother's illness, nursed by the grandmother together with a new-born aunt.

At last the sermon was over; the priest turned back to the altar, the people knelt, and the solemn rite of the Mass went forward towards the supreme moment of silence and awe and low-bowed heads.

Looking down from the gallery it was strange to think that this Office, at which all who will may now be present without let or hindrance, once divided nation from nation, parents from children, husbands from wives: that hunted priests celebrated Mass in secret, that men went to the stake for the sake of this service being so hastily gabbled

¹ Blessed be the money which has brought us here.

through, for the sake of those confessionals and all they represent.

By and by the collection was taken in a wooden box with a slit in the top, handed round by a white-robed acolyte with whom we are familiar as the game-keeper in everyday life. No such recollection, however, softened the dignity of his demeanour as, conscious of his high office, he rattled his box in quest of alms; only when Mafalda, pulling at his sleeve, explained that she had dropped her coin prematurely through a hole in the floor did he relax into the shadow of a smile.

At last the end of the service was reached. We were out again in the bright sunshine, the dogs bounding about us, excitedly, in the joy of reunion.

The contadini dispersed in little groups, chattering together in full enjoyment of the Sunday rest, and with pleasant anticipations of the "festa" dinner, better in quality and more abundant in quantity than on working days.

Dear, simple, kindly people, with their dark eyes and winning smiles and musical speech. Surely no one who has once lived among them could ever quite drive their memory from his heart.

The conventional idea of a country Sunday includes quiet lounging, visits to the live stock, and the surveyal of crops. In these last I admit that, from a theoretical point of view, I take little interest. I like to see the olives abundant, because I know it is well that they should be so; and I like the grapes to be plentiful,—from a more personal motive,—otherwise my feeling as to the crops is tepid, though my enthusiasm for the live stock, whether it move on two legs or on four, is keen.

My feet, therefore, moved unbidden from the church

to the stables, and, having gladdened all its occupants with gifts of bread, figs, and sugar, Mafalda and I turned, by mutual consent, to the dwelling of Federigo, the pig.

Federigo is of a delicate pink colour with a black patch on his side, and small shrewd eyes embedded in his fat. He is an agreeable creature, and was much gratified by being invited out to walk,—an attention generally paid him on Sundays,—and hastened to and fro on his neat little trotters, sniffing at everything with vivacious interest.

“What he eat?” asked Mafalda, regarding Federigo with interest. “He like it, the apple?”

Yes, I was sure he would like it; as Mafalda had one in her pocket, she had better offer it at once.

Federigo accepted graciously, his eyes twinkling with pleasure, and Mafalda, emboldened by his genial expression, ventured to pat his pink, well-padded side.

“What a fat corpo he has,” she told me delightedly, “but of a fatness to not believe!”

In the afternoon we rambled through the woods, coming from time to time upon parties of peasants, all wearing, in honour of the day, the boots which in summer they usually dispense with, and strolling along in groups enjoying the Sunday rest.

Sunday in Italy is a “festa”; not only a “Holy-day” but a “holiday.” In the towns the people crowd to the public gardens, galleries and theatre; many of the shops are open in the mornings, and dressmakers, carpenters, and other employés work until twelve o’clock, after which the day is devoted to amusements: but the peaceful Sunday atmosphere is missing, as perhaps in England, where the day is so fast being secularised, it will soon be missed.

In the country, on which, remote from the city, the peace of God rests perpetually, Sunday passes more

quietly. The peasants, after the toil of six days, are glad to rest on the seventh, and the only diversion, except peaceful strolls, and a little love-making among the young people, seems to be in the game of "Bocce," over which we found several groups of men engaged.

This favourite game, a kind of "Bowls," is played between two sides, every member of each being provided with a pair of large wooden balls. There is also a small ball called the "Lecco," and this is first rolled by one of the winning side to any distance he please. The object of the game is to pitch the "Bocce" so that they lie beside it; and the number of points for a match having been first fixed between the players, each ball of one side which lies nearer the "Lecco" than a ball of the other side counts one point. The players of the two sides throw alternately, the important thing being, not only to place one's own ball near, but to help forward those of one's comrades, while dispersing the antagonists,—so that every throw may completely alter the aspect of affairs. The "Lecco" itself is moved at times, thus changing the points for both sides, and the pitching of the last ball decides the game.

By and by the bells called to Vespers, and as we strolled home to tea, loud chanting from the little church proclaimed that service had begun.

How long these uneventful country days are, the hours gliding by like a peaceful stream! The morning seemed already far away when I went up again on the terrace for a last look at the darkening sky and hills.

The scene was curiously un-English. The sun had set; a green light lingered behind the western mountains; the pine-trees on the ridge of the "poggio" formed a minute frieze, Japanese in its sharpness and delicacy, against the

serene and lucid sky. Across the valley a funeral or festal procession wound, with blazing torches, up the slope among the olives, to the village church. Only the splash of the fountain in the garden below, and the chime of the Ave Maria broke the silence. It grew darker. Night, the Sower, strewed the blue sky-field with stars. Slowly the full moon, ruddy-gold, rose above the Apennines, flooding the east with amber light, giving a faint amethyst flush to the mountains, and whitening the farms and villas scattered over the hills. A nightingale, perched on a cypress, poured out its heart in impassioned song; from the pine-woods came the hooting of a "Barbagianni," and a small "Civetta" on a palm-tree below the terrace stirred the night air with a plaintive cry. She seemed a well-behaved little fowl, if rather disconsolate, and I wonder why Italians use her name to describe a heartless flirt?

The moon whitened as it climbed the purple hill of heaven; the stars grew faint before such splendour. In the pure and austere light I could read as if it had been high noon. A profound peace lay upon the quiet land. It was a fitting close to a day most lovely, a day such as leaves a fragrance in the memory like flowers pressed between the pages of life's book.

Ah, how happy I was, and thrice happy that I knew it! We pray often for more happiness: why do we not the rather pray that we may realise what we have?—for how many of us fail to recognise the face of Happiness, and know her for what she is only when we watch her retreating figure down the vista of life's road.

Now that they are gone by, never perhaps to return, since life seldom reacts an old play, and never without some change—often, it seems, for the worse—in scene or

actor, let me at least be glad that those quiet Sundays in the heart of Tuscany did not slip by me unheeded, but that I strung their golden beads on the string of memory with as profound thanksgiving as ever that devout mystic George Herbert strung his Bemerton Sundays into—

“Bracelets to adorn the wife
Of the eternal glorious King.”

VIII

THE VINTAGE

THE summer heat was over ; Brother Sun, who in July had beaten down pitilessly upon the reapers, was more merciful to the grape-gatherers, and shone softly upon the autumn fields. The sky paled a little towards the horizon ; dim wreaths of haze lay across the plain and the far blue hills. The season of garnered fruits, of fulfilled purposes, was come ; and an inexpressible sweetness, a strange enchantment, rested upon the lovely Tuscan country,—something of that mysterious beauty which shines in the face of a mother who gathers around her the children in whose success she sees the realisation of her hopes.

It was a glorious September morning when Francesca, Mafalda, and I set off gaily in the scarlet ox-cart to “ vendemmiare,” or, in plain English, to lend our valuable help in gathering the grapes.

It is seldom that two families on an estate hold their “ Vendemmia ” on the same day, as it is a business in which all must by turns help each other, and, the days having been appointed by the Fattore, and notice given to the neighbours, everyone hastens early in the morning to the chosen vineyard, provided with knives and baskets, to join in the work.

Bachicche was the favoured person whom we meant to

cheer by our presence on that particular morning, and, his being the largest crop on the estate, and his podere one of the prettiest, we had been awaiting with impatience the day when his grapes should, according to the Tuscan idiom, "pick themselves."

In the vintage season one watches the sky apprehensively, and a storm of hail in the night had raised doubts as to what the morrow might bring, and whether, at the eleventh hour, poor Bachicche's crop might not be spoiled. But the day dawned clear and brilliant, and we drove triumphantly up the woods in the waggon, through a radiant world of rain-washed pines and glistening purple trunks roofed with deep blue sky.

The oxen plodded up the hill slowly; the vintage for them, as for their drivers, is a hard time, and they are seldom from under the yoke. The greater part of the cart was occupied by a huge vat, roped firmly in its place, into which the baskets of grapes are emptied as soon as gathered, and but scant room remained for us to perch on the slippery, juice-stained planks behind. He, however, who desires to enter fully into country life must prepare his heart for some discomfort, and this I explained to Mafalda, in answer to her aggrieved statement, "It is very slip, this cart. I have not place, I, and I go to fall!"

No sight could have been lovelier than that which lay before us, when at last we passed out from the woods. In the south, marked by long waves of blue hills, stretched the Chianti district, famous for its wine all the world over. Clothing the near slopes were the fresh green pine-woods; here and there white peasant houses nestled among the olives; and in the centre of all this beauty lay the vineyards, with their waving tendrils, and their rich clusters of black and purple, white and rose-coloured grapes.

The festival of the vintage is both ancient and lovely: it is the most important country event of the year, far more so than the harvest, and—though some old customs have died out—of necessity picturesque. Indeed, the very word calls up visions of laughter and good-fellowship, mirth and movement, song and sunshine, beautiful places and brilliant tints.

The scene on that September morning when we arrived in our dignified vehicle was gay and primitive,—a scene which might, such is the conservatism of rural Italy, have been seen as well in Virgil's day as ours. Indeed, old reliefs and frescoes still survive to show that there is little difference between the vintage now and centuries ago.

Among the vines all was movement, colour and gaiety.

There were women with short skirts, faded to warm indefinite tints, showing their bare, bronzed legs, and wearing brilliant handkerchiefs or huge hats of Tuscan straw upon their heads; men and boys, black-haired and olive-skinned, with hands and feet stained with grape juice; old people, almost past work, who had yet turned out to help in the stress of the vintage; children employed in picking up the fallen berries; fat, black-eyed babies toddling about on unsteady legs, the little girls showing tiny gold earrings beneath their dusky locks.

There was a hum of merry voices, peals of laughter, light-hearted jokes, and "stornelli," as the osier baskets and "bigoncie"—small wooden casks—were filled and carried away on strong shoulders to be emptied into the vats; for care, in the vintage season, seems to sit with its head under its wing, and jests and joy, laughter and good-fellowship, reign supreme.

Many poets and painters from remote times have found their inspiration in this gay festival, and have left

pictures and verses to commemorate its customs and do honour to its charm.

The Vendemmia was an important feast among the Romans, sacred to the jovial god Bacchus; and, as the "Baccanali" of the ancients testify to the gaiety of the feast, so the god himself is constantly recalled in the "Per Bacco," which is to-day the people's genial oath.

Certainly nowhere can the Vendemmia be seen to better advantage than in Tuscany, for not only is the land itself as fair as Eden, but the contadini, for all their roughness and swift passions, possess the simplicity and light-hearted gaiety of children, and respond, in the fullest sense, to the gracious influence of the time.

The Bachicche brothers and their wives received us with effusion, proud that the "Signorine" should have honoured their podere, and hastened to provide us with baskets and knives for the work.

Mafalda, who is a zealous little soul, but not old enough to be trusted with pruning knives, was made happy by a commission to gather up the berries from the ground, as every grape is of value, especially in eyes so thrifty as Bachicche's; while Francesca and I set to work energetically on our self-appointed task.

For those who have never been among the vineyards it is impossible to conceive of grapes in such quantities as surrounded us on every side and covered the hillsides far and near. The vines, with their slender branches and garlands, were trained over maple-trees,—a far more picturesque, even if a less practical, way of cultivating them than the French method of growing them on a low trellis, or attached to straight posts like raspberry canes.

They hung in heavy festoons from tree to tree, they

climbed high among the branches, or drooped, borne down by the weight of their clusters, to the very earth.

The sight of those waving tendrils made it hard to credit winter memories of the days when, in every podere, there were men at work, clipping back the vines, slashing and binding, until a mere mutilated stock, straitly tied, and devoid of all grace and beauty, stood bare and rigid, exposed to the icy Tramontana wind. Yet that severity had resulted in a wealth of white and purple clusters, misty with bloom, under the load of which the branches almost broke.

It seemed sad to despoil them of their glory,—and it was so quickly done; a few moments' hasty cutting with a sharp knife, and throwing into baskets, and another vine stood stripped and bare; while the grapes themselves, emptied into the vats, and crushed with heavy wooden clubs, were robbed in an instant of their beauty and delicate bloom, nothing remaining but a shapeless pulp.

There was something pathetic in the ruin of such loveliness; yet it is the fate of Nature to pass through death to life, and the grapes must be crushed before the new wine in the cluster can be obtained,—as hearts have sometimes to be bruised before they yield, rich and sweet, the wine of life which shall endure unspoiled, to give strength and gladness to others in their days of drought.

A sudden despairing cry of "Madonna mia!" aroused me from a train of such thoughts to behold Francesca, hopping with pain, a vindictive wasp having stung her leg, and she withdrew to a seat on an upturned hamper to bind up the wounded member and solace herself with grapes, while Mafalda and I unpacked the luncheon basket and laid out the sandwiches and hard-boiled eggs.

"How I should be pleased," observed Mafalda reflect-

ively, as she cracked her shell on a convenient stone, "if I should find in it this egg a little chicken, but *little*, and with the fur yellow! Never have I found one yet," and she sighed over an unkind fate.

"Indeed, I hope you never will," I responded hastily; "boiled eggs are not the place for chickens!"

Mafalda raised a pair of astonished eyes.

"But you have told me, you, that the chicken it is first an egg. Why then, in my egg, is there never, no never one?"

"Because Angelino takes good care that there shouldn't be: and in any case once the egg was cooked the chicken would be dead." Francesca's tone was a little brusque; her leg was probably making itself felt.

"A chicken dead, I want not," retorted Mafalda loftily. "But a little one alive, one that would peck them the crumbs, how it would be nice! How I should amuse myself to see the little head yellow! When I return to house I ask Angelino that he make cook for me an egg such."

What a respectable cook is likely to say on being reproached because his eggs do not contain chickens I cannot say, but it would be a scene worth witnessing,—if Mafalda does not forget to make her request!

The contadini, also, brought out their simple fare; flat, round loaves of dark, home-baked bread, and wickered flasks of vinaccia,—thin wine, scarcely more than coloured water; for, when the house is far and the work heavy, they eat frugally and in haste in the fields at midday and keep the principal meal till the evening.

Then—and especially on the last nights of the vintage—is the time for merriment and good cheer.

Each contadino, unless poverty renders it impossible,

offers a supper to those who have helped in the gathering, —a supper of bread and maccaroni, wine, cheese, and even meat. The old stone houses ring with songs and laughter: if any member of the company owns a concertina, or a hurdy-gurdy can be hired, so much the better; there are dances and jests, flirting and “stornelli,” for the Tuscan heart easily rejoices, and appreciates to the full these simple festivals.

There is a curious etiquette about these dances, as there is about most doings in the contadino world. Custom ordains that any young man passing a house where a “Ballo” is in progress, may claim the right to enter and take his turn with the rest; and it is by no means rare for the “Giovanotti” who have not been invited to avail themselves of this prerogative, and should they be resisted, brawls and blows would assuredly be the result.

They are hot-blooded, these Tuscans, and it does not need much provocation to make the knives leap out,—a dispute about the music, a trifling jealousy about a girl, and a “rissa” arises, too often with fatal results.

A contadina would hardly dare to refuse to dance with a young man, however little she might desire to, unless she resigned herself to refuse every other offer as well; for should she accept a second during the evening, the first will feel himself insulted, and it is more than likely that a fight with the favoured partner or a brother of the capricious damsel will result, ending, not improbably, with a fatal stab.

Even in aristocratic ballrooms such cases are not unknown, for the rejected partner, if he be hot-headed, is very likely to avenge his wrongs by a “schiaffo” to the girl’s brother or accepted partner, as a sign that a duel is desired for the salving of his wounded honour; for the Italians are great

duellists, and, although the practice is illegal, it is easy to get from some friend the loan of a garden where the fight may go on undisturbed; and, unless a man is killed, it is seldom that the affair becomes public or that any official notice is taken.

Another peculiarity of the rural dances is the strict line of demarcation drawn in these, as in everything else, between the contadino and the native of the "paese" or village. There is no intermixing. The contadini never come down from their farms and poderes to join in a village dance, although the young men of the village, being reputed better dancers, will sometimes go up to dance with the peasant girls at a contadino's house.

The Bachicche' supper should be by rights a good one, for they have the reputation of being the richest of the contadini, but "molto avaro," as their less frugal neighbours declare, shaking their heads. Hard work and thrift have done much in two generations to convert the rough hillside into rich podere, and their land now yields more than any other on the estate.

There was a dreadful time years ago, when old Bachicche, then the only man to work on his podere, his sons being yet children, went out one night, as is customary when the grapes are ripening, to watch over his crop.

Where there are several men in a family this duty is light enough, as each takes certain hours every night to guard the vines from robbers until the last bunch has been gathered and stored; but Bachicche, worn-out by the hard work of the day, added to the nightly watching in the fields, found his eyes growing heavy, and, unable to resist the drowsiness which crept over him, fell asleep with his gun across his knees. So while he slept thieves came and stole away the crop which was to crown the

hopes and labour of the whole year ; and it must have been a very long-faced Bachicche who wended his way down through the wood next morning to break the news of his loss to the Fattore,—a loss which was not only his own, but his Padrone's, who was naturally entitled to half the crop.

Many “fat years” have, it is to be hoped, taken the sting from this memory, if not obliterated it ; and although the eldest brother, as spokesman for his family, only responded to compliments upon his wealth of grapes with a cautious “Non c'è male !” there was a certain elation in his rugged face which added warmth to his words.

After the midday meal we set to work again.

I was obliged to remonstrate with Mafalda for eating far more grapes than were good for her, and doing considerably less work than might with reason be expected from a person of her size ; but unfortunately Mafalda and I did not see eye to eye in this matter.

“Why do you make me this displeasure when I do my very possible ?” she retorted hotly, when I called her attention to the number of grapes which lay scattered upon the ground. “Am tired I, and one has also need to repose oneself !”

This was a plea with which no one could quarrel ; but babies of six and large bunches of grapes do not always agree, and this I hastened to explain.

“You needn't pick up another grape if you don't want ; but I am afraid, cara mia, that if you eat so very many there will be sad results to-morrow !”

Mafalda shrugged her shoulders.

“It makes me nothing,” she responded shortly, and when Mafalda is in this mood he who has wisdom saveth his words.

However, before long the real cause of this young lady's capricious conduct was brought to light. It appeared that Mafalda's soaring ambition disdained the most useful work of gleaning on the ground, and aspired to the "better part" of gathering from the vines; and I saw her, hot and flushed, vainly trying, like an innocent fox, to reach a bunch above her head.

I offered my help, but her indomitable spirit scorned surrender.

"I arrive not yet, but I shall do it endly!" she assured me; and the difficulty was solved by setting her on an inverted basket, where, happy as a festa, she could pick to her heart's content.

Bachicche's little daughter, Maria, a shrewd-looking child of twelve, was working beside us, and I heard her answering Francesca's questions about the farm in that tone of proprietorship which each member of a contadino family assumes, even babies of five or six speaking, not of "*our*," but of "*my*" *podere*, oil and wine.

"No," she replied to a question about the oxen, "for the moment I have none, having sold them; but I shall buy me more at the Empoli Fair."

Maria is a capable little person, who drives oxen and works in the fields almost like a man; and as far as possible makes up to her parents for the misfortune of not being a boy. It is a bitter disappointment to the Bachicche family to have no son to carry on the farm where their family has been established for more than a hundred years, and also matter of regret to the "Padrone" that the best of all the families of contadini should have no heirs.

Under these circumstances, Maria, like Sorbi's daughter, will probably be married "in the house," and will certainly

not lack "pretendenti"; for though not blessed with beauty, she is reputed to have pretty wit, "molto spiritosa,"—and then there is the solid attraction of her lands and goods.

The prospective husband will need, however, to be of a mild and yielding disposition, ready to submit entirely to his family-in-law, which will consist not only of Maria's parents, but of her two uncles and aunts. His antecedents, health and character, will be as carefully enquired into as those of a prince-consort; and he will undoubtedly be of the "Poggio" or hill part of the estate, since these families, more conservative, less tinged with modern ideas, have few dealings with the Samaritans of the plain, and intermarriages are almost unknown.

There were some likely lads among the hill-folk helping in the Vendemmia that day, and I do not doubt that Bachicche's discerning eye was already upon them, marking how they would shape.

As the day wore on, load after load of grapes was drawn slowly away by the bullock waggons, to be weighed by the "Fattore" before being conveyed to the "tinaio"; as the amount of every man's crop must be entered in a book, half the quantity being his own, the other half going to the Padrone in place of rent.

The first grapes to be brought in when the Vendemmia begins are always the "scelta" or very pick of the crop, for making the best quality of wine; and after these have been set aside, the rest are gathered and mixed together indiscriminately, black and white. Each estate makes its own wine, and in the "tinaio"—a great stone shed—stand rows of enormous vats, eight or ten feet high, on each of which is painted the name of one of the families on the estate. Each man's grapes are emptied, as fast as

they are brought from the podere, into his own "tino," after having been passed through a "cutter" like a mincing machine; and every evening, when the work of the fields is over, the treading of the wine-press begins. The men, with bare feet, stamp and prance in the vats to tread out the wine, singing lustily the while, for the Italian peasant is usually a cheery soul and has much of his native sunshine in his heart.

The first juice trodden out is drawn off for the best wine, and after the first fermentation, is made to ferment a second time by adding the "Governo,"—black grapes dried in the light and air upon "stoje" (shelves made of layers of canes). This clears the wine and deepens its colour; and so great a boiling and bubbling of the wine takes place during this fermentation, that no one need distress themselves at the thought of the men's feet in the butts, for the strength of the wine is such that every particle of dirt, as well as every skin and stalk, is thrown to the top and skimmed off, and the wine remains pure and clear, while the tinaio smells so strongly of musk and fermentation that the fumes alone are enough to go to the head.

The new wine, be it "vino rosso," "vino bianco," or "vin santo," is run through pipes into the great vats which lie generally generation after generation in the old vaulted "cantina" or cellar, until it shall be ready for use, when it is sold either in casks, or in quaint, straw-covered flasks, with a little oil in the bottle-neck to keep out the air.

When the good wine has all been pressed out, the peasants carry the clotted skins and stalks home, and, pressing them again in water, make a "vinaccia," or very thin, rough wine, for their common use. The pips are

then put by for pigeon food, and the dry skins can be sent to factories for making ink.

The afternoon faded to evening, and the dusk had crept up the land before the work ceased in the vineyards; and still, after the long day, the many busy hands, more than half Bachicche's grapes remained to be picked. Truly the crop was a rich one, and it is little wonder that English people, who find themselves in Tuscany during the vintage season, are amazed by the wealth of grapes which they see along every country road.

The last load was leaving the podere; we scrambled into the sticky, slippery cart, full of "bigoncie" in which the juice already splashed from the half-crushed fruit.

The oxen, muzzled with osier baskets so that they might not eat the grapes as they passed down the narrow grassy tracks among the vines, bent to the yoke. The contadini, gathering up knives, coats and baskets, followed behind; the young ones, perhaps, seizing the opportunity of this magical twilight to "fare l'amore"; the older ones discussing the quantity of grapes already safely gathered, and the chances of the next day finishing the work.

So, triumphantly, we bore home the spoils of the great god Bacchus, through the darkening fields and woods. And as I jolted along on the edge of the ox-cart, thinking over the delights of the day, the charm and colour and gaiety of the Vendemmia, I knew well that never again in any climate, no matter how cold and grey and distant, should I see or drink the red Italian wine without there rising before me—ah yes! with a sudden pang of longing—the sunny vineyard, the purple clusters, the contadini with their graceful attitudes and musical speech, the patient oxen, and the glorious sunshine gladdening the whole scene in that Arcadia shut within the circle of the Tuscan hills.

IX

A RIDE IN TUSCANY

THE stable was the scene of palpitating excitement: the "Signorine" were going to ride!

The young ladies themselves bore the thrilling prospect calmly, but the contadini were all agog with eagerness, and although the ordinary stable attachés more than sufficed to saddle three horses, an entirely superfluous number had gathered for the better performance of this duty, while all the children of the near cottages, round-eyed with astonishment, collected to gaze.

Looking down from the windows, I saw a crowd gathered around "Lalla," who was pawing the ground with impatience; while Gemma was being led out under the doorway where St. Anthony's picture hangs.

St Anthony, as everyone knows, is the patron and protector of horses and stable-men. On his festa the cabmen of the various stands send their patrons bread shaped into crowns, hearts, and various designs, with a large woodcut of "Sant' Antonio Abate" with his pig,—expecting, one need not say, a "mancia" in return. At the city stables and mews vested priests are to be seen, with lights and clouds of incense, sprinkling the horses with holy water; and in country places cows and sheep, as well as horses, are gathered to receive this blessing in the open space before the church, unless the priest—for a

consideration—goes up the winding ways to the old farms among the olives, and blesses them in the fold and stall. I hope Gemma and Lalla and Lucas got a blessing, for I am sure they needed it; especially Lucas, who is the most perverse little ass that ever walked this earth.

Sant' Antonio, apart from his care of animals, is a particularly useful saint, being most able in the recovery of lost objects. In fact, whatever is lost may be recovered by prayer to him, who is reputed to be what the country-people in parts of England term "a good seek."

At last a pawing and champing of bits in the courtyard announced the arrival of the horses,—Gemma, Lalla, and Pirino; the latter's tail, in which, like a woman's hair, his glory is, having been braided in a graceful plait by his devoted attendant's hands.

Saturno was not of the party, owing to the unfortunate passions which hold sway over the hearts of horses as well as the hearts of men. He, a spirited and stately gentleman, lately added to the social circle of the stable, has fallen deeply in love with Gemma, who meets his advances with indifference; while "Lalla," who is reputed among the grooms as "fuocosa," has fixed her fiery affections upon him. As he fails to requite them, and treats her with marked coldness, it is a very unfortunate, three-cornered affair; and the jealousy and soreness of spirit of Lalla is such that her loose-box will soon need to be repaired.

We set off, accompanied by Fiore, who is skilful in the management of horses, having done his military service in a cavalry regiment; and his face was radiant with joy at having been called from the monotonous work of breaking stones to mend one of the farm roads to "girare" the country in style. Dressed in his best, with a pink shirt,

gay tie, and large felt hat, he was a cavalier to turn the heads of half the peasant girls on the place, although, oddly enough, he gets less than his full meed of admiration, owing to his having what the country-people call "white eyes,"—bright blue instead of the black which they admire.

Fiore's mother, whose first-born son is the pride of her heart, must, I am sure, have superintended the toilet, for she keeps Fiore, as the country-people say, "Sul altare" (on the altar of her affections), as some sacred thing; and as, although in subsequent weeks he rode with us many times, he always wore the same rose-coloured shirt, and always in the same state of immaculate purity, it must have been continually washed and ironed by her devoted hands.

She was working in the fields as we passed down the road between the olives, and her eyes were fixed with such pride upon her son that she could hardly make her "reverenza" to the "illustrious ones." Her elder daughter, Regina, paused in her digging to stare,—a picturesque figure in faded purple dress and orange scarf, her pretty bare feet thrust into clumping, wooden-soled boots; while Fiore's baby sister, with fat, bare feet set firmly in the soil, kept on repeating in an ecstasy of joy, "Il mio Fiore chi va a cavallo con le signorine."

Etiquette did not permit the gallant cavalier to notice or respond to these demonstrations, but he was none the less gratified by them; and though Lalla is a roan, it was obvious that Fiore, proud of heart, rode in spirit a bay trotting horse and wore gloves in his cap.

We took the road winding up through the pine-woods, past the grotto, now a chapel, where San Zenobi used, they say, to retire from his episcopal cares in Florence for

meditation and prayer. Only once a year is this lonely oratory opened; and then, on May 25, the feast of the saint, while down in the cathedral roses are being blessed for the people by the touch of his relics, the priest from the little church by the Villa goes, followed by his acolyte, up the shaded road, and celebrates Mass upon the chilly altar; and once more, after long silence, the old sacred words are heard there, and incense rises to the rounded roof.

At this turn of the road Lalla gave an exhibition of her fiery temper by kicking and prancing, and showing great unwillingness to advance, which Fiore considered an extremely bad sign in that holy place, as what but the action of the devil could cause horse or human to fear a shrine? Very severely he upbraided her: "But how thou art perfidious," I heard him say. "What to thee comes in mind? Hast thou not shame to make thus the imbecile, and to have fear of a holy place? Corpo di Bacco, but it goes not well, this!"

She was at last with difficulty persuaded to sidle by, her ears twitching, and stepping delicately, as Agag. But misfortunes never come singly, and it was then discovered that the malicious Pirino had inflated himself to such a degree while his buckles were fastened, that, now he had thought fit to reduce his body to its normal bulk, my saddle was slipping round. Fiore, alighting, made short work of *him*, however, by pulling in his girths another two holes, an injury which it was evident, from his sullen expression, that Pirino bitterly resented.

The view which opened before us at the hilltop was glorious. Far away stretched the undulating curves of the Chianti hills; at our feet lay slopes clothed with vines and olives, among which nestled old white farms.

In the fields the men were ploughing, the oxen treading slowly among the olives; here and there, with splendid gesture, a sower scattered his seed broadcast on the freshly-turned earth.

It was a warm October day, profoundly still; a soft haze rested upon the distant hills, delicate as the veils which old painters loved to fold about Madonna's head. Autumn in Tuscany, among the unchanging pines and olives, does not show the blazing colours of an English or Swiss October; the vines and bracken may brighten to gold and crimson, but as a whole it is a dreamy landscape of pale and tender tints.

Turning to the right, we took a narrow cart-track through the pine-woods, where the air was hushed and fragrant as in some minster aisle. The dying bracken and brushwood was touched by the sun to russet, bronze and gold; the slender trunks of the umbrella pines rose, like church columns, to the roof of living green. The heather carpeted the ground with pink and purple. Far down, seen in glimpses between the rank of columns, lay the Valley of the Arno, a mystery of space and light and air, of delicate line and colour, over which were scattered, pearl-like, white villas and little towns.

In the haunted quiet of the pine-wood, one almost expected to see the great god Pan himself, shaggy and goat-footed, dancing to the music of his reed pipes among these trees which ever witness to his love and loss. For the legend of the pine-trees is that Pan, the bright-locked, loved, in those old, old days when the gods walked on earth in visible form, Pitys, who was also loved of Boreas, the strong god of the wind. But, she favouring the spirit of the woodland, the wind-god, in a passion of

jealousy, blew her down from the summit of a lofty rock. A tree called by her name sprang up from the place of her death, and for her sweet memory became the favourite plant of Pan.

Ah, well, they say Pan is dead now, the dryads are gone from the forests, no nymphs dance in the meadows and no naiades haunt the lakes and pools. These ancient, joyous gods perished before the austere mysticism of early Christian teachers; the world has grown older and graver, and they live only in the hearts of the young,—those blessed ones of whom the Hebrew poet wrote, that they should die, children in spirit, though they lived a hundred years. Perhaps they never really existed, and we lament an imaginary golden age, and sigh with desire for things which are but the visions of our hearts. Yet, “where there is no vision, the people perish”; and we may be poorer than our ancestors in that we scorn as shadow much which for them was substance, and reject as fancy much of their old poetic faith.

But here, on these quiet Tuscan hills, the old dreams—too beautiful to be quite untrue—come back to us: life is lovelier, more simple; and we forget the hideous modern spirit of doubt and denial, which would, if it were strong enough, rob the world of all that adds beauty to life, or takes fear from death.

Leaving the dim world of the woods behind us, we rode along the white curving roads, unbounded by wall or hedge,—roads where the past came so near that it would have seemed only natural that the frate trudging along should have been St. Francis, or that the nearing figure leading a donkey should have resolved itself into St. Antonino, the good Archbishop, traversing the country as Villari described him, leading a mule loaded with bread

and clothing for the poor, and those left desolate by famine, war, or plague.

The sloping ground opened up a view of inconceivable space and splendour. Vague, illimitable distances, mysteriously blue, stretched away to where, beyond Pistoia, rose, remote and purple, range after range of mountains, set, as the four rivers which bounded Eden, to shut in the garden of Tuscany from the outer world.

It seemed as if one must overlook half of Italy, if not the kingdoms of the earth, so immense was the circumference of the girdling walls of Apennine which, with feet on earth, raised their crests towards the light of God. The broad plain was quiet as still water; far off a curve of the Arno mirrored the blue and silver of the sky.

Along the road the clean, straight trunks of bay or cypress-trees rose up, as in old Quattro-cento pictures, cutting in clear calm outline against the sky. The sword-like blades of bamboos glittered in the sun; late pink roses fringed the garden walls; the vines glowed like fire and blood as the sun shone through them; the olives were darkening among their silvery foliage; rods of golden myrtle and pale yellow snapdragon grew beside the way.

In places, built up chapel-wise, with a background of cypress and olive, or shaped out of the thickness of the walls, on houses or at cross-roads, were shrines whose faded colours borrowed warmth from the sunlight. Before them offerings of flowers had been set by pious hands; beneath them rested old men and women; children on their way from school had paused to play in their shadow. They were set along the road as the illuminated capitals which glow amid the lines of black letter in ancient missals. And here and there a cross, reared by the road-

side, threw the shadow of a great suffering across the sunny way.

There is a beauty strangely Eastern about the Tuscan landscape. The grey walls running over the hills among the olives, the square, white houses, the vineyards, the yoked oxen, the lilies of the field, suggest Nazareth, the flower-village, and the hill-towns of Galilee.

Surely, if when God made man in His own Image, He also made earth in the likeness of Heaven, Italy still retains something of that fairness; and, for all the struggles which have drenched her plains with blood, which have given her a past so fierce and terrible, she yet possesses an influence which lays a quieting touch upon the soul. Can Paradise itself be more beautiful? Will the golden streets ever call like the white Tuscan road? How her sons must long for her and dream of her with, ah! what passion of desire, in far countries. How maddening must be the change to some contadino, driven by hard times, or the spirit of adventure, from the gold and blue of his native country, and set down to grind an organ in the Old Kent Road!

The majority of the villages through which we passed were, strange to say, ugly and squalid; curiously lacking in the charm of an English village, and seeming, in spite of the loveliness of their surroundings, like bits of town set down abruptly in the midst of the country, with gaunt tenement houses, plastered and uniform, of a yellowish tint, generally bordering both sides of a long and dreary street. The open doors showed interiors both bare and gloomy; dingy clothes hung in festoons from the windows; no grass or flowers were to be seen, and the house-walls formed the boundary of the road as in a town. Yet here and there under an archway, survival

of an older day, was a picturesque barn or pillared courtyard, a stone well or ancient coat of arms, as a reminder that each of these old villages has its own biography and bit of history, its traditions of great men or great deeds.

The straggling village of Peretola, for instance, although it has—let us hope, unjustly—such a name for stupidity that the Florentines describe an especially unenlightened person with the scornful expression, “Non è stato nemen’ à Peretola” (He has not even been to Peretola), produced the Vespucci family of which Amerigo was born; and when, as Tribaldo dei Rossi notes in his diary, “A letter came to the Signoria saying that certain youths gone out in sailing ships, have arrived at an immense island, to which never before have any people sailed, which is inhabited by men and women all naked,” the despised people of Peretola must have known at least one day of congratulation and pride.

The ugliness of the villages is very far from being repeated in the houses of the contadini, which are, as a rule, delightfully picturesque, and afford charming bits of colour, with gay pots of geranium and carnation at the barred windows; great golden gourds hanging against the mellow, time-stained walls; vines climbing about the doorway and flecking the stones with shadow; and trays of split figs and scarlet tomatoes laid out on the low walls of the courtyard to dry for winter use.

The excitement which our passing aroused was comical. From every house the people rushed out to see the almost unknown, and therefore enthralling, sight of the “Signorine a cavallo.” Hearing the beat of horses’ feet, great girls of eighteen or twenty took to their heels and fled, to gaze open-mouthed from a distance. Children ran screaming

to their mothers, and, safely arrived, turned to cast distrustful, sidelong glances at us out of their great black eyes. Heads bobbed out from every window; men dropped their spades, women their straw-plaiting, to hurry to the side of the road. And there is little doubt that, except such as were confirmed invalids, we saw every member of every community through which we passed.

On a piece of wild ground close to the road, in a lovely wooded place, we came upon an encampment of "Zingari," and reined in our horses to watch the picturesque scene.

Fiore shook his head judicially, and hoped that there would be no fowls or more valuable things missing in the neighbourhood; but Francesca and I were deeply interested by this glimpse into so romantic and homeless a life.

It is a strange existence which the gipsies lead; roaming from birth till death, citizens of no city, natives of no land; their unions unblessed, their children unbaptized; themselves, outcasts and wanderers on the face of the earth. Yet the camp looked, for all the dirt and confusion, wonderfully picturesque on that sunny afternoon, with the bright colours of the costumes and of the cushions upon which the many babies, almost naked, sprawled.

The women were handsome, in a half-savage way, with bronze skins, black eyes, and gleaming teeth. Their hair, divided in two parts, was plaited above each ear; the braids, interwoven with medals of gold, silver, or copper, the gifts of their admirers, tied together either on the back or the breast, and, according to one who has had the opportunity of closely observing gipsy customs, never, once plaited, undone as long as they live.

They were dressed in short, full skirts, bright-coloured

shirts with wide, hanging sleeves, and wore silk handkerchiefs tied over their heads.

The men, brown-skinned, black-haired and bearded, wore dark trousers, and boots reaching to the knee; jackets of green or black, heavily braided, and often sleeveless, showing the full sleeves of blue or scarlet shirts; felt hats, and—curious and characteristic detail—a quantity of silver buttons or large knobs, attached in close rows to their coats.

These buttons are useful as well as ornamental, for the men work as tinkers, and on taking a piece of work, leave with the owner of the saucepan or kettle buttons equal to it in value, as a pledge of good faith.

The gipsy women gathered round, eager to tell our fortunes; but I, for one, have no desire to unveil the secrets of the future, so, leaving them staring after us as they chattered in their peculiar "Gergo," we rode away.

The afternoon wore on. The mountains were faintly veiled in silvery mist, yet defined with the delicate finish of a cameo, in every exquisite curve and subtle line and moulding; and the sun, dipping behind them, sent a flush of saffron light up the sky, blending all tints into a dream-like beauty and perfect calm.

Upon the splendour of the sunset followed that mysterious hour of the luminous Tuscan twilight which results from the intense clearness and transparency of the air. The sky was full of green light; below, the land grew slowly dark; the hills cut sharp violet outlines against the sky; the stars came out; here and there bonfires, smouldering in the fields, sent the blue smoke of vegetable fuel across the way; and from farms and villas the lights began to gleam.

That ride in the magical hour of the gloaming, along the dusky reaches of road, with the fresh night-breeze in our faces and no sound but the rhythmic beat of horses' hoofs to break the silence, was one of the lovely experiences of life, to be enjoyed in every smallest detail, garnered by memory for future delight, for is it not on the enchanted land of such memories that I shall look back as I climb some monotonous hillside of mediocre days?

As glimpses of the sea, mystical, lovely, gladdened our eyes and surprised us at sudden turns with a breath of freshness as we toiled up the steep, narrow streets of some fishing village, so the memory of a happy childhood, a lovely experience, a beautiful ideal, preserves for us, inviolable, an ocean from which some breeze may blow; and such things, having given all they can to our present, remain a joy which abides long after they have become our past, forming a sunny background to the years, surprising and gladdening us, even when shut in by the bricks and mortar of the commonplace, with a sudden breath, from an ocean of delight and splendour, at unexpected turnings in the twisting street of life.

X

A MUSHROOM HUNT

MUSHROOMS, like manna, should be gathered afresh every morning, and on that October day the weather was ideal for the search. A week of soaking rain had been followed by hot sunshine, and the warm, damp earth was a perfect forcing-bed in which every fungus was hastening upwards at the top of its speed.

Certainly such a morning must be devoted to a mushroom hunt: there was no need for Salvatore to tell us so; we knew it from our own experience as veteran hunters, without any advice from him; and, with nailed boots, baskets and clasp-knives, were off in the fresh of the morning, with a joyous sense of adventure, to seek these coy creatures of the wood.

The dogs, who understand perfectly the pleasures which await them when country-boots and baskets are the order of the day, barked and bounded in an ecstasy of delight as we took the narrow track among the olives; then, having expressed their approval of the expedition, fell into a long, straggling procession down the road.

Adolfo, the gardener, paused in his work of pruning roses to prophesy that we should return empty-handed; but Adolfo is a pessimist, so his prediction troubled us not a whit as we toiled up the steep slopes of the green and golden woods.

The sun shone upon the emerald turf and undergrowth ; the dying oak thickets glowed like bronze ; blue mists lingered among the distant tree-trunks ; the ground in sheltered places was rosy with cyclamens ; the pine-needles filled the air with their spicy fragrance. Far down on the plain lay Florence, with its belfries and cupolas, and the great dome which Brunelleschi set, dwarfed by distance to the size of an egg-shell, rising in the midst. Beyond rose the mountains, and it was pleasant to be assured by the aspect of Monte Morello that we were in no danger of rain.

This mountain, now bare, but once covered with thick forests through which rang the bells of little lonely churches, is exceedingly weather-wise, serving the Florentines as barometer ; and the habit of a good Florentine, asked to prophesy the weather, is to glance up at the mountain, and reply with the old rhyme—

“Quando Monte Morello, mette il cappello, Pigli l'ombrello.”

It was a perfect morning. Birds sang softly among the white flowers of the myrtle thickets. Now and again a rabbit slid through the fern, rousing sudden excitement in the dogs. The scarlet and orange balls on the arbutus trees glowed in the sun like fairy fruit among their burnished leaves, and on the prickly juniper bushes the berries clustered, misty blue.

A juniper is a pretty shrub, and its fruit useful for the making of gin ; but I think Elijah must indeed have been hard put to it when, going a day's journey into the wilderness, he sat down under the shadow of one to rest and pray that his life might be taken from him,—though perhaps the juniper trees of Palestine

are larger, more capable of shade-giving than the stunted bushes of Italian woods.

The first mushroom was found by Francesca, and was a noble specimen of the "Ovolo" tribe, orange-red above, primrose colour beneath; a class of fungus which takes its name from the manner of its growth,—coming up through the soil in a cream-skinned egg, and after splitting this outer covering, opening in the sun like an orange parasol. But our search at first was, on the whole, unsuccessful, for the peasant boys had already been out since daybreak; and as little had escaped their sharp eyes the baskets remained distressingly light. Among the contadini, the mushrooms which they send their children to gather prove a profitable crop, as they sell them at the Villa or in the town, either for immediate eating, or to be preserved under oil as a pickle for winter use. Especially are they valued in the mountains, where the people have little to live upon save their chestnuts, and the strawberries, raspberries, and mushrooms with which the varying seasons fill the woods.

Still we rambled on, confident that sooner or later some splendid discovery would reward our search.

I wonder in what lies the fascination of a mushroom hunt! Certainly it is not the desire to eat mushrooms, for those can be set before me in every variety without my moving hand or foot; yet there is undoubtedly some charm which leads me day after day to clamber about the wooded slopes with eyes bent upon the turf and dead leaves and broom bushes; and even when I return empty-handed I am always ready to set out again with fresh enthusiasm next day.

It must be a spark of that adventurous spirit which once drove men forth in search of El Dorado; that

passion which led the old explorers, sailing over unknown and mighty waters, or toiling through Alpine snows or desert sands, to go forward ever one league farther, feeling that realisation of hope and fulfilment of effort *might* lie at the end of that next mile. The feeling that any moment *may* reveal the longed-for treasure, the earnestly sought knowledge, has encouraged and led to all the world's discoveries; and the desire to see round the next corner of life's road, the expectation of something pleasant lurking there, is as strong in small things as in great.

The excitement of the search, the eternal spring of hope, which made great enterprises possible, prompts me to walk on, my eyes fixed upon the ground, because I feel that the next foot of earth may prove a South Sea of discovery, that any moment may, after a whole barren hour, reveal a majestic "ovolo," a sturdy "porcino," or, most glorious discovery of all, a crisp family of golden "ditole."

The Italians eat far more varieties of fungi than the English, and many which we despise as toadstools would on an Italian table hold an honoured place; but for an ardent searcher there is, in all the mushroom world, no greater joy than the discovery of "ditole." Its crisp form resembles a clump of golden coral as it pushes up under the moss, where some yellow gleam, some protruding sprig betrays its presence; and when the excited seeker turns back the green coverlet, a group may be discovered, so large as to half fill the basket, when carefully dug up with a knife.

Ditole has another charm, in that it flourishes not only in families but in colonies, other clumps being almost invariably found in the neighbourhood of the first; "porcine" also have this domestic habit, growing in pairs,

or, as Mafalda expresses it, a gentleman and lady side by side.

As we climbed farther up the hill our patience was rewarded with more success; but, alas! while Francesca and I had both fairly well-filled baskets, Mafalda, for all her diligence in searching, had not found a single one.

In vain had I offered her my best ones; her lofty spirit scorned such compromise. "I have not found them, I!" was the form of her refusal; and I recognised the true spirit of the adventurer, and realised that it was not mere mushrooms which Mafalda wanted, but the proud moments when effort should be rewarded and hope be emptied in delight.

"Never mind, dear," put in Francesca, offering a crude consolation. "Poverina, you are sure to find some soon!"

Pity in such a moment was, however, the one unbearable injury. Mafalda tossed her head.

"It makes me nothing!" she replied tartly: "these noiosi funghi, I want them not," and she turned her back upon us in a lofty manner, toiling up the slope on fat bare legs whose lagging action betrayed the anguish of her soul.

Francesca and I exchanged glances: something must clearly be done. I saw a dreadful tear roll down the round, flushed cheek; evidently wounded pride and disappointment held sway together in Mafalda's heart.

Providence was kind in that moment; I saw a gleam of yellow in the shadow of a stack of brushwood. Checking the involuntary burst of jubilee, I passed by unheeding, and from a little distance up the hill directed Mafalda's weary search.

"If I were you, I would look under that big pine-tree, Mafalda; that seems to me a very likely place. No?"

Well, under the arbutus! Nothing there? *I am* surprised! Perhaps in that patch of moss beside the path! What? Really! How wonderful! What a clever child!" as a shout of triumph rent the air, and Mafalda fell on her knees before her treasure, a great clump of "ditole," crisp and golden in its bed of moss.

The joy of the discovery rendered her momentarily speechless, and seizing my hand, she pointed in dramatic silence to the fungus, which I promptly transferred, with many congratulations, to the basket, since if she did it herself, the knife might, as she wisely admitted, "sore" her hand.

"Never have I seen a thing so beautiful!" she exclaimed rapturously, gazing at her well-filled basket,—for the first clump had been the prelude to several discoveries in the near neighbourhood. "And I have found it, I myself; am very brave to find them, the funghi, non è vero?"

After this happy event we pursued our way in good spirits, although it was distressing to find many places where only the white roots remained of ditole clumps which had been nibbled off to the level of the ground.

"It is those sheeps of Paradiso," snapped Francesca vindictively, when she saw the traces. "I wish that they may die, every one!"

This would have been a somewhat extreme punishment, and I hinted as much to her; but Francesca is as stern on the subject of mushrooms as any English landowner over the preservation of game.

We came upon some of these guilty animals a few minutes later, and upon the shepherd himself, a weather-beaten man, staff in hand, who, with his dog at his feet and his back set against a tree-trunk, was gazing vacantly

out across the Val d'Arno, and the undulating ripple of far blue hills.

As I looked at him I feared that the shepherd's vocation was wasted upon Paradiso ; I doubted if he had any full perception of its joys. Yet it must be a good life,—to dwell with all this beauty, and to have the long sunny hours in which to wander in the silence of the hillside, marking the time by the steps of the sun in heaven ; and, from the going forth in the morning until the flocks are folded at night, hearing the music of birds and waters, watching the march of the seasons across the land, and feeding one's soul upon the beauty of the world. I believe that I should be quite happy under such circumstances, in love as I am with the open air and sky, the grass and trees, and all the creatures of fur and feather which dwell in fields and woods.

Of course I should have a dog ; that is the right of every shepherd ; and it would certainly be Plato, that big, grotesque, long-haired animal whom I love best of all the dogs on the place. When I need consolation, it is of Plato that I seek it, and find real comfort in feeling his large warm paw laid in my hand, and in meeting the grave kind gaze from beneath his shaggy fringe.

I can never realise that Plato is a mere child, being little more than one year old ; his long hair, his great, thoughtful, pathetic eyes with their earnest gaze suggest, like his name, some elderly sage or philosopher, and I have a sense of reliance upon him as upon some old and trusty friend.

In spite of his strange appearance Plato must, I am sure, come of a noble family, for at times he assumes most stately attitudes, which contrast oddly with his rather clumsy build. When we are down in the ravine,

crab-catching, he extends himself upon the rock above, the living presentment of the Lion of Lucerne; and whenever, out walking, he has a spare instant, he lies down, and gravely observes the landscape with thoughts which "do lie too deep for words."

I should like to discuss this pastoral question with Paradiso; to hear his opinion on the subject, and know whether, in his primitive soul, untouched by the breath of modern life, still lingers that profound, if dumb, love of nature, that poetry and ancient folklore in which his country is so rich; and if he is content to dwell alone with nature and be the friend of the creatures, or, not knowing how blessed he is, cherishes visions, never to be realised, of life as a music-hall artist or master of a city trattoria.

Francesca, however, refused to linger while I satisfied myself on these points; she clearly held the shepherd responsible for the doings of his sheep, and in any case it was hopeless to look for mushrooms anywhere in the neighbourhood of the flock.

The baskets were well filled at last, and the boom of the midday cannon, which reached us faintly from Florence, the bells ringing from the little hillside churches, warned us that it was time to be turning our steps towards the house.

As we made our way through the heather, where the bees were humming as busily as if it were midsummer, we met an old man bent upon the same errand as ourselves, but with sadly different results.

He was very old, very ragged; his clothes were patched with a score of colours, his long grey hair hung down below a battered felt hat; in his eyes was the dim, pathetic expression only seen in the eyes of the very old.

He told us, in quavering tones, that he would be eighty-four next Ogni Santi; that he was past work, but that he came out to look for mushrooms, because his "povera vecchia," his poor old wife, was ill, had no teeth, and needed soft food now. But he could see little, and the stooping made his back ache, and there seemed to be less mushrooms in these days than there were when he was a boy.

Poor old fellow! He was a pitiful sight among the heather and the sunlight and the glad sounds and sights of the woods. He was feeble and worn-out, a burden on the sons at home, where there were many little mouths to fill. It was a pathetic age after a life of toil, and the sight of him made a shade in the sunshine as when some wayside Calvary throws its shadow across the sunny way. It was one of those sorrows for which there is no comfort, which make one's heart ache with a universal pity for all the lonely, old, and sad.

The great basket, large, perhaps, as the hope with which he had set out to look for food for his "vecchia" and the little ones, was almost empty; it stood under a tree with the bit of dry, dark bread for his dinner, while he wandered slowly about, a dreary, shrunken figure, his frequent ejaculations of "Oi! Oi!" witnessing to the aching of the rheumatic limbs.

I looked from the three full baskets to the empty one, then at the two children, and they understood at once.

I was the first to empty out my mushrooms; Francesca, always quick to give, followed my example promptly; only Mafalda hesitated. She was very little, and the treasure to her was very great; she looked wistfully at her basket, then at me. I shook my head as I met the

appeal in the blue eyes. "He will have enough now," I told her.

But Mafalda, after the momentary reluctance, rose to the occasion nobly.

"I give, also I!" she responded with dignity; and, her basket emptied, we slipped away without a word.

"Will he think Madonna sent them?" asked Mafalda, as, hand in hand, we went down the heather-covered slope.

Perhaps. Who knows? To his simple mind this may well seem food sent direct from Heaven.

"Adolfo said we should come back with empty baskets," remarked Francesca, swinging her stick as she walked; and I realised that, though she did not regret the mushrooms, it stung a little that Adolfo should be right.

Yet what if he were? There are better things even in a mushroom hunt than full baskets, and if ours were empty, another's—and he more needy by far—was full. It is not given to us every day to be agents in a miracle; and to the old man, I am sure, this sudden multiplication of his mushrooms could seem nothing less. So we reached the house in jubilant spirits, if empty-handed, for what do mushrooms matter to those who have been fellow-workers of a miracle, and who have been privileged to set the little coloured shrine of some kindly deed by the dusty wayside of another's road of life?

XI

THE PINE-CONE GATHERING

MAFALDA and I waited together in the courtyard, where the air was sweet with the twittering of the last swallows, skimming in and out of the loggia, and enjoyed the pleasures of hope.

Mafalda, having never yet experienced the charms of a Pine-cone gathering, nor the bouncing joys of an ox-cart, was much elated by the prospect, and amused herself in making little runs up and down the steps of the fountain while the oxen advanced deliberately through the gates.

“Reno, she very pleased, she skip!” she announced gleefully, drawing attention to the gambols of the big collie, and regardless of the fact that Reno’s whole character is essentially masculine. I have many times vainly pointed out to Mafalda that he is a gentleman, but, for some reason best known to herself, she invariably applies to him, as to most male beings, her father included, the feminine pronoun “she.”

We clambered into the great scarlet waggon, where Dario, beaming with smiles, accommodated us with a pile of sacks in the bottom, and then with a cheery “Via, Cavaliere! Via, Pallino!” intimated to his huge team that they might now advance.

“Pallino,” or “Little-ball,” seems a singularly inadequate name for an ox considerably taller than a man, and of

corresponding bulk, but it is a favourite among the contadini, although I should have said that "Monte Bianco" would have better hit the mark.

The oxen having been induced to set their eight legs in motion, we moved off towards the wood, bumping heavily over the stones,—since springs are an unknown luxury in a "carro à bovi,"—and proceeding in a leisurely manner which would have realised even Ruskin's high ideal.

It was a still autumn day; the serene blue of the sky paled towards the horizon, the azure distances were dreamy; the Carrara mountains, remote as a vision of the heavenly battlements, raised their white peaks through silvery haze; the long chains of Apennines, in every cadence of purple, were softened by air and distance to exquisite harmony. Below, level as a still lake, lay the world-historic plain, mysterious beneath the burden of its great memories, sweet and terrible, splendid and sad. It was a landscape of immeasurable breadth, and infinite detail of loveliness. In the still sunlight it seemed as if the white road were strewn with gold-dust and the cypresses interwoven with golden thread. It was very still. Every sound rang clearly through the air, which yet remembered the sharpness of last night's frost; and the voices of peasants, the rumble of a cart, the distant bark of a dog, floated down, faint indeed, but distinct, from the wooded hills. It was a day fair and unforgettable; yet for all its beauty, its calm, its peace of fulfilled hope and completed toil, there is something in autumn which stirs an insatiable desire, a longing which never finds, which scarcely even understands, its object; a sadness profound though unexplained. Perhaps it is because the leaves in their dying remind us that we, too, must drop when our time comes

from the Tree of Life, that one day the windows will be darkened through which we look out on the splendour of the world,—and who, unsaddened, can face such thoughts on such a day? Certainly not I, loving as I do the world and its splendour! And, feeling so, how shall I bear it, when the sweet days are all over, and I must turn from the light and look no more upon the sun?

Mafalda, whose unquenchable gaiety convinces me that a “star must have danced” when she was born, was quite untroubled by any such musings; and in exuberant spirits was conversing volubly with Dario in her native tongue, far too deeply absorbed in enquiries about his “bambini” at home, the usual nourishment of oxen, and the habits of little calves, to bestow much attention upon me.

The vines along the road were turning to copper, bronze and crimson; faded leaves, dull gold and russet, already carpeted the dark soil. On the fig-trees a few yellow leaves yet lingered, and through the scant foliage the rounded forms of the last figs were silhouetted sharply against the sky. The darkening olives looked like small damsons among their silver foliage, and the next event of the contadino’s year would be the gathering of the crop and the pressing of the oil.

Dario looked complacently at the trees as he cracked his whip in a stimulating manner over Mr. Little-ball’s head, for gladness is put into the peasant’s heart in proportion as the corn and wine and oil increase, and if no hailstorms nor other destructive forces intervened the olive crop promised well.

The road was soon left behind, for the cones must be collected from the places where they are piled in heaps by the gatherers, and the cart began to jolt among the boulders in a steep by-path of the wood, while the way

in which its occupants bounced, cup-and-ball fashion, called forth gleeful exclamations from Mafalda: "But how it is amusing, this cow-cart! How one diverts oneself! You like it, you?"

It was a pretty picture which met our eyes at the top of the hill. The clean, slender trunks of the pine-trees rose up to the green umbrella-like tops, from a carpet of fading heather and yellowing fern; the air was sweet with the aromatic scent of resin; and the contadini, adding by their bright costumes to the picturesqueness of the scene, were busy, with much laughter and chatter, in gathering the cones which came thumping down from the trees.

Each contadino has a piece of the wood allotted to him, and when the vintage is over, and the sowing of the grain and pressing of the olives not yet begun, the pine-cones are gathered and stored.

This "Raccolta" is no easy matter, as the cones do not fall of themselves, but must be forcibly detached. One of the men mounts the tall bare trunk, on which the succession of knots and lopped branches forms a rude ladder, and at last sits perched, like some fantastic bird, high among the boughs. Then—a perilous process to any but an agile and skilful climber—he cuts the cones with a sharp knife attached to a long pole, and they fall to the ground, to be gathered by the rest of the family into heaps. Care must be taken, however, to keep at a safe distance while the actual rain of cones continues, as they fall with all the force of heavy stones, and a blow on the head would be enough to severely injure, if not kill, a man.

The Tuscan folk are wonderfully attractive, with their dark eyes, sunny smiles, and warm-hearted, winning ways,

and our arrival was greeted by the whole group with a cheery "Buon giorno alla Signoria!"

Dario's wife was there, the little Madonna face looking sweeter than ever under a gay yellow handkerchief. Close by, gathering more diligently than anyone, was a deaf and dumb woman who has an immense reputation for field-work, and general utility, since, being denied the gift of speech, she cannot, as the men-folk say approvingly, waste the time in chattering like the rest of her sex, and must, perforce, remain "as still as oil."

Another of the party was Giocondo, who, however, belies his name of the "jocund," being a pensive soul, "sad and civil," and inclined to take a mournful view of life. Perhaps this is because he has proved the fallacy of the Psalmist's unqualified statement that he who getteth a wife, getteth a good thing. "La Gioconda" is not a treasure in domestic life, being sickly in mind and body, manifesting a feeble incapacity both for work in the fields and work in the house. Moreover, she brought as her only dowry an elderly and unamiable father, who has encamped by poor Giocondo's fireside, and will neither lend a helping hand in work, nor withdraw the shadow of his presence from his unfortunate son-in-law's house. Therefore, perhaps it is hardly to be wondered at if Giocondo sighs windily as he kneads the bread and performs his other duties about the Fattoria.

Half a dozen young girls, picturesque in their faded clothes, and with the lovely hair which knows the touch of sun and wind and rain alike, were busy together, chattering over their work like mill-wheels; and I saw more than one pair of eyes turned towards the fascinating Fiore, who is undoubtedly the best-looking "Giovanotto" on the place, and will, it is safe to prophesy, have little trouble

in finding a "sposina" when he turns his mind towards such things.

At present he could hardly marry even if he wished to do so, as his eldest sister is only sixteen, and until she is of an age to be carried off to a home of her own, and leave a vacant place, there is no room in the family circle for any daughter-in-law. The patriarchal fashion in which the contadini live, each family under its own "Capoccia" or head, and the habit of taking the wives of sons into the house to share the work and submit to the domestic ruler, makes this arrangement of a double wedding necessary in most cases, as the sister's departure makes room for the brother's wife.

Mafalda, arrived at the scene of action, set to work with praiseworthy energy, gathering pine-cones in her pinafore and depositing them on the heap which Dario and Giocondo and Fiore were dexterously transferring from the ground to the cart.

The small rustics, in their over-alls and clumping, wooden-soled shoes, eyed her with consuming interest mingled with admiration; and as she returned from one of her journeys with an empty pinafore, the gallant Morino, Giocondo's five-year old boy, shyly held out a branch of arbutus, bright with its scarlet and golden fruit. Mafalda received it silently, but with a smile as gracious as a princess, and came hastening to me, full of excitement over the pretty shrub, which she had never before seen.

"Have you seen, you, that he gave it me, *quel bimbo li*,—that little boy there?" she asked eagerly. "I like him, I: he is *molto gentile*; his clothes is ugly, but the little face it is very nice." Then, as a sudden desire for knowledge awoke in her, "What they do with them, these pine-cones, when they get them to house?"

“They put them in the fire, or in hot water,” I explained, always glad to see Mafalda’s mind opening to instruction, “and the heat makes these little scales unfold,—do you see, my sweet one?—and below every scale lies a nut, warm and snug. Then the nuts are taken out and cracked, and are good to eat, and to cook, and for, oh! ever so many things, and the empty cones are sold for fuel,—to make fires when the winter comes.”

Mafalda was deeply impressed by this information. Her eyes opened to their widest extent; the mystery of the hidden nuts sleeping at the fragrant heart of the pine seemed to appeal to her, for she remained silent and nodded her head thoughtfully several times.

“I take a cone to house, also I,” she finally announced with determination; “and to-night we put her in the fire and take out her nuts, *non è vero?*”

Certainly we might do many things less amusing, so Mafalda selected a particularly noble and symmetrical specimen from among the piles before her, for the revels which we were to enjoy in that delightful hour which begins with the clearing away of the tea-cups, and is bounded so sadly and so soon for small people by the summons to bed.

By this time the short November afternoon was drawing to a close; the day’s work was over, the last load was ready, and the cones piled so near to the level of the high waggon-sides, that it seemed as if no place would remain for us.

Mafalda was much distressed.

“Must we go on feet?” she asked anxiously, using a form which, when one comes to think of it, is really more reasonable than our usual idiom, since no one person, much less two, could possibly return to the house on a single foot.

However, her mind was set at rest by the courteous Dario, who scooped out a nest in the middle, lining it with sacks that we might not suffer too much from the hard and knobbly cones.

We scrambled up, helped by the *contadini*,—all of them loud in their injunctions to Fiore, who was to lead the oxen, to “star’ attento” and not jolt the Signorine; then, with much pomp and circumstance, we set off, a proud procession, on the precipitous descent.

Fiore went first, sternly admonishing the Cavalier and Mr. Little-ball to bear in mind their responsibilities, and indulge in no freaks while *his* eye was upon them. Dario followed, to adjust the drag, of which there was much need down the steep track, rugged and uneven as a mountain water-course; and behind walked all the *contadini*, picturesque in the waning light, carrying baskets and tools, chattering and laughing, glad that the week’s work was over and that to-morrow was “*festa*” and a day of rest.

The woods were dim and mysterious, grave with the quiet of evening, haunted by shadows and evasive presences which lurked among the trees; and it was pleasant in the misty grey of the twilight to picture the fire of blazing logs awaiting us, the welcome tea, and, beyond that agreeable horizon, the burning of the pine-cones as a fitting conclusion to the day.

Mafalda could scarcely eat her bread-and-jam in her impatience to begin operations, and no sooner was tea over than she committed her pine-cone to the flames.

“May I sit upon it, the knee?” she asked with her accustomed courtesy, after this important business was accomplished; and so we sat bunched up together in a great chair in the chimney-corner, and possessed our souls

in patience while the glowing tongues of fire did their work.

It was a real story-book scene: the warm glow from the logs flickered upon the tapestry and old portraits, and up to the vaulted roof of the salotto; the dogs lay basking in the warmth; the splash of the fountain in the garden, and the wail of the rising wind as it tossed a handful of dead leaves against the window-panes, only emphasised the cosiness within.

It was a magical hour, made for musing and dreams; but Mafalda was in a garrulous mood, and too deeply concerned over the well-being of her precious pine-cone to watch it quietly on its glowing bed.

"The pine-cone, she feel very hot," she pleaded presently. "If she not cool she burn me the hand!" And as the cone really did seem to have opened its "petals," I acceded to this request and removed it with the tongs to a corner of the stone hearth.

From time to time, as we waited for this cooling process, the slipping of a charred log sent a cloud of red sparks up the chimney, and Mafalda, of course, wanted a tale about these "sons of the burning coal," as the old Hebrews called them. I might have expected as much! Had she ever heard the sensational story of the army of fire fairies who lived in the heart of the wood? No? Well, the pine-log was the mother of all the fire fairies, and some of her children were good and some were naughty, and when she told them to do no harm to anyone, but to fly right away up the chimney into the sky, some said, "Yes, mother," and others said, "I don't care," and jumped out on the rug, and made holes in it, and sat down on the dogs and made them cry, and were just as disobedient as . . . some little girls could be!

Mafalda gazed pensively at the ceiling. Her air of detachment said plainly that though such little girls might exist—perhaps on the dark side of the planet—she had no dealings with or knowledge of them, and considered the allusion uncalled for and ill-timed.

“Was there no good ones?” she asked.

“Yes; there was one who was as good as good could be! And he didn’t make holes in people’s pinafores, nor sit down on the rug to make it burn, nor on the dogs to make them cry, like the bad fairies; but he just *flew* up the chimney when his mother told him, ever so high. Yes, right in the air!” as Mafalda’s face expressed the liveliest interest in the ascent of the virtuous spark.

“And then, what is happened?”

“The angels caught him and blew on him, as Santina blows the fire, till he grew big and very bright and yellow; and then they made a little hole in the sky and planted him in, and he has been a star, a beautiful shining star, ever since, because he was good, and did what his mother the pine-log told him, and went up in the air instead of sitting down to make a blaze; and he looks in through the window every night at good children when they are in bed.”

Mafalda drew a long sigh of satisfaction. “Will he look at me to-night?” she asked eagerly.

“Of course, unless a cloud gets in his way. But the cone must be cool now, so we had better begin to take out our nuts.”

The extraction of “pinoli” is one of the dirtiest occupations imaginable, the cones being sticky with resin, and blackened by flame; but Mafalda and I have no objection to “clean dirt” in a good cause, and, as the former sapiently observed, “With the soap we can wash us

the hands"; so by bedtime—that is to say, the bedtime of well-regulated young people of six—quite a large heap had been got out and cracked.

Mafalda was charmed by the whole proceedings; but her pleasure reached its height when, very carefully, I opened one of the "pinoli" and showed her, in the safe sheath, trebly protected by nutshell and cone, the tiny waxen hand, with its slender fingers, which the country-people call the "Manina di Gesù." She went into ecstasies over "this little hand white," and was not content until she had opened one for herself,—a delicate operation, not easy for impatient, childish fingers to perform.

At last Mafalda was led off, reluctant, to bed; and ten minutes later I was leaning over her, and, obedient to her instruction, "more tuck," straining the bedclothes to that unwrinkled smoothness which this exacting little person requires. Sitting up, she herself smooths away every crease from the tightly drawn sheet and counterpane, and then slides cautiously into a recumbent position, fearful of disturbing in the least degree the perfect neatness of her bed.

Why Mafalda is so punctilious on this point I do not know. At times, from an irresistible love of teasing, I have seated myself on a corner of the bed after her preparations were completed, in spite of her stern injunction, "Go up, you!" and when I have been so unfeeling as not to rise promptly, or have seriously damaged the neatness of the clothes, Mafalda has melted into indignant tears, and sitting up, with great drops rolling down her cheeks, has set about her work a second time, casting fiery glances the while at me.

On this night, however, no such mischance occurred,

and when I kissed the round face on the pillow, the blue eyes were already heavy with sleep.

Then I went back to the salotto, and to my reveries beside the smouldering logs.

Mafalda's pine-cone lay in the hearth, blackened, mutilated. Twelve hours before it had swayed on the crest of a lofty tree on the hillside, perfect in shape, fragrant in scent, rich in the treasure hidden at its heart.

Ah, well! it is the fate of pine-cones as well as of grass to be cast into the oven; and this one had surely fulfilled its destiny, since the life which had been fed by sap, strengthened by sun and wind and rain, had gone out that night in fire and fragrance, had made a child happy, and had given me another glad memory to add to a store already rich,—for no creature, from the least to the greatest, which has added one happy moment to the lives of others; which has, by whatever sacrifice, given one glad hour to some other soul; has failed entirely in its mission, has been a quite unworthy guest at the feast of life.

PART II

XII

THE HAPPY PILGRIM

THE glory of the sunset had faded ; even the gold which had long smouldered behind the ripple of far blue hills had died out ; the stars sparkled in the sapphire of the summer night, and a wan light in the eastern sky heralded the rising of the moon.

The station at Florence was crowded and noisy, for in the July heat everyone who can travels by night ; but fortunately the world and his wife were going northwards, pressing into packed carriages, while we, whose faces were turned to the south, might trust to travel in comparative peace. So a kind fate ordained it, for when at eleven p.m. the train, bearing the tremendous name of Rome upon it, shunted out into the darkness, the engine giving vent to short staccato grunts, our carriage was free from all intrusive strangers, and we were at liberty to dispose ourselves, our dogs and possessions, to our own satisfaction, and make the best arrangements possible for either watching or sleep.

Francesca, covering her head with a Neapolitan silk scarf, prepared for slumber ; Mafalda's face had already assumed the seraphic expression which sleep gives to little

children; but I, unwilling to lose any of the beauty which the journey might offer, filled with a joyous sense of adventure in setting out to seek the unknown land, and eager to garner every memory for future delight, leaned back in my corner, a drowsy dog in my arms, and watched the swiftly changing scene.

A waning moon was travelling slowly up from the horizon, putting out the stars one by one. The ranges of hills cut outlines of perfect peace against the sky, while from time to time some higher peak lifted a little church towards God.

The train ran on through stretches of podere, where the olives gleamed silver in the moonlight, and secrets and mysterious presences seemed to lurk among the trees; past villas and convents, white as angel-houses, and surrounded—guarded, it seemed—by the dark, breathless flames of the cypress-trees; past rivers where the moonlight sparkled into diamonds, as gifts thrown down to some water-nymph with starry eyes and shadowy hair.

At San Giovanni Val d'Arno, Masaccio's birthplace, loud voices outside the servants' compartment announced that the housemaid, a native of this little town, was being greeted by her friends; their laughter and chatter sounded strangely far-away, as if it broke across a dream, and the station looked gaunt and dreary in the dingy lemon-coloured light of its one oil-lamp. But we were soon off again, out in the solemn black and white of the country, where the moonlight rested like a benediction on the earth.

Here and there a faint light shone out from a convent, where the Brothers had risen to recite the midnight Office. Pious souls, I hope they remembered in their prayers the

pilgrims of the road, with all night wanderers, and me among them, and wished us God-speed!

Once, where the road ran beside the railway, we passed a man trudging along, the only living creature in that grey, deserted landscape. Where was he going at such an hour, far from town or village? Was it a message of birth or death he was carrying? Was it a summons to the doctor to greet some tiny new life, or to speed some old traveller upon his shrouded path? Or was he a Son of the Way, a pilgrim like ourselves, journeying in the cool of the night that he might rest beneath the noonday sun?

It was but a glimpse, and we had sped onwards and left him, a dark, mysterious figure, tramping doggedly along the lonely road.

Towards three o'clock we passed Cortona, its white houses and churches gleaming pearly among the ilex and olive groves as they straggled up the steep hillside. Its wonderful name was shouted out by a sleepy porter with no more emotion than if it had been Hull or Brighton, yet this Etruscan city is so inconceivably ancient that it claims no less than to have sent forth the founders of Troy! However that may be, it is wondrous old, and its immense antiquity, the thought of the strange Etruscan rites which those slopes must have witnessed before the coming of the White Christ, the strange permanence of these material objects in a world of change, lays a steady, calming hand upon the heart. It possesses more modern memories, too, of Luca Signorelli, its great son, who left his best work at Orvieto and here in his native town.

Soon after leaving Cortona the shadows grew fainter, less sharply defined: the first light of dawn began to steal across the land, and a chilling of the air announced the

cold, mysterious, and most sacred hour before the day. Gradually the shadows crept away, the wan light grew clearer; familiar objects, houses and trees, walls and hayricks, no longer blurred and indistinct, began to sharpen into clear black outline, yet strangely solemnised and remote. In the east the "Stella Diana" shone with wonderful radiance in the transparent blue, until, as the saffron light stole up the sky, she veiled her beauty before the coming of a greater than she; and by degrees colour awoke again, though the mystery of unforgotten dreams, the magic of the unspoiled day, yet lingered on the face of the earth.

Life is full of surprises, some tragic, some beautiful; but never have I known a surprise more lovely than the one which was vouchsafed to me in that July dawn, when a sudden turn in the railway line revealed the enchanted lake, the "Reedy Thrasymene" of Macaulay's familiar lay.

The vast expanse of water, calm and transparent as a mirror, pure and remote in the freshness of the new day, lay before us, blue and silver, with a faint rose-flush which foretold the rising of the sun. It was solemn, as befitted one into whose heart the moon had gazed all night: calm as one who had awaited daily, through unnumbered ages, the miracle of dawn. Beyond, girdling the lake, rose the majestic blue mountains, among which Perugia, the "Empress City," stands. The grand lines of their peaks cut sharply against the growing brightness of the sky, where the rose of dawn bloomed. At their feet, on the edge of the water, clustered tiny white villages. On a crag rising sheer above the lake stood a small walled city, Castiglione del Lago, its fortress and campanile silhouetted in stern but noble profile against the sky. A breeze

from the water blew in our faces; only a flat, narrow band of pasture, with a few small trees and a white ribbon of road, separated us from the lake, along the shores of which the railway ran.

The whole view, with the delicate lines, yet everlasting strength, of the mountains; the ethereal tints, the sense of breadth and illimitable space which comes from the limpid clearness of the Italian air, was lovely as a vision; and the magic of the hour added to the enchantment of the scene.

It was a landscape of imperishable memories, sweet and terrible; and to Mafalda, who had awakened, and was looking out of the window with my arm round her, I told in low tones, so as not to disturb the still sleeping Francesca, the story of a misty summer morning, long and long ago, when the grim pageant of war passed this way, with flashing swords and lances, and one of the greatest battles of the world was fought out upon these very shores.

Mafalda's eyes grew round and solemn as she gazed at the unchanged hills, and heard how the Roman leader fell into the Carthaginian snare; and how the battle raged so fiercely that an earthquake which devastated many cities was unnoticed in the fray; and how by noon, when Hannibal and his troops ceased from slaying, Flaminius and fifteen thousand of his men lay dead, while their blood ran down in waves to tinge the silver waters red.

It was all over, all dead now, that tumultuous past; and certainly the lake seemed on this July morning as if it had long forgotten the blood and slaughter and the tramp of the Roman soldiers' feet. It was hard even to realise that such things ever had been; yet the guardian mountains had witnessed them, and the sun could have

told the tale. It was easier, more in harmony with the surroundings, to picture St. Francis, the Little Poor Man, with his beautiful face worn by prayer and watching, with his kind eyes and coarse brown robe, coming alone over the mountain to keep his Lent.

And this is the legend of St. Francis as told in the "Fioretti," and as told by me to Mafalda while the train rushed on.

St Francis, being once, on the last day of Carnival, near the Lake of Perugia in the house of one of his followers, was inspired by God to go and keep that Lent in an island of the lake. So he besought his disciple, for the love of Christ, to carry him in his boat to an island where no man dwelt, and to do this on the night of Ash Wednesday, that none might know where he went. This the disciple, for the great love he bore to St. Francis, did willingly, and rowed him there; the Saint taking no provision for those weeks of prayer and vigil but two small loaves of bread.

Arrived at the island, when his friend was for leaving him and returning home, St. Francis begged him earnestly that to no man would he reveal the place of his retreat, and that he would not come for him before Holy Thursday. All of which the other promised, and went his way.

So was Francis left alone on the island; and since there was no dwelling in which he might shelter, he entered into a dense thicket, and set himself to prayer and the contemplation of heavenly things. And there he abode all Lent, drinking nothing, nor eating save the half of one of the loaves. When, therefore, the disciple returned on Holy Thursday, he found one loaf unbroken, and of the other, a half. And this half loaf it seems that St. Francis

ate for reverence of Christ the Blessed, who fasted forty days and nights; and so Francis, with that piece of bread, chased the venom of vain-glory from his heart.

And in the place where St. Francis kept his marvellous fast did God work many miracles, for which cause men began to build houses and dwell on the island; and in a little while they raised a village, fair and great, and a company of frairs also settled there; and ever since men have had great reverence for the Isola Maggiore, where St. Francis kept that holy fast.

At length, in the cold, clear light of early morning, the train stopped at Chiusi, and having breakfasted in the waiting-room upon milkless coffee and thick biscuits,—all which the sleepy attendant could provide at that hour,—we set off on our long drive, the horses trotting along gaily, with jingling bells, in the fresh air.

A host of impressions may be crowded into twelve hours, and during a day's travelling much loveliness may be caught and made one's own. Especially is this so in Italy, where every hand's-breadth of land is full of beauty, and rich in historic associations; where, on all sides, are mountains and lakes, cities and rivers, with haunting names which stir memories of Etruscans, Romans, Carthaginians, and Northern tribes; of kings and emperors, popes and saints; and of the many fierce feuds and factions, the intense faith and passionate piety, of mediæval days.

Here, on these winding roads, one is a pilgrim, and not a citizen of any modern city. How far away, how utterly remote, London seems! Can it really exist on the same planet? Is it possible that it is only two days' journey away? That at the very moment when the sun rises over Thrasymene, the traffic up the Strand is beginning, the

activities of the night giving place to the activities of the morning, as the dwellers in the West go home after the night's pleasure, and the dwellers in the East go out to the day's work ?

It seems incredibly distant : the century fades ; modern interests grow dim ; it is Italy with her memories, her regrets, her traditions, her splendid, haunting past, which is real and potent. Even the modern, progressive, united Italy grows dim before the sorcery of the mountains, the influence of these wide calm spaces, these old white roads along which have passed the footsteps of saints ; and one walks in spirit with Francis, Catherine, and their fellows, along the way which must surely lead to a continuing city whose name is Peace.

The landscape for many miles after leaving Chiusi was fair and fertile, inexpressibly lovely in the tender light of dawn ; a verdant country of woods and waters, fields and glades. The soil bore rich crops of corn, which, later than in Northern Tuscany, was still waiting the sickle to garner its golden treasure ; the grapes, green as yet, clustered thickly on the vines ; the bulky heads of the maize were swelling in their green sheaths ; the olive-trees lay like grey smoke upon the slopes ; great bushes of yellow broom grew along the road. The sun, reaching suddenly above the rim of a distant hill, sent a flood of golden light across the land, throwing long shadows from the trees upon the deep dewy grass, and over everything was the cool freshness, the radiant purity of the unspoiled day.

Here and there along the road a group of peasants passed with tools and dinner-baskets, on their way to work ; or a man with a donkey, which carried some load slung on either side of the wooden saddle. Now a yoke of

soft-eyed oxen went by, or a barefooted girl leading a cow to pasture or driving a flock of sheep.

Perhaps it was along these very roads that Lars Porsena of Clusium, having sworn by the nine gods that the House of Tarquin should no longer enjoy sovereign power, sent forth his messengers east and west, and south and north, as everyone has learnt in Macaulay's ringing lay.

The landscape was endlessly varied as the horses trotted on. To the right rose Monte Cetona, the highest peak in the district; and clustered along a lower ridge, the little town of the same name, its quaint old houses and towers forming a sheer wall with the rock on which they were built, and glowing into ruddy tints as the glory of the level sunbeams blazed against the stones.

Herds of black pigs and flocks of turkeys along the way, and beneath the trees, were kept by picturesque women and children. Men sat at the roadside breaking stones, with a canopy of branches erected to keep off the increasing heat of the sun; while in the fields the labourers were digging between the olive-trees, with spades formed of a three-cornered piece of metal set at the end of a long straight pole.

The fresh morning air aroused a keen hunger in Mafalda, who began to clamour for food; but, alas! the carriage offered nothing, for who was to have foreseen this desire between refreshment at Chiusi and refreshment at "Le Piazze," where we were to arrive at half-past six? I explained that it was impossible for me to provide breakfast here in the wilderness, which was too much for her weary spirits, already vexed by a night in the train instead of in her cot.

"What to do?" she exclaimed pettishly. "Am hungry,

I, and it makes you nothing; and these Piazze they are ever more far, and never we arrive!"

The situation was serious, for tears were evidently not far off. To reason with a tired and hungry person of six is useless, and also I felt that I was not blameless in the matter, as surely I ought to have foreseen the dilemma, and provided loaves and fishes for our wayfaring; so with the serpent's wisdom I tried to divert Mafalda by drawing her attention to the profound interest which, to judge from the direct gaze of his narrow eyes, her beloved Blue George was paying to the beauties of the scene.

Blue George is a minute Japanese doll, only to be distinguished from Red George by the colour of his gown. Both faces express the same imperturbable calm, both heads are crowned with the same halo of black bristles; but for some mysterious reason the heart of Mafalda cleaves to Blue George, while she regards his twin with chilling indifference, if not dislike.

Blue George sits beside her cup at breakfast; his plaster face peers over the front pocket of her pinafore at gymnastics and play; and many days before we set out on the Happy Pilgrimage she had prepared, with infinite care, what she described as his "valigia"; while Red George was left to pass a lonely summer on the nursery shelf.

Happily the subject was well chosen. Mafalda was instantly diverted.

"Is naughty, the Red George," she told me severely, when I enquired why he, too, was not to enjoy the benefit of a sojourn in the mountains.

"Poor Red George! He must have been much disappointed?"

“È vero : he cried hot tears,” Mafalda stated, warming to the subject,—though how anything so human as a tear could be imagined to well from Red George’s almond eyes, with their basilisk stare, is hard to conceive. “But I,” continued this Spartan parent, “I made him the hard face, and scolded him strongly. I love him not, that bad one!—But thou, my treasure,” addressing the blameless Blue George, “thou wilt divert thyself in the mountains ; thou wilt see how it shall be beautiful !” And she became so absorbed in pointing out to this beloved object the points of interest along the way, that she forgot her hunger, and was pleasantly surprised when the halting-place was reached.

Having roused the inn people, who, much to our driver’s indignation, were sleeping heavily at that hour, we were ushered by the bustling padrona up a narrow stone staircase into a room stencilled with bunches of grapes upon a brown trellis, where, with appetites sharpened by the morning air, we feasted on cold meat, black bread, and country wine.

The “paese” was a small peaceful place, typically Italian, consisting of a few stone houses and a little church, on the low wall of which the priest sat reading his breviary. Pigs and goats wandered about at their own sweet will. A group of black-eyed children, with brown bare feet, stood gazing, open-mouthed, at the carriages of the “Signoria” which had so early invaded their village. Some picturesque looking women went by with old copper “brocche” to the well, their voices floating up to the window, accompanied, as the bucket went down, by the pleasant splash of water, the creaking of the chain, the clatter of the metal pots.

Man and beast alike refreshed, we set out again.

Here and there the road ran through the golden-green of an oak-wood, the great trunks rising from mossy lawns and deep fern; hips and haws glowed like fire in the hedges; pyracanthus bushes held out their bunches of orange-coloured berries, and the sun caught the lovely misty blue of the sloes.

After passing San Casciano, a quaint little town made up of steep, winding streets, old houses with stone escutcheons and open loggias, and a "Palazzo del Comune,"—now used as a post-office,—rich with rows of heraldic devices, the country grew wilder, more austere. Wide, sweeping lines of mountains enclosed this solitude. The near hills were bare, and utterly uncultivated, save where, at long intervals, some small stone house with quaint outside stairs marked the place where a family of peasants had succeeded in finding pasture for a few goats and long-haired cattle, and in growing a little corn. For miles in every direction there was nothing to be seen but illimitable sky-spaces and wild hill and moorland, over which sheep wandered, cropping the spare grass; a region where the wind could sweep as across the waves of the sea, and where Silence dwelt.

The slopes, through which the road ran, showed sharp ribs and angles of greyish chalk and marl, worn by water into weird forms; cracked by the sun, seamed with innumerable crevices, folds, and wrinkles, where nothing grew but stunted grass,—truly upon such a landscape Noah might have looked out after the Flood!

To the north-west rose Monte Amiata, the great volcano of the Maremma, which in forgotten ages sent its fire and lava over wide tracts of country, but, long since extinct, is now dark with forests, which clothe, as a garment, its sweeping curves. Northward, Radicofani

sprang sharply from the plain, crowned with its old castle, the mountain eyrie of a fierce mediæval race. Here and there some small brown town raised itself on the hillside, hiding probably a stormy history of brigand broods crushed out in those old struggles which humbled so many mountain fastnesses, dooming them to insignificance and an uneventful age.

The heat grew intense as the hours passed, and there was no shade along the dusty road. The sun beat pitilessly down upon the bare slopes, where peasants, moving with the classic grace of Fred Walker's pastoral figures, drove their plough and team of oxen through the dry ashen soil. Seen thus, in their own surroundings, many of these hillmen are splendid types, bearing often the great names of mediæval times, possessing the strength and poise of antique statues, and the dark, finely moulded faces, spare brown flesh and sinewy limbs which proclaim their race; black-haired, with dark, or—often, in these mountain regions—blue eyes, beneath their bronzed foreheads and sharply defined brows.

The Italian peasant, however ignorant of all book-learning, usually possesses that innate courtesy, that ease and dignity which are the inheritance of the Latin races, who, when the other nations of Europe were barbarians, were masters of the world. His field-work, too, is wonderfully picturesque, though perhaps neither progressive nor scientific; and Italy, in out-of-the-way places, is still, agriculturally, as it was in Virgil's day. The great scarlet waggons still roll along, drawn by cream oxen with brave red trappings, as they must, in Cæsar's time, have rolled through the streets of Rome; and as they crowded every way to the Eternal City when the people fled before Lars Porsena and his Etruscan hosts.

The plough which drives its furrow now is the same rude wooden implement as then; the forks and rakes are made from branches of tough wood peeled and smoothed, the natural shape of the branch forming these primitive tools; the corn is sown and reaped by hand, and trodden out by horses and oxen with their hoofs.

Hour after hour passed, and still we drove on, all a little weary of the winding, sun-scorched road; and especially Mafalda, who had long since fallen asleep with her head upon my knee.

In places the road ran across some stony river, impassable after the winter rains, but now hardly deep enough to cool the horses' feet. At one point, where the old highway from Rome runs north, was the wide pebbly bed of a stream, dry after the long drought. It was an arid-looking place, yet possessing a wan, melancholy beauty of its own, with bare stones and white sand, stunted, pale-leafed willows, coarse grey grass and silver thistles; and, crossing it, a solitary figure—an old woman dressed in faded greys and greens, bearing on her head an earthen pitcher in dull tints of cream and green.

Close to this lonely crossing stood the "Sforzesca," a palace built in 1576 by the Cardinal Alessandro Sforza, to receive Pope Gregory XIII., to whom the Cardinal wished to show the bridge built by him over the river Paglia, two miles from Aquapendente on the Roman road. The picturesque old building has fallen from its high estate now, and only affords house-room for a few contadini; but there is still a melancholy dignity about it, although its back parts are in ruin, and brambles and traveller's joy run riot over its walls.

Ah, well, "Sic transit gloria mundi!" Yet it is strange to think that there, where pigs and goats now feed in the

grass-grown courtyards, and rough waggons stand beneath the great archway with its carved inscription—

“Sublato Denso Nemore
ALEXANDER SFORTIA
Rus Hoc Edificavit
MDLXXVI,”

a pope once passed in splendid state, with attendant scarlet-robed cardinals, and all the gay colour and vivid life of a mediæval train.

On and on we went, the road becoming steeper as we climbed to Castellazzara,—a huddle of grey, red-roofed houses, near of kin to the rocks on which they stand, and poised like a falcon's nest on the scarp of the cliff.

The sound of horses' hoofs in the narrow streets brought every man, woman and child to door or window, and hosts of small boys came clattering after the carriages in their wooden shoes. But, pausing for none of them, we still went on and on; past the washing cistern where the women were slapping their clothes on the stone slabs with alarming energy; past the wooden cross at the entrance to the “paese”; on by the winding hill-road, where here and there patches of corn yellowed the stony slopes, and where goats leaped among the rocks; until, at a sudden turn in the way, a grey house came in view, with one or two attendant cottages and out-buildings, very lonely in a great valley; the track ran down to it, stopped short, and the pilgrimage was over!—the Happy Pilgrim had reached the Place of Peace!

XIII

AT CORNACCHINO

No sooner did I see Cornacchino than I surrendered to its charm. It was all delightful. The immense solitude, the distant glimpse of the Mediterranean, the bare slopes with their litter of grey boulders, their brambles and thin, wind-whipped grass; the curve of wooded hills to the south; the white winding road; even the goats, cropping the grass and shrubs along the way. I could have clapped my hands for joy as I looked down upon it all, so lonely and beautiful was it,—a place where one could get on with one's life, and cast out jarring thought, and lay up a store of tranquillity; and where one's soul could grow like grass after rain.

The house itself was ideal for a summer holiday, strongly built of rough stone, with a terrace in front, upon the wall of which stood pots of geraniums and carnations.

Inside, the walls and rounded ceilings were whitewashed, the cross-beams and deep-set doors were of dark oak, the furniture of the simplest wood and wicker; and coarse bright pottery, gay chintz, and woollen embroideries such as the Roman and Abruzzi peasant women do, formed the only decoration.

Yes, it was delightful, indoors and out. For years it had been waiting for me, as many another lovely place may await me round the corner of the years.

By strange, unforeseen turnings in life's road I had come to it; and as, weary with travel, I looked my last for the night upon the sky blazing with stars, clear and sharp in the darkness, and felt the wonderful silence only broken by the distant barking of a dog, it was with a joyous sense of anticipation, a delightful consciousness of happy days to come.

When I awoke next morning the square frame of my window showed a hillside golden in the early sunlight, and, behind the slope, a patch of deep blue sky. The air which came in was fresh and exhilarating after the heat of Florence; and, since novelty is the salt of life, and I was in the midst of novelties, I jumped up quickly, eager to enter upon my kingdom without delay.

Down below the dogs were stretched luxuriously upon the rough turf; Pietro, the servant, chanted lustily as he went to and from the fountain filling the copper cruses; horses and mules passed from time to time along the stony hill-track with heavily laden paniers slung across them, forming, with their owners, groups suggestive of the Flight into Egypt. A girl came in at the gate with a pitcher of goat's milk for breakfast on her head; and down at the kitchen door an old woman, with a garland of aggrieved hens hanging, head downwards, at her donkey's saddle-girths, haggled with the cook over prices, while she defended herself from the sun with a large green bough. Everywhere there was the promise of new experiences, and it was with a thrill of excitement that I said to myself "Incipit Vita Nuova," and, slipping out of the house, climbed the hill at the back that I might take the bearings of this new and lovely land.

It was a magic morning. The sky was deep blue; radiant light glittered on the dewy grass and sharpened

the cool shadows which defined every curve and hollow of the hills. The air was yet a little chilly, the purity and freshness of the dawn unspoiled. Marguerites, white and yellow, starred the ground; perpetual sweet-peas, lupins, and larkspurs of all colours, blue delphiniums, chicory, corn-cockles, sweet-williams and traveller's joy, flowered among the rough grass which covered the hillsides; the woods were carpeted with wild strawberries, and here and there a stem of tall orange lily lifted its stately head.

Far off, beneath the hills, lay the Lake of Bolsena; a silver mirror set in the dark neutral tint of the surrounding country, where colour was hardly yet awake.

Upon the banks at one end rose the little town of Bolsena, where the miracle was wrought which stupefied the mediæval world, and from which originated the feast of Corpus Domini, instituted by Pope Urban iv. in 1264. For it happened in 1263 that Peter of Prague, a young German priest, much troubled by doubts as to the Real Presence in the Eucharist, came from his native country to the land which is the heart of Catholicism, hoping to find the solution of his doubts. Pausing on his way to Rome at Bolsena, he drew near the altar at Sta. Cristina to celebrate Mass, when, behold, a great miracle! For, as he broke the bread, he saw it changed before his eyes to flesh, dripping with blood; and, though vainly he tried to hide this marvel by wrapping it in the corporal, the stains came through, and in every spot of blood appeared, thorn-crowned, the head of Christ. Then Peter, trembling before so great a mystery, carried it to the sacristy, and, hastening to Orvieto, told the story to the Pope. This latter, greatly marvelling, sent straightway the Bishop of the diocese to fetch the miracle, going forth himself with all the cardinals, bearing olive-branches, to meet it, and

kneeling in great humility as it was borne to its place in the chief church of Orvieto; where, in honour of its presence, the great Duomo soon began to rise.

Beyond Bolsena were visible the delicate contours, faint and ethereal as a vision through the morning haze, of ranges of mountains, like the petrified waves of a mighty sea, between which the white mist lay in ghostly lakes. Behind me rose the rocky peaks of Monte Penna and Monte Civitella, and beyond their sharp, stern outlines the deep blue sky. To the right lay round, brown hills, their bases thickly wooded; and far away to the south-west stretched the Mediterranean, fringed by mountains which the early light touched to rose and amethyst, opal and pearl,—the sea where the Argonauts sailed, and over whose waters the Crusaders went forth; the water-way to India and the mysterious and languid countries of the East.

To the south-west lay the Maremma, that strange and lonely land which possesses the poetry of past greatness, the melancholy of dead days; which is as a mother bereaved of her children, since the ancient cities have vanished, and of Vetulonia, Cosa, Rusellae, Tarquinii, Norchia, Populonia and the rest, almost all traces are long since obliterated, scarcely their sites can be identified to-day. Yet those wide plains, where corn now grows and cattle graze, were once covered with ports and cities, filled with the busy life and activities of mysterious races,—Lydians and Etruscans,—who built and planted and worked mines, and went to war before even Christ was born in Bethlehem or the Roman power dominated the world. There, in a sublime peace, remote from modern races and modern life, sleep warriors and kings, in their splendid stately tombs, over which the wild myrtle and laurel and juniper,

the marsh lily and the golden asphodels, have run wild, weaving a green screen between their buried greatness and the intrusions of a modern world, to which they have bequeathed only their graves and their gold, the lamps which lighted those who passed into darkness before Rome was, the ornaments which decked the women long since turned to dust. This land, across which Alaric with his hordes must have swept towards Rome, lies, through century after century, beneath the clouds and the stars, under the blue dome of summer, whitened by the moon, whose pale light accords well with its perished greatness. The winds sweep across it, the storms echo through its mountains, the rose of dawn blooms above its loneliness, and the lurid light of sunset blazes across its swamps.

In summer the Maremma is still, in spite of the draining of marshes and other improvements, comparatively lonely, deserted, and fever-stricken, left to the herds of wandering cattle and horses, the foxes and wild boars. But with October the north winds blow away the miasma, the invigorating air of sea and wood purifies the atmosphere, and, after the summer heats, the torrents of autumn rain turn the land into a morass ready for cultivation. Then hosts of labourers stream down from the mountains, brown and stalwart compared with the ague-wasted people of Maremma; hunters and herdsmen and ploughmen and charcoal-burners appear, to plough and sow, hew timber, burn charcoal, and hunt the wild game through the long winter; and then, with the first hay-cutting or wheat harvest, are back to their mountain homes high among the chestnut forests of the north, leaving the Maremma deserted again beneath the torrid sun.

It was very still as I sat upon my rock in the early morning, and overlooked the wide lands at my feet, and recalled their ancient greatness. From time to time came the shout of a man calling to his comrades on the mountains, the crow of a cock in the valley, the tinkle of a sheep-bell, the sudden cry of a bird, distinct above the undercurrent of sound—the hum of many insects, the soft music of the wind. In this sparsely populated country, where no whistle of train nor horn of tram has ever violated the profound silence, and before this infinite succession of hills, these wide, empty spaces, the anxious memories of strenuous life seem to fade, and one draws to oneself peace from the utter calm and silence of the earth.

Certainly, silence is a thing profoundly blessed; and I wondered, musing, if we realised as we should the supreme value of the spaces of quiet which are sometimes granted to us, when, tired of people, tired of the insistent talk of money and good matches, of scandals and success, we can escape to the woods and mountains, or shut ourselves in field or garden with Nature, and, excluding all jarring voices, achieve harmony, and shape our most precious desires, and, in the solitude, fill our souls with peace.

As I returned from my walk, I saw upon the turf in front of the house what appeared to be a pale yellow mushroom of some giant species, but which proved to be Mafalda in a sun-hat of enormous size. She was dividing her attention between making friends with the dogs, picking flowers, and discussing the new surroundings with Blue George, who, bland and unemotional as ever, sat propped against the leg of a garden seat.

“Sei contento, tesoro mio? Ci stai bene qui?”

I heard her enquire caressingly as I drew near; but at the sound of my step she jumped up and ran towards me with her pinafore full of daisies and sweet-peas.

"You have seen, you, how many flowers?" she exclaimed triumphantly. "But," with a vicious glance at the thistles, which grew among the grass, "those there, I like them not, they have pins which sore me the hand."

Yes, I admitted that, since the unhappy day when Eve ate the apple, there was neither rose nor thistle without thorns.

"I cannot make it, a bunch," Mafalda declared regretfully, regarding the mangled heap in her pinafore. "These flowers have the leg too short, they bunch not."

I endeavoured to point out that this resulted rather from her own lack of forethought than from any botanical imperfection. If instead of seizing the head of the flower and pulling sharply upwards, she would pick near the roots, she would have less cause to complain of insufficiency of stalk. But Mafalda and I did not see eye to eye in this matter. She gathers flowers in the way established by generations of six-year-olds, and could not stoop to my faulty, grown-up suggestions. Where the head goes the "leg" should follow, is her theory; and she dropped the contents of her pinafore petulantly when she discovered that this law of nature had been violated, and gave me her hand to lead me to the breakfast-room.

Later in the day Francesca and I set out to ride with Giovanni, the stable-man, commissioned, according to his daily custom, to pass by the post-town, and carry home the mail.

Giovanni is a genial soul, of unimpeachable honesty,

whose excellent character is only clouded by occasional drinking bouts, when his usual respectful manner falls from him like a cloak, leaving him grossly impertinent. These fits, however, take place rarely, and when he brought up the horses that afternoon his face was sober as a judge.

I was glad of an opportunity of a talk with Giovanni, as there were two subjects upon which I trusted to him for enlightenment from his personal experience: firstly, the prophet David Lazzaretti; and, secondly, the brigands who used to haunt these parts.

To the first of these I felt my way cautiously, for in the matter of his beliefs and superstitions the Italian peasant is reticent, fearful of being made fun of, and only in response to very careful handling does he expand and talk about the things which lie nearest to his heart.

“Yes,” he admitted airily, in answer to my tentative question, he had heard that there were some who spoke of David as a saint and a kind of prophet, but “chi lo sa? può essere,”—there was so much talk about so many things. As for him, he, Giovanni, knew little of such matters; the Signor Ingegnere could perhaps tell me more about it, and. . . . The Signorina would do well to leave her rein looser and take hold of a piece of the horse’s mane in mounting this stony track.

I took the hint, and, dropping the subject of the prophet, turned my attention to the Roccaccia di Selvena, an old mediæval fortress of the Aldobrandeschi, which rose upon a crag in the valley below. Very peaceful was its old age, its walls and the scarred rock upon which it stood overgrown with laurel, myrtle and bramble; but I wonder what would have been our lot as peaceful travellers, when those great and truculent gentlemen used to rush

out to harry and rob the wayfarers who, with their trains of sumpter mules, passed that way?

For some distance we discussed indifferent matters, Giovanni apparently sounding my sincerity and wondering if I were a fit confidante; but evidently he decided that I was, for suddenly, as he led the way along the narrow track, he swung round in his saddle with one hand extended to where Monte Labbio raised its bare rocky peak.

“The Signorina sees that ruin up there on the mountain? That was the hermitage of the Santo David, where he lived and built his church.”

“Ah yes, and did you ever see him?”

Giovanni's tongue was loosened now, and it was not difficult to draw from him the whole story of the mountain prophet, which, told very briefly, and not as Giovanni, with much gesticulation, related it, is as follows.

David Lazzaretti of Arcidosso, called the Saint, began life as a most unsaintly “barocciaio” or carrier, who, with his mules,—of which there were always three, fine and well-kept,—used to wander over the district of Monte Amiata and the Maremma, where he was known for his immense strength, his serious appearance, intelligent manner and gift of speech; but also for his violence and habit of swearing by all in heaven and earth. Suddenly, however, a change came over David. He disappeared for a time, and on returning to his old work, asserted that he had been converted in a moment from a swearer to a penitent, and went among the people, solemn, inspired, showing on his brow the mark O + C which he declared St. Peter had set there as a sign of his mission. Not only the people, but even the priests, were anxious to see and talk to him;

and all the places of Monte Amiata he visited, announcing that the time destined by God for the moral renewal of the world was come, and that he, by his preaching, was bidden to prepare the way.

It had been his habit even before his conversion to give his companions his views on the state of the world, and to recite to them long pieces from Dante, Tasso, and Ariosto, whose works he read assiduously; and there was no doubt that he was a man inspired and mystical, who came to believe in his own mystical and ambitious dreams. He was a revivalist who sought to reproduce in himself many of the exterior facts of the life of Christ, and the attitude towards him of his followers was, both before and after his death, analogous to that of the Christians of the Early Church.

Retiring to the bare and lonely crest of Monte Labbro, David spent his days in intimate communion with God, in a hermitage built by his followers, to which was attached a tower and a little church, where he ministered and preached.

It was easy to realise how mysticism should be born and fostered on the desolate peak overlooking a land so lonely and so wonderful as that which stretched on every hand, and to imagine how such a man came to dominate the simple agricultural folk of the mountain, who, whatever natural talent they may possess, are untaught and entirely ignorant; but it was stranger that even among the more educated people there were many who believed David a chosen vessel, a messenger sent direct from God.

Dwelling on his mountain-top with the little band of followers who had all things in common, the funds being administered by himself, David was at first nothing more

than a mystic and revivalist. But gradually he asserted higher claims, declaring that he had been carried into heaven and found himself face to face with God, had talked with Him and heard Him talk at length, and described his vision minutely, especially that which he called "The Seven Eternal Cities," one of which was to rise on Monte Amiata.

In 1876 he visited France, where he spent some time, writing while there a book "*La mia lotta con Dio*," in which he declared himself faithful to Rome and her teaching, though already it was plain that he considered himself the depository of the secrets of God and the head of a new faith,—a belief of which his conduct, on his return, was sufficient proof.

His church on Monte Labbro had been originally consecrated by the Bishop of Montalcino, and with his consent, and that of the clergy of Arcidosso, David had preached sermons invoking aid for the building of a new church near the village, on the Sta. Fiora road, on the very spot where, later, he was to fall. But after his return from France his pretensions and doctrines caused him to be excommunicated by the Pope; an event which makes it the stranger that the peasants, generally doggedly loyal to their faith, should have followed him and believed in him when the Church had cast him out. Perhaps it was hardly to be wondered at if the priests attributed his influence to a devilish delusion; and probably at the last, when he began to preach agitating doctrines and set up his cry of "*Viva la Repubblica, regno di Dio*," prophesying a near social upheaval and redistribution of goods, a large majority of the two thousand who followed him, followed, not the religious revivalist, but, on account of bad harvests and hard times, the social reformer.

Some, however, as their later conduct proved, believed firmly in the creed which he himself had drawn up for his disciples, which ends thus: "Crediamo fermamente che il nostro istitutore David Lazzaretti, l'unto del Signore, giudicato e condannato dalla Curia romana, sia realmente Cristo duce e giudice;" and he himself declared that he had been called to this work since 1848.

Even beyond Italy his doctrines had some influence, for his followers tell that people were always going to and from the tower; that even foreigners came, whose speech was strange to the simple mountain-folk, and talked with David and went away again; and that among the hermits was a German, stricter than all others in the observance of the rule, who died, assisted by David to the last.

Whether influences from other parts of Italy or from without urged him forward, or whether it was that he found himself in a position from which it was impossible to withdraw, is hard to say; but certain it is that in August 1878 he promised his followers some great development, telling that the time for the revelation of the Kingdom of God was come, and that on August 14th he would descend with them from his mountain upon Arcidosso, and lead them forward even to Rome itself; that they should see signs and wonders and the redistribution of property, and spread east and west over all the land.

Whether he meant to sack and do violence, or only to propagate calmly his religious and republican doctrines, is not certain; but though he had fixed his descent for the 14th, prophesying terrible events on that morning, he put it off until the 18th, and was then probably *forced* forward by his followers, eager to see their prophet manifested before the eyes of men.

The scene must have been a wonderfully impressive one;

and, as Giovanni described that which he as a young man had witnessed, it was easy, in face of the very mountains and roads where it all happened, to re-create the events. The people on the previous night gathered in crowds; all the peasants from the Maremma and from the lonely hill-side farms, who had for years followed David as a saint; their number ever increasing, until when, in the early morning of the 18th, the procession began to wind down the slopes of Monte Labbro, they were "as close as stones upon the hills."

The event was itself dramatic, and rendered far more impressive by the surroundings, the stage upon which it was played out. In the bright sunlight, beneath the deep blue sky, the procession descended the mountain, singing. David, a splendid-looking man, with long black hair and beard, in his scarlet shirt with gold-lace trimmings, his blue cloak flung over one shoulder, and his cap with its three feathers, yellow, blue and green, must have been a striking figure. Before him walked twelve young girls, dressed in white, with veils and garlands on their heads, and the disciples whom he had chosen as his twelve apostles; while behind pressed a throng of peasants in picturesque costumes.

So they moved on, two thousand strong, until they came in sight of Arcidosso, when, before them, they saw the whole population drawn up, and the two crowds for a space gazed at each other in silence, until the "Sindaco" (Mayor) stepped forward, and read his orders, which forbade David to advance. The latter, in spite of this, ordered his company to go forward, and it was then that the order was given to the "carabinieri" to fire. There was one short, sharp volley, and as the smoke cleared it showed the figure of the prophet stretched upon the

ground as one dead, and with him about twenty persons dead or wounded ; while everywhere a frightful confusion reigned among the people, seized with panic now that their leader was taken from their head.

For some hours David lingered, while his family sang around him the hymns learned at Monte Labbro ; and it was a curious fact that, though at first stunned by his loss, his followers and friends did not weep over him, for had he not himself prophesied that "the blood of the new Abel must be spilt for them and their faith, but that when this came to pass no one must be troubled or in doubt" ?

So they buried him at Arcidosso, and years afterwards his followers lived (still live, for aught I know) in hopes of his rising from the dead and coming back to dwell among them and establish the Kingdom of God on earth.

It was a strange story ; the story of a man in whom the wild and wonderful country had bred a mysticism, an exaltation which, sincere, perhaps, at first, had afterwards been fostered by the love, not of money, but of fame and popularity, until it led him to break loose from the old religion, to set up a new, to make blasphemous assertions as to his own personality, and to lead many away that they should believe a lie.

There was something pathetic in the derelict church, so broken as at a distance to seem almost part of the rough crest of the mountain from which it was built, and to realise that this ruin and the unmarked grave in the Arcidosso cemetery were the end of those ambitions and mystical dreams.

To what extent Giovanni personally believed in the pretensions of his prophet I cannot say, for though he told me the facts in detail, he was unwilling to comment

on them, and turned more readily to the subject of the brigands who had once overrun these parts.

Had he ever seen them? But certainly! One had been his fellow-groom until a hard sentence for some law-breaking induced the promising young fellow to take to the woods, and when they wanted money or food from the Signori, it was to him they sent their note, and waited for him on the edge of the beech-wood until he brought them what they asked.

Was he afraid? Why no! they had no quarrel against *him!* It was only the rich on whom they made demands, and to whom they would use force when they could not get what they wanted. Of course it was not well to offend them. Had the Signorina ever heard the story of Tirburzi, who killed a man with thirty or forty standing round? No? Well! this was how it happened.

A certain farmer had offended Tirburzi, and so what does he do but ride into the field where this fellow was working with thirty or forty reapers, all with scythes and sickles, and shoots him down without a man lifting a hand to stop him. Ah, he was a bold man, Tirburzi; but he was shot himself when his turn came, on the steps of an Aia one All Saints' Day, and the others were betrayed to the carabinieri,—drugged by some people who pretended to be friendly to them, and then given over and shot before ever they came to themselves.—Perhaps the Signorina had seen at Le Piazze the photographs taken of them after they were dead?

Yes, I remembered them well; ghastly, stiff figures propped up in chairs, with their guns across their knees and dreadful staring faces. It was a relief to feel that the last of them had been disposed of, and that this country,

so fitted by Nature for outlawry and the evasion of justice, was now peaceful and safe.

At Castellazzara we called for the letters. The slow mail-van not yet having arrived, Giovanni, anxious to do the honours of his native place, proposed that he should show us the church ; so a boy was commissioned to hold the horses, and we walked up the narrow, paved street, watched with passionate interest by the inhabitants, who had all rushed to doors and windows on hearing the clatter of hoofs.

Few of the women were beautiful, though here and there among the young girls was a face of pure delicate outline ; but all were picturesque in their own surroundings and costume, which, if not of any distinctive form, was usually of blue and black with a black veil thrown over the hair. They sat spinning on their quaint, outside stair-cases, or passed along the street to the well with old copper jugs in their hands or balanced upon their heads, walking with easy dignity and grace which comes of long habit ; for even the little girls are trained to carry loads, gradually increasing, upon their heads, with the result that, from the continual pressure they remain, as old women, with scarcely any neck at all.

As we entered the church, Giovanni gallantly offered me the holy water on his finger-tips, and having crossed himself, and made his funny little "reverence" to the altar, proceeded to point out the details of the place.

There was nothing beautiful to be seen. It was a very simple house where these mountain-folk worshipped God, and a striking contrast to the glory of the natural temple outside, walled by the mountains and roofed by the stars ; but it was cool and hushed, hallowed by the celebration of supreme mysteries and the utterance of simple prayers.

Certainly, as I reviewed it, riding home through the mellow evening light, while the sun went down like a ball of fire behind the ruined church of the prophet, I acknowledged that this first day in the mountains had been supremely happy. And that night, as I tucked Mafalda into her cot, I was able to respond with a hearty affirmative to her question, "You like this place, you?" And as I blew out the light, I heard her response, already drowsy—

"Also I, I like it!"

XIV

THE DELECTABLE MOUNTAIN

It was on a glorious afternoon in late August that we set out for Piancastagnaio, from which, on the morrow, the great ascent of Monte Amiata was to be made.

The previous day had dawned drearily, folded in a fleece of white, wind-torn fog, which passed later into a soaking rain; and, looking out upon the dull melancholy tints of the landscape, there seemed little hope that the long-planned expedition could take place. Mafalda, whose imagination had been fired by the prospect of an adventure so tremendous, was reduced by tea-time to a state of such dejection as to mingle her tears with those of the heavens; and even the buoyant Francesca was wrapped in gloom.

It is generally, however, the unexpected which happens, and when all hope was abandoned the rain ceased, and as the sun, which had been hidden from us all day, dipped behind the mountains, colour began to throb through swathe after swathe of grey cloud, until to the very zenith the sky was aflame with scarlet, rose and crimson, a sudden vision of splendour, which faded slowly, leaving the west as cold and grey as the dead ashes of a fire.

It was the proverbial "red sky" which delights the shepherd, and it delighted us with good reason, since the next day was all that the heart could desire. The sun

shone brightly, the country, after the rain, was radiant; even the horses seemed to feel the exhilaration in the air, so briskly did they trot along the winding road among the hills.

Almost the only sign of life in all the lonely way was the mail-van, a shabby old chaise, loaded with bags and parcels, and looking in the distance, as it climbed the long slope, like a black beetle crawling up the hill.

In one place a stone at the roadside marked where a man had been shot one morning as he drove from Santa Fiora with the wages for the miners. It was a desolate spot. No house was in sight. High, wooded hills rose on all sides, with the scarred rocks of mountain-peaks beyond. The road wound away in great curves down the valley among rough grass and bush and stubble-field.

The scene was a fitting one for an act so tragic, and imagination called up only too vividly the sudden shot, the desperate cry echoing up to the imperturbable heavens and calm untroubled hills; the last agonised look which found no kindly human face, but only the pitiless landscape, till the final darkness fell; then, the murderous hand which clutched the money-bag, and the figure—if one or more was never discovered—creeping stealthily away to the shelter of the woods, leaving in the silence and sunlight only a dead man and a pool of blood on the white road to witness to their deed.

The way wound on through miles of hill and woodland, until we saw in the distance Santa Fiora, the ancient stronghold owned even before the twelfth century by the Guelf family of the Aldobrandeschi, and named, both the place and its Counts, by Dante, who knew it by report even if he never passed this way himself.

The yellow and brown houses clustered—top on top it

seemed—high against the scarp of the hill. Around stretched those woods where, says the legend, dwelt a mighty serpent, the terror of the people of Santa Fiora and the surrounding country, until the gallant Count Guido, spurring forth alone, slew it, and, in thanks to the Holy Trinity, raised, on the opposite hillside, the convent of that name.

Close by, the river Fiora, which, rising in Monte Amiata, flows into the Tyrrhenian sea, went foaming down in its rocky bed; and as we climbed the long slope we came upon a cascade, which supplies the power for the electric light, so strangely incongruous in this tiny old-world place.

Near by was the public fountain, where a number of women, gathered round the stone cistern, were beating their linen in the sun, laughing and singing as they scrubbed and splashed, while those whose work was ended moved towards the "paese" with slow and dignified step, their hands on their hips to preserve their balance, as they bore their heavy linen baskets on their heads.

Passing over an old bridge, flanked by an ancient tower,—all that remains of the Aldobrandeschi stronghold, and now built into the seventeenth-century palace of the Sforza Cesarini,—we passed under an echoing archway into the piazza, where rises an old red-brick tower, and from which—as is usual in these little towns which sprang up round some over-lord's castle—the narrow streets wound away down the hill.

Santa Fiora is off the beaten track. No one goes there. It is too remote, too difficult of access. No train approaches it, and the tourist scarcely knows of its existence. But in its old quiet church some of the loveliest work of Luca Della Robbia or his best pupils—

collected there by the Duke Guido Sforza—has dreamed away its beauty of sky-blue and milky white, far from the world, for more than four hundred years.

Never have I seen more beautiful specimens of this pottery than in that old "Pieve." It is a little forgotten nest of lovely things. A pulpit, a ciborium, and several perfect altar-pieces are shown, in one of which latter Madonna, encircled by cherubs and angels, and adored by a row of exquisite saints, lets down her girdle to St. Thomas; while in another St. Francis receives the Stigmata, and an angel announces below to Mary Virgin the birth of the Holy Child.

The sacristan, a little old man who loved very simply and sincerely the treasures of which he was guardian, sighed as he told us that few "Signori" or "forestieri" came to Santa Fiora, though he added, with a touch of pride, perhaps they would come if they knew that the town had not only the Robbias but also the electric light!

From Santa Fiora the road lay through the chestnut woods, where the vistas of sunny turf between the tree-trunks and the white, unfenced road were reminiscent of an English park.

As the hours passed, the light began to grow a little dusky in the forest, and Francesca and I amused ourselves with recalling how adventurous this journey would have been in the fierce mediæval days, when the hills were crowned by castles from which sallied forth bands of armed men who came crashing down to attack peaceful travellers, and rob them of their merchandise and gear. We pictured ourselves back in those ferocious times, going in great dread of lurking robbers, looking this way and that fearfully, our hearts thumping as we hastened on

through the darkening woods, trying before nightfall to reach Piancastagnaio, the small ruddy-roofed town which we could see on its outlying mountain-spur an hour's drive away.

Mafalda, however, objected strongly to this talk of robbers. In the sunlight it was one thing; then she could herself enjoy the terrifying tales in her fairy book, the dramatic adventures of Little Red Ridinghood, and the pathetic fate of the Babes in the Wood; but in this waning light our conversation was ill-timed and tactless, it gave her "Noia,"—which was but another way of saying that it "gave her fear."

The road, a mile from the town, passed by the old white church of the Madonna, in a clearing of the woodland, at the meeting of two ways. From within came the sound of music and the gleam of altar lights, and as we drove by the people began to come out and disperse in twos and threes, poor peasants who had turned in for a few minutes, as, after their day's work in field or forest, they drove their goats and carried their furze and faggots home.

It was already almost dark in the woods, where the shadows gather early, but as we entered the town under the ancient archway, flanked by that massive, ivy-grown tower held in the fifteenth century by the Orsini of Sovana, and, from the top of a steep, narrow street looked over the brow of the hill towards the open country, a crimson sunset flamed above the distant mountains, and dyed the western house-walls red.

Piano, the familiar abbreviation of the more sonorous title, stands at the end of a broad, outlying ridge of Monte Amiata, overlooking an immense and lonely land; scorched by the sun, buffeted by all the winds that blow.

It is a picturesque little place, with irregular houses, to which flights of stone steps lead from the narrow twisting streets. Here and there an old crest or Bishop's mitre carved above a doorway, a quaint and once splendid house in some little square, reminds one that each of these tiny, rugged towns has its own biography, its old families, its stormy past, its tales of sack and siege. Each one is quite exclusive, possessing, even in these modern days, a fine contempt for its neighbours; and as few men call themselves Italians, but Florentines, Romans, or Venetians, so these hill-folk are intensely individualistic, and a man from Santa Fiora would not be gratified if by chance you attributed his birth to Abbadia.

Piano possesses, as well as the ruins of its castle, a fine old palace of the Marchesi Borbon del Monte, to whom the Grand Duke Ferdinand I. gave the town in fief in 1602. The old house, built by Giovan Battista Borbon del Monte, Captain of the Infantry of his most Serene Highness, is characteristic in its stateliness, the fantastic style of its decoration, of the age in which it was built. Its great halls, the magnificent arched and pillared staircase, winding up four sides of a square, the piazza affording a glorious view of the surrounding country, and traces of what must have been splendid gardens, still survive. But the whole place is empty and dilapidated; grain is stored in the rooms once filled by the guests of the illustrious Marquis, and a kind of "melancholia"—the sadness of a splendid youth remembered in an ignoble age—hangs over all.

The children, tired with their long drive, went to bed early in preparation for the next day's exertions,—Mafalda much absorbed during her toilet by a quaint little glass shrine on the dressing-table, in which a plaster

Madonna, wearing a tinsel crown, knelt before a pink wax Bambino, lying with outstretched arms upon a bed of flowers and grass.

When they had fallen asleep, I leaned out of the window, looking across the irregular red roofs to the church-tower, silhouetted against an immense expanse of green, slowly darkening sky. Below ran a narrow street opening into a tiny piazza, which gave, for some curious reason, the effect of a scene in a play, with its one oil-lamp and cobble-stones. Fragments of talk came up from it as the people stabled their mules; or led home patriarchal, bearded goats, white, black or brown, with glassy yellow eyes and dainty little hoofs; or sat gossiping on the door-steps after the work of the day.

The start was fixed for half-past six in the morning, but long before then I was up and dressed, roused by the pleasant sense of excitement and anticipation which seemed to pervade the house and even the outer world.

It was an exhilarating morning.

The sky was blue, the sun shining; in the clear air the swallows were circling round the church-tower; down in the street women went by with copper cruses to draw water, and there was a brisk clatter of hoofs as the horses were led up two and three abreast.

All Piano was excited over our departure, and gathered in the Piazza to see us mounting,—a lengthy matter, necessitating much adjustment of straps and saddles. But at last, on the stroke of seven, a joyous cavalcade, we rode out under the old gateway, into the glittering freshness of the green and golden woods.

It was quite an imposing procession, though it must be admitted that not all the horses were beautiful, for the number brought from Cornacchino had of necessity been

supplemented at Piano, and I took a dislike to my steed, "Righetto," on the spot. He was elderly and unamiable, had none of that cheerful alacrity which I like to see in horse or human, and clearly considered himself aggrieved in being compelled to join the party at all. Francesca rode a white pony, fat and frisky; Giovanni followed on a mule; Mafalda was mounted on a donkey, with a reliable man to watch over her; the rest of the party, numbering nine or ten, were on horseback; and the company was completed by various guides and muleteers.

For several miles the way lay along the road, until we reached Abbadia San Salvatore, the most antique of the little towns which cluster on the slopes of Monte Amiata, having sprung up around a Cistercian monastery, the abbots of which were owned by all the surrounding lands as feudal lords. This ancient abbey, which legend asserts to have been founded by the Lombard King Rachis, was suppressed by Pietro Leopoldo, Grand Duke of Tuscany, and now, still surrounded by its grand old chestnuts, serves as school for the children of Abbadia.

From Abbadia, which lies at the foot of the mountain, we struck an upward course through the woods, by a way so steep and stony that I had much ado to persuade Righetto to adventure it at all. It was truly a "Hill Difficulty," and, like Dante, he found the ascent painful, and only accomplished it with sullen patience under the compulsion of half a dozen horses pressing behind him up the narrow track.

For nearly three hours we toiled up, first through the chestnut woods which clothe the lower slopes of the mountain, later, among beech-trees whose branches came so low and whose twigs were so closely interlaced that it was only by leaning right along the necks of the horses

we could escape the fate of Absalom or make our way at all. But he who keeps on climbing long enough is bound to reach the summit, and so at length, after much travail, we won our way to the top. As we made our way up through the dense trees we had not seen the dark clouds gathering, and the effect as we emerged from the thicket upon the rock-strewn peak was strange yet very wonderful, so completely was the blue sky shrouded, so lonely and solemn was the land.

A dome of storm-cloud reached almost to the horizon, where, all round, ran one pale line of blue. We were at a height of 5700 feet above sea-level, and the view was stupendous; grand and desolate and austere; wide as that upon which a falcon poised in mid-air must look down. To command such a horizon certainly compensated for the toils of the ascent,—a parable perhaps of the toil by which, when we would look out with larger vision, we must climb to the hills of life, since horizons vary according to the point of view, and our whole perspective and landscape of life alters a little with every upward or downward step.

To the south-east lay Lake Bolsena, cold as a sheet of steel at the foot of the mountains. The Maremma swept away, a desolate expanse of grey and purple, mysterious with the memories of the life and death of bygone ages, the secrets of those dead races and dead cities buried at its heart. Far out on the Mediterranean lay Corsica, Elba and Monte Christo.

Somewhere, hidden in that blue haze to the south, was Rome itself. To the west rose Siena, and to the north-east Thrasymene, my enchanted lake of dawn, backed by the Perugian mountains. Less far off lay Piano, red and brown upon its ridge, backed by the forests; and

Radicofani beyond, the fortress once held by the famous robber chief Ghino di Tacco, who, according to Boccaccio's merry tale, cured the Abbot of Cluny of the ills consequent upon too good living by a scanty diet of dry beans and toast.

It was a strange landscape, sad and sombre rather than sublime; for the wide sweep of hill and plain, of a pinkish-brown tint, scored and rent by ancient volcanic action; the small shrunken cities, of which the greatness was long departed; and the memory of the ancient races of Etruria, who, having once thickly populated this region, have left us, of all their splendid civilisation, only their gold and their dead, seemed almost to mock at the frailty and transitoriness of human life.

It was very still; only the tinkling bell of some goat or cow on the pastures far down upon the mountain-slopes broke the profound silence of the mountain-top.

As we sat upon the rocks to rest, the storm, which had seemed as if it would momentarily break above our heads, rolled on southwards, and by the time we were ready to descend only a few floating clouds remained, stragglers of the army which had passed.

Each leading a horse by the bridle, we turned our steps down towards the appointed place for luncheon; but now sorrow overtook us, as the guide proved but the blind leading the blind, and sailed into the north of our opinions by declaring, after an hour's wandering, that he had lost the way!

Here was a dilemma! Midday was long past, all appetites had been sharpened by the ride in the fresh morning air, and yet we had nothing to eat! Foolishly we had allowed the mules which bore our food on pack-saddles to go direct to the place appointed, the con-

sequence being that, though both upon the mountain, the provisions and we were far apart.

Everything looked at its darkest, and, weary with wandering up and down among the dense beech-thickets, we were abandoning ourselves to despair, when some women, picking wild strawberries, took pity on us, and guided us at last to the haven where we would be.

The place—a grassy meadow in the midst of the woods on the mountain-slope—was so lovely as to well repay the trouble of the search. The mules had arrived, and were already unloaded; our drooping spirits rose at the sight of well-filled hampers, and baskets of wild strawberries and raspberries freshly gathered; and while the horses were turned loose to graze, we joyfully settled down to eat.

In a sheltered place, the guide, anxious to retrieve his honour, found some snow to cool the water, and the meal went on merrily without mishap.

It was indeed necessary that we should be fortified for our downward journey, for if the ascent had been difficult, the descent was ten times worse.

The way was steep and stony; dangerous, too, in places, being a mere track, like the bed of a mountain torrent, where the loose stones slipped beneath the horses' hoofs. But we were down at last, with perhaps the loveliest part of the day before us; for as we rode back along the winding way to Piano, the sunset brightened, the grass blazed like gold, even the rocks were glorified; and beyond the distant wall of mountains the sun sunk, a ball of ruddy fire.

The hills were flushed to rose and amethyst, until, as the light died, they darkened to purple; the shadows crept up the valleys, and grey twilight lay upon the wide country which swept away below the road on the left

hand, while on the right ran the dusky fringes of the woods.

It was dark, the night wind had risen, and the stars were throbbing in the sky as we rode under the great archway into Piano. And far behind, lonely in the darkness, we could distinguish, against the sky, the mountain-peak ; immutable as a sentinel, watching, through all the ages, the rise and fall of nations, the transient lives of men.

XV

A DAY WITH THE SONS OF ST. FRANCIS

THE "Padre Guardiano's" letter was cordial. All things would be ready; the famous "Minestra di Magro" would await us, if we would honour the convent with a visit on the day we had named. So on a bright August morning we set off, a joyous party, for the Franciscan Convent of Sta. Trinità.

The weather was glorious, it was a day of deep blue sky, drifting cloud, bright sunlight, and fresh bracing wind. Three hours' ride lay before us. Surely these things were enough to produce buoyancy of spirit and the proverbial merry heart which goes all the way!

The road was varied and beautiful. First a stony track which ran over the mountains, looking across the mysterious purple Maremma, with its buried cities, to the Mediterranean, far off and very blue; then, along a white road winding among the hills and down the cool green glades of chestnut woods, in the depth of which rose, here and there, a peasant's house or tiny church. Many falcons we saw poised, with wide-spread wings, motionless, before darting down upon their prey; or sweeping across the illimitable breadth of sky. To me there is in all nature no more perfect and satisfying movement than the flight of a falcon; the bird, without

any restless beating of wings, sailing with effortless grace from one horizon to another, only, like a skater, changing, as it were, the "edge."

As these were the very hills over which St. Francis, the "Little Bedesman," used to wander with his Lady Poverty, perhaps these were the descendants of that Brother Falcon who made it his mission daily to rouse the Saint for matins during his long fast in La Vernia, and who being, as the writer of the "Fioretti" relates, with exquisite and naïve simplicity, "a discreet person, courteous and compassionate," used, on the mornings when the Little Bedesman was unusually weary, to give him an hour's grace.

Wonderful blackberries grew along the way, large and soft, and warmed by the sun. Here and there rose a rude wooden cross, with the instruments of the Passion nailed to it,—lance and sponge and smiting hands and crowing cock, and many another, set there by reverent though unskilled workmen, to remind all wayfaring men of a great sorrow and a great love.

So at last, by pleasant, peaceful ways, we came to the convent, folded in silence in the heart of the chestnut woods.

It stood on the warm western slope of the hills, looking across to the old town of Santa Fiora; green, mysterious glades, hushed in the calm of high noon, extended to right and left of the steep track which wound down to it. The sunlight mellowed the white walls and the cluster of ruddy roofs; in the orchard the apples were reddening; beyond lay a dark pine-wood sheltering the buildings towards the south. In an angle formed by church and refectory lay a square of turf; and from this a low wall, dropping steeply on the other side, separated

a kitchen garden, full of fruit-trees and pot-herbs; beside the church stood a row of cypresses, lending a touch of mystery and solemnity to the scene.

It was profoundly still; a place quiet and lovely in which to dream. Time seemed to be suspended; one was back in the fourteenth century, detached from modern interests, strangely remote from the hurly-burly of modern life.

As we dismounted, the Father-Guardian, an old man with a shrewd, kindly face, wearing the brown habit and knotted cord of St. Francis, came out to greet us, and welcome us in the name of the friars.

The Professor, a large and delightful man of guileless disposition, embraced him like a brother, being of that simple nature which loves all men, and accords with monks and friars as well—to use the Italian idiom—as bread with cheese. The Professor is one of those warm-hearted, genial souls of whom everyone takes advantage, but who radiates happiness like a human sun. He is fifty, and looks sixty; a big man, with kind blue eyes behind round, black-rimmed spectacles, and an expression suggestive of a benevolent Newfoundland dog. He is, strange to say, a bachelor; but there must have been some bungling on the part of Fate in this matter, as, if ever a man bore “father” on his face, and required a wife and a baker’s dozen of children perpetually grouped about him, he is the man. As it is, he is obliged to content himself with playing the part of fairy god-father, and winning the heart of every child he comes across.

He and Mafalda are the best of friends, and the latter, who had made the journey in a basket on the back of a sedate donkey, clung to his hand as he stood talking genially to the Padre, still holding above his head the

large green umbrella with which he had protected himself during the ride. Meanwhile Giovanni attended to the needs of his adored horses, and the rest of us, with riding-skirts looped up, busied ourselves in unpacking the provisions which a mule had carried, her baby having trotted confidently by her side the whole distance, so that he might not be deprived of necessary refreshment while his mother was away.

The friars had laid a table for us in a small refectory devoted to the use of visitors, and provided linen, knives and forks, and crockery,—upon each piece of which latter (a curious selection for frati!) a scantily dressed young woman escaped into a desert with a wild expression of countenance and a baby under each arm. They also contributed bread, fruit, and the renowned “Minestra di Magro,” while for the rest of the luncheon we were responsible ourselves.

An interval for the heating of the soup being necessary, we filled up the time by a visit to the church; a plain building, containing little of interest save a relief by Andrea della Robbia of Christ upon the Cross, supported by God the Father, below whom flutters the Holy Spirit in the form of a Dove: but the figures were spoiled by crude colour which had been rubbed on over the original blue and white, one of those disastrous “restorations” which have been the ruin of so many beautiful things.

In the sacristy they proudly showed us part of the bleached skull of some strange reptile,—was it a giant snake or a dragon?—below which an inscription pompously recorded that in the year 1499 Guido, of the Ducal House of Sforza, Count of Santa Fiora, while hunting in the woods of this convent, by him founded eight years earlier,

met with a horrible monster, which same he slew after prayer made to the Most Holy Trinity : and in memory of which fact he left half the head to the Brothers of Sta. Trinità della Selva, sending the other half to Sta. Trinità del' Monte at Rome. Some believed, so the Brother who showed us this heirloom told us, that an evil spirit had taken this form to overcome the valiant Guido, but, deprecatingly, "Chi lo sa? È tanti anni fa!"

He was a genial little fellow, with a crumpled yellow skin, and dark eyes, out of which looked a pathetic eagerness to serve and please; but he was, like most of his brethren, distressingly dirty, for soap and sanctity have little affinity in the monastic mind, and the majority of monks with whom I have been brought in close contact must, alas! be classed with "the great unwashed."

Instead of remembering the reproof given by St. Francis to a slovenly Brother, that he must not thus render odious and ridiculous a religion which God had made beautiful, the religious seem too often to see in proper ablutions a snare of the devil. The splendour and sanctity of the body as a very perfect work of God does not strike him; he sees it only as a snare and a shame. What he believes himself he teaches to others, making a code of morbid morality, adding additional laws to the Ten Commandments, which are already hard enough to keep.

The following incident is an example of the false monastic ideal of modesty. Is it incredible? It is certainly comical, and perfectly true.

A girl of good family, having been educated for six or seven years in one of the most exclusive and aristocratic convents of a large Italian city, shocked her elder sisters on her return home by her apparently lax views on the

subject of personal cleanliness, and her unwilling acquaintance with soap and water. At the suggestion of a bath she reddened with outraged propriety.

“What! uncover myself entirely? Never! The nuns would be horrified at such a thing. They always taught us that we must never be without something on, lest we should make our angels blush!”

Indeed it will be well if their angels never have a worse thing to blush for! It might also be well if the good nuns who were so busy filling their pupils' minds with a sickly modesty which is no modesty, should take to heart the words of an old wise book which says, “to the pure all things are pure.”

The Friars of La Selva are strictly cloistered; so that although men are allowed to enter, no woman may set foot in the sacred inner precincts. Should this rule be unwittingly violated, the place must be consecrated afresh; but if it be wantonly broken, and the knowledge come to the authorities, terrible are the penalties imposed! History tells that two girls, now sober matrons, when visiting this convent eluded the watchful eyes of their elders, and, slipping away into forbidden places, surprised a sick frate—a mere boy—asleep in bed. Fate was kinder than they deserved, however, for no one saw them, and it was not until long afterwards, when such an escapade could assume the proportions of a prank, that they owned their sin, and the trick they had played upon the unsuspecting friars. Poor friars! they must miss a great deal of what is best in life, by believing women to be but so many manifestations of the Father of Lies!

The old friars, whom time had rendered impervious to folly, were allowed to see us from afar, if the sight gave

them any satisfaction; but the severe morality of the convent rule did not grant the younger ones this license, and the novices had been carefully shut up somewhere, for not a hair, not a shadow of one did we see. Poor boys! I wonder if they felt like children, who, when there is a party downstairs, are shut in their nursery and not allowed to come down and join in the fun? Or had these austere young men voluntarily withdrawn to pray and meditate during the invasion of their convent by the world and the flesh, with a spice of devilry thrown in?

I pitied them which ever way it was, for when God Almighty made man and woman of one lump of clay, He presumably meant them to be pleasant and companionable one with another, and not to look askance at each other, as these stiff-necked young men would assuredly have looked at me or at any other nice, friendly, well-meaning girl who set foot in their sacred cells.

From the faces of the friars I saw, I think that the conventual life must have a dwarfing effect upon the character, except in the case of very noble natures which can rise superior to its peculiar temptations. In the early days of religious Orders, when they were founded by such men as Benedict, Bernard and Dominic, they were indeed Holy Houses, retreats for the scholar, homes of art, blessed refuges for the weak from a violent and turbulent world. But gradually they fell from their high estate, enthusiasm cooled and inspiration died. "The monastic establishments," writes Villari, a modern Italian describing modern, conventual life, "have very much changed in character since they were founded. They are no longer seats of learning and study, or of really religious life. Their inmates are, for the most part, men and women of the crassest ignorance, who felt that they had not the

courage to face the struggle for life, and therefore retired to a place where they were at least assured of a bare pittance. Their chief secular occupations, when they have any, consist in tilling the soil around the monastery, and making liqueurs. Some of the nuns embroider and make sweets and patent medicines, many orders do no work at all."

The well-educated Orders, such as the "Sacred Heart," occupy themselves in teaching; and in Italy the nursing in hospitals and asylums is the work of nuns, who also act as wardresses in women's prisons. In these cases the Government pays a salary for their services to the convent to which they belong.

A quaint, half-pathetic little glimpse I once had of the "Eternal Feminine" which yet dwells under the shapeless gown of even a grave-eyed nun.

It was in a quiet corner of the cathedral roof at Milan that I came upon two "Monache" so rapt—in contemplation of divine things, I supposed—that they did not even hear my step. They were not, however, gazing northwards to the peaks of Mont Blanc, Mont Rosa and the Matterhorn, white and wonderful in the sharp brightness of the autumn morning; nor up at that great army of Saints triumphant which countless pinnacles lift to the splendour of the sun. No, it was not these things which absorbed them, but the stray leaves of a fashion book,—found, Heaven knows where,—over which they were bending in such artless delight! I wonder if, wrapped in their cumbersome habits, they felt any pang of envy at the sight of the pretty hats and chiffons which were only for others, not for them?

Under the new Italian Government the poor monks and nuns have fallen on evil days, the majority of their

convents having been suppressed; and although there remain plenty of "Religious" to make picturesque figures in the landscape, of which they seem an essential part, and, between the monks and a celibate priesthood Sir Toby Belch could see many a bachelor of threescore here in Italy, innumerable conventual buildings have been cleared—often very heartlessly—of their simple inmates and put to Government uses as barracks or museums.

By the time we had visited as much of the convent as was not forbidden to our unhallowed feet, the "Minestra di Magro," a solid purée made with oil, bread and vegetables, was ready, and we sat down to the table in the refectory with appetites sharpened by the long ride through the fresh mountain-air.

The Padre Guardiano, with a deprecating gesture, begged us to overlook any imperfections in the service or provision which their poor house could offer. Then, wishing us "buon appetito," after the kindly Italian fashion, left us to the care of the "Curato," a distressingly dirty person, with shaggy yellow hair and a pair of merry, rather cunning blue eyes.

This latter, who was frankly charmed by a little variety in the monotony of his convent days, flitted in and out continually, and was delighted to discuss his present surroundings, the habits of his Order, and the other convents in which he had sojourned since he cast in his lot with the Sons of St. Francis.

He complained bitterly of the dullness of La Selva,—
 "A place impossible! Let the signori figure to themselves a life such. He had been sent there three years before after a malady grave, but very grave; still if it pleased the Buon Dio, he would before long be sent to Turin." For the Padre Guardiano, "that poor old one," he

admitted that a life so monotonous might be well, "but I, I wish not so soon to retire myself from the world!"

And after the expression of these and other similar sentiments, he accepted a glass of wine with alacrity, and gracefully drank to our illustrious health.

The meal went on cheerily. The soup was excellent; the provisions which the maternal mule had carried were done full justice to, but the convent apples, golden, and very pleasant to the eye, proved rotten at the core, and the convent coffee was a concoction to make an angel weep.

Still, it was their poor best which they were offering,—especially the coffee, which was borne in proudly by the Padre Guardiano himself, with an exultant face, the pot arranged on an enamelled tray, surrounded by a circle of saucerless cups, in each of which a spoon stood majestically erect.

"It is of a quality special," he announced complacently as he poured it out with a flourish.

It certainly was! We looked at one another, each scheming in his deep mind how he might, by subtlety, avoid drinking the brown liquid which the good father dispensed with such beaming smiles. The Professor shamelessly stated that coffee disagreed with him,—although he usually drinks it as gladly as the earth drinks rain after drought. I glanced at the others, then at the Padre, looking on half wistfully as if he feared that his best was not good enough, and then nobly drained it to the dregs,—a rash action, as it was with difficulty that the kind old man was persuaded that I was not pining for a second cup.

Luncheon over, we wandered away to the pine-wood, there to await the great event of the day, the eclipse of the sun.

It was very solemn as the light faded; very silent, for evidently the birds and all the woodland creatures were awed and subdued before this mystery. It grew strangely cold; the trees looked metallic and harsh in the weird light, as if stricken by some mysterious blight; the dappling of round, dancing lights which the sunbeams had shot through the foliage, was changed to crescents, like little new moons on the ground.

A strange, deathly pallor crept over all faces, as the light grew colder and more grim. There was something very awful and ominous about the sunless world, and Mafalda clung closely to my hand.

The eclipse, which we watched through smoked glasses, was almost total, only a thin sickle of gold remaining visible on one side of the disc.

At the darkest time an old toothless woman came up begging alms, and we asked her what she thought of the eclipse? But the words meant nothing to her. Then we asked if she noticed nothing unusual about the sun; but, after looking at it dully, she only answered that it seemed less bright than usual to-day. No spark of curiosity awoke in her, no wonder at the mysteries of the heavens. She held out a skinny hand persistently, and went away mumbling over her coppers, quite indifferent to anything so far beyond her sphere as the darkening of the sun.

It was with a sense of relief, of being set free from some strain, that we saw the light, warm and golden, steal back across the land; and, after the gloom of the pine-woods, it was pleasant to pass into the bright little convent garden, fragrant with lavender and rosemary, gay with old-fashioned flowers. Down the middle ran a pergola covered with morning-glories; in one corner stood a row of primitive bee-hives; a sun-dial marked the uneventful

hours; an old stone bench under a moss-grown wall offered a fitting place for musing and rest.

As I sat there, watching the friars gathering little bunches of pansies and roses for us, I felt that it must be very peaceful to lead the contemplative life in such surroundings, in so silent and unhurried a world. How easy it would be in such a place to attain to peace of mind and tranquillity, to forget a world of unrest and the ignoble things for which men strive! Yet though the feeling was ungrateful, the old religious pleasaunce would have pleased me better without its owners, who, though picturesque figures from a distance, are painfully uninteresting close at hand. How, one wonders, can the Sons of so gentle and joyous a Saint as Francis, be so dirty and commonplace? How can members of an Order possessing such a tradition, ever be grasping or petty or mean? Yet the reproach is, after all, an unjust one, for have we not all for Master a Figure more divine than Francis, a legend lovelier even than his, and yet are . . . what we are! Yet what a heritage the spirit of Francis should be! What profound joy in the world and its creatures, what delight in simple things, what intimate communion with God would be ours if we could but enter into his heart, which is the heart of love!

The bell was calling from the church-tower through the late afternoon sunshine as we said good-bye to the kindly friars, who waved their farewell to us with many wishes that the Buon Dio might go with us on our way.

As we rode up the track from this quiet nook, it was not the eclipse and the darkness at midday, not the odd, merry luncheon, the grotesque, yellow-haired friar, nor the famous beast slain by Count Guido in the wood which filled my thoughts, but the lovely and luminous figure of

the "Little Poor Man," to whose life, lived seven hundred years ago in the Umbrian country, this convent; and many another among the hills and forests and the city streets, owes its origin.

What a life was his!—and what a death, in the golden calm of an autumn day, with the crested larks singing above his cell! His life, like his great Canticle of the Sun, was all praise, a song of which the sweetness yet lingers in this country where he dwelt.

What, one wonders, was the secret of his joyousness? Was it the sense of that Holy Companionship which caused the Irish Saint Deicolus, when asked, "Why art thou always smiling?" to reply, "Because no one can take God from me"?

Ah! if he could but come back to a world which has such need of his simple and joyous spirit, that we might learn from him to feel brotherhood with sun and fire and wind, sisterhood with the water and stars and death! If he might come back as our teacher, he who embraced the Lady Poverty, not of necessity, as we do, but adoring her as a bride; who blessed the birds and flowers in passing and tamed wild beasts and the wilder passions of men; who drew after him all creatures, until he deserved that name of the "Christian Orpheus" which a modern writer gives him: he who was the poet, not of the love of women but of the love of God. Earth since he went away is the poorer; it could ill spare to Paradise so sweet a saint! but after all the centuries his spirit still dominates the Umbrian country, and for many a soul Nature is quickened with a new spirit, Christ is less shadowy, and Heaven less utterly remote, because of that joyous legend of his life and death.

XVI

THE GREEN CATHEDRAL

THE Green Cathedral is the retreat to which I make my way in the early morning, before the rest of the world—my individual and domestic world—is awake.

A track running round the hillside brings me to the entrance, and there, while the sun is yet low, glittering on the dewy grass and sharpening the shadows which define every curve and hollow, I arrive, with Elba following at my heels.

Elba is my favourite companion in these morning expeditions, and as she is a large Newfoundland, four years of age, and mother of forty-four puppies, I am justified in considering her a sufficient chaperone.

I meet few people on the way. A herd of goats with dainty little hoofs and yellow glassy eyes, reminiscent of Hymettus and the Golden Age, trotting by under the guidance of a bare-legged boy, who pipes like a youthful Pan; a few men with loaded donkeys; a sturdy woman astride a meek old horse, returning with faggots from the woods; these are the only disturbers of the morning peace.

Prosaic people, I believe, call my cathedral the chestnut wood, but this is because their eyes are holden, and they have never perceived the sacredness of the place.

To an illuminated vision the forest is the original

Church. When men desired to build houses for their faith, it was surely in the forests, with their wide aisles, their stately columns and vaulted roofs, that they sought inspiration, and learned their art; and in Gothic minsters, where the air is holy with the vibration of centuries of prayer, the pillars, the carven leaves of the capitals, the dim vistas between the arches, all remind us that it was so, recalling, as they do, the rounded tree-trunks, the mysterious blue distance, and roof of living green.

The secrets of the forest may best be surprised in silence, just as the truths of life steal on us unawares; moments of revelation, when the soul is still enough to perceive them, come unsought, and that is why, when I go to the woods in the morning, I want no companion save one whom men, as a term of disparagement, call dumb.

Together we reach a log left by the woodmen, and there I seat myself: Elba lies down with dignity becoming one who has enriched the world by forty-four puppies, and we each, in our several ways, surrender ourselves to the sweet influence of the time.

It is an hour of mystery and enchantment. The slanting sunbeams silver the tree-trunks, and dapple the turf with green and gold; the ground is starred with daisies and amaranth, with purple thistles and the pale blue chicory—to me a new friend—which lifts its round face to the sky with the innocent candour of a little child. Cool shadows dream about the boles of the trees and in cup-like hollows lined with moss; purple mists linger in the dim aisles; far and blue, through the arching boughs, rises the altar of the hills, the dwelling-place of God.

The birds sing a low, hushed song in the thickets, an unseen chorus of songsters, cloistered in their green retreat; countless insects fill the air with their whirr and hum. The cry of a startled pheasant, the rustle of a hare stealing through the brushwood, the ring of a far-off forge, the rumble of a cart in the valley, the lilt of a labourer's song in some distant field; these things, unnoticed until listened for, blend into harmony with the voices of the birds.

The Green Cathedral is full of worshippers. All the dear soft creatures of fur and feather, the birds, the shy, white-tailed rabbits, the butterflies and busy patient ants, are, by their beauty, their glad acceptance of life, their gentle duteous days, sending up continually a great "Te Deum laudamus."

As I sit, bemused, upon my log, I feel a grave joy, born of the magic of the place.

How lovely this green world is, how potent its spell! Here, surely, poor mad Isabella, the heroine of D'Annunzio's beautiful, terrible play, might have lived in peace: she for whom—since the blood of her lover drenched her garments—no scarlet poppy must open, no red rose bloom, but for whom the world must be for ever green.

In old pictures, green symbolised contemplation, hope and springtime. Surely, then, the Green Cathedral should be a fit place for learning lessons of hope and the promise of life; of attaining to happy quietude and tranquillity of heart.

Where I sit is but the fringe of the forest. For miles it clothes the sides of the mountains: now stretching in level reaches with gold-green vistas between the tree-trunks, now climbing steep slopes, where moss-

grown boulders strew the ground; and through it runs a white ribbon of road, connecting lonely villages and tiny ancient towns.

If so fair in the tired green of late summer, what must these woods be in spring, I wonder, when, on some supreme day, the young leaves burst from their sticky sheaths, clothing the trees with shimmering emerald, and a million cones of milk-white blossom open to the sun!

It is easy, looking down the long shimmering glades, to understand how the simple folk of old days peopled the forests with Dryads and coy green gods, who lurked with timid, faun-like eyes among the trees. Have they ever really gone away? Do we not still find them, feel their presence, when we sit alone gazing up to the Hills of Desire, or down into the Well of Dreams? Was it some memory of these woodland spirits which inspired Dante with a dream so sweet as his green angels? How lovely they would be! Green as when the sun shines through young lime leaves, with soft, earth-coloured hair, eyes blue as the mists which linger in autumnal copses, and wings, not of feathers, but of the fluttering fronds of fern. Surely such a conception is too beautiful not to be true? Surely, if to us are appointed guardian angels, the shy wild creatures of the forest, children, like us, of God, have their guardians also; and, since their world is green, would it not be sweet and fitting that their angels too were green? As the angels of the little ones always behold the Face of the Father, may not also the protectors of the forest folk hold a worthy place in the heavenly courts, bearing up the cry of the creatures, the detailed doings of even that fifth sparrow, for whom God

“providently caters,” and whom He has declared He does not forget ?

All who are familiar with, and lovers of the forests, know that strange sense, stronger in the twilight, of secrets lurking among the trees, of presences of which we seem to catch a glimpse, though, when we turn to look, there is nothing. These presences, I like to think, are the woodland spirits, who, clothed with a verdure which veils them from us, dwell among the trees.

They must have a sad tale to tell, at times, these guardian angels. Especially here, in Italy, where the phrase, “non sono Christiani,” is too often heard as an explanation—though not an excuse—for cruelty to the dumb creatures ; and where the song-birds are trapped by thousands for food,—blackbirds and thrushes, even “the robin and the wren, God Almighty’s cock and hen.”

The trapping is treachery, not sport. They are decoyed by means of blinded birds, hung in cages in the wood to call the others by their songs, which are supposed to be all the sweeter for their sightless eyes. The wild birds gather to the cages, and the “sportsman,” hidden behind a tree or in a hut, nets or shoots them down at will.

Yet, after all, how may I criticise the Italians for killing thrushes, for silencing the music of the thickets, when we, in England, are not innocent of the lives of larks? How may I condemn them for cruelty to their animals, remembering the half-starved, over-driven horses which among us too often turn a public holiday into a public shame?

An inquisitive blackbird draws near and surveys me from a bramble bush. A thrush advances with short, quick runs and sudden halts, during which he stands, with

orange beak raised heavenwards, and round intent eyes, until a movement assures him that Brother Worm is rising to take the air.

Perhaps these are the fledglings' fledglings, many generations removed, of those very birds to whom St. Francis, wandering over this country between Rome and Florence, preached that sermon, unforgettable for its naïve sweetness and tender, all-embracing love.

And this is the story as told by the simple writer of the "Fioretti."

"As Francis one day was passing along the road between Cannaiolo and Bevagno, he looked up and saw many trees by the way, in which were perched a great multitude of birds, so that the saint wondered, and said to his companions, 'Await me here in the road, and I will go and preach to my little sisters, the birds.'

"And he entered the field, and began to preach to the birds which were on the ground, and immediately those which were on the trees came and gathered around him, remaining silent until St. Francis had finished, and even then they did not fly away until he had given them his blessing.

"This was the sermon which St. Francis preached to them:—

"'Little birds, my sisters, much are you indebted to God your Creator, and always and in every place are bound to praise Him, because He has given you liberty to fly in every place; also raiment He has given you, double and threefold, and because He preserved your kind in the Ark, that it should not come to an end.

"'Again, you are holden to Him for the element of the air, which He has appointed to you. Besides all this,

you neither sow nor reap, but God feeds you and gives you rivers and springs for your thirst; gives you the mountains and valleys for your refuge, and the high trees wherein to build your nests. And, since you cannot spin nor sew, God clothes you, you and your little ones. Therefore much are you loved of your Creator, since He bestows on you so many benefits. Beware then, little sisters, of the sin of ingratitude, and strive always to give God praise.'

"As St. Francis spoke these words to them, all the birds began to open their beaks and stretch their necks and spread their wings, reverently bowing their heads to the earth, and alike with act and song expressed their delight. When at last the sermon was ended, St. Francis made the sign of the cross over them, and gave them leave to depart, and immediately the birds rose into the air with marvellous sweet singing, and streamed away in a great cross to the four quarters of heaven, signifying that their preacher had been San Francesco, the Gonfaloniere of the Cross of Christ."

The forest is lovely indeed on this August morning: no movement of man disturbing its stillness, nor marring the mystery of its glades. But it is not always so.

With the early days of winter, when the wind sweeps over the mountains and the leaves fall, its quiet is invaded by the inhabitants of the poor little villages, to whom the chestnuts which grow there are a matter of life and death, and for whom the anxiously awaited "Raccolta" is the principal event of the year. On the harvest of chestnuts depends the comparative comfort or bitter want of the coming season: they are the sole wealth—for the greater part of the year the only food—of the mountain folk, so no wonder that to them the weather which ripens, the

wind which may blow down the chestnuts untimely, are matters of momentous import.

On the high bleak spurs of the Apennines, where the land yields none of the grapes and olives and but a scanty supply of the corn which is the rich heritage of the plains, where the inhabitants of the lonely villages and towns are indescribably poor, the chestnut forests are the salvation of the people, their one resource. Pasture for their goats in summer, the wild fruit of the woods, and the chestnuts, these are the sole heritage of the mountain-folk.

Until the autumn—no blight or storm harming them—the nuts remain on the branches, protected by their prickly burrs, while gradually a transformation comes over the forest, wonderful as that of the old fairy tale, and all is changed to gold. With the November winds, the yellow leaves fall, and are piled into barriers to prevent the chestnuts, when they drop, rolling away and being lost in the mountain-streams.

These preparations made, the people anxiously await the early frosts which ripen the nuts, when men, women, and children set out then with poles, sacks, and baskets to beat them down and gather them. Agents are in waiting to buy up a supply for the city markets, for the "marrons glacés" of the confectioners, and the many soups and sweets in which they figure on the tables of the rich. The rest of the crop the people carry away home to dry for winter use.

In huts made for the purpose, or in the old stone houses themselves, false ceilings of laths and bamboo canes are raised on wooden props, one above the other, between the roof and the floor of trodden earth. On these shelves the chestnuts are heaped; beneath them is lighted a great fire, which burns day and night until the

continued heat makes the shells darken and drop off, the nuts are then ground to flour,—“farina dolce,”—which takes the place of cornflour for the mountain folk.

All winter their food will be “Polenda,” a stiff chestnut porridge mixed with oil, which is cut with a string; or “Necci,” a mixture of flour and water, spread upon chestnut leaves,—of which a store is collected in summer,—and cooked between hot iron plates.

Many of the mountaineers, when their scanty harvest is reaped, their flocks driven in for the winter, and the bare slopes afford no employment during the cold months, journey down to sell their chestnuts in the cities. “Sono arrivati i Buzzurri,” they say in Florence, when at the street corners or in the dark mouth of some old archway appears the charcoal brazier, and around it the great pans of “Castagnaccio” and “Polenda” and smoking nuts; and very gladly do the thinly clad workmen and women, the red-nosed children spend their “soldi” upon a food which is not only cheap and satisfying, but—blessed sensation for those who shiver in the streets and over empty hearths at home—steaming hot.

So my Green Cathedral offers food for the body as well as for the spirit, comfort for cold hands as well as calm for restless hearts. Never again, I think, shall I see the “Buzzurri” or the chestnuts in Florence but they will call up for me, amid the wintry cold and darkness, these golden woods and quiet glades which are the home of the chestnuts, these mountain-slopes where “God’s Providence” is the people’s sole inheritance, and every detail of a divine summer, passing all too swiftly away.

PART III

XVII

THE CRESIMA

It was Whitsunday, the feast to which the Tuscans give the charming name of "Pasqua delle Rose." All morning the Duomo had resounded with the music and monotonous chanting of the High Mass. The Archbishop, gorgeously vested, had been dressed and undressed, mitred and unmitred, until he must have been worn out. He had made his communion—the most impressive part of an office which almost seems at times, judging from the attitude of priests and people, to be rather a pageant for the eyes of men than a sacrifice for the service of God.

As the supreme moment drew near a gilded faldstool was set in the centre of the altar-steps. The Archbishop was led to it from his throne, and knelt there, bowed almost to the earth, his robes sweeping about him in heavy folds. Behind him, a row of Bishops and Canons, the priests and deacons, the choir, and his two servants in black liveries, knelt with bent heads. There was a long pause; the air was dim with incense, sweet with plaintive music, which seemed to come from very far away. It was a hush vibrating with holy things. Then the organ burst out suddenly in a triumphant peal of music, which filled

the whole building: all was movement again; the Archbishop was led back to his seat; the great silver candlesticks were carried away; the service went on.

In the afternoon another scene took place in the Duomo: now it was full of children, awaiting, like the apostles of old, the coming of the Holy Ghost.

A great oblong space had been enclosed in the vast nave by benches, and at the east end of this an altar was raised. Upright upon the forms all round, their faces directed towards the centre, where the priests were already gathering, knelt hundreds of children, boys and girls, ranged upon opposite sides. Their friends and relations stood behind, and a crowd of spectators had gathered beyond.

The bleak interior of the Cathedral was half dark, for it was already six o'clock: the weather outside was stormy, and a sweeping rain had emptied the streets. Day and night, sunshine and moonlight, these are the only natural forces felt in the Duomo; seasons have little influence there: in winter it is warm; in summer, with its great west doors thrown open, it is filled with mysterious golden haze, and the shadows which generally reign supreme hide behind pillars and in dark chapels; but though the Piazza outside may glow like a furnace, summer does not cross the threshold; in all the parched city the Cathedral is the coolest place. It stands, through centuries, a great memorial raised to the glory of God by men who, with work and prayer and sorrow and much patience, expressed their souls and embodied their dreams in stone.

Such buildings were the work of an age of faith, when men, for all their violence, believed vividly in an unseen Power and an unseen world. They rose gradually in the midst of plague, war, famine, revolt, oppression; in times

when one faction or another were the "Fuorusciti," and thundering for readmission from without the city walls: times of bloodshed and cruelty; of great sinners, but also of great saints. Those were the days when men gave their best for the service of God, to make the place of His Name beautiful, each content to submit his share to the glory of the whole.

What scenes that Florentine Cathedral has witnessed! Rejoicings and mournings of the people, great pageants; awful preachings, as when Savonarola thundered from its pulpit his denunciations of the city's sin, and threats of the wrath to come; deeds of blood and sacrilege, as that by which the Pazzi plotted to exterminate the Medician line; visits of Pontiffs, pilgrimages, midnight masses as the holy vigil faded into Christmas Day, bringing the Desire of Nations; Easter festivals, strange Holy Week rites and observances, down to the very ceremony of this Whitsunday.

All the life of Florence for hundreds of years has passed in and out of the Duomo, passed and disappeared, as the leaves of a past autumn, or the snow of some forgotten winter day. Now, where the good Archbishop Antonino—long since raised to the glories of sainthood—must have blessed the children of his time, where Savonarola gathered his bands of white-robed, psalm-singing boys, another generation of Florentines, white-frocked, flower-faced, awaited the laying on of the Episcopal hands.

They had been gathered from all the parishes of the town, and from many of the villages round, each squadron under the direction of its own parish priest.

Every child held a paper signed from his "Priore," or "Curato," certifying fitness for confirmation, and a white

silk ribbon about an inch wide, with a gold cross worked in the centre, of a length sufficient to tie around the head.

Most of the candidates, boys as well as girls, were in white, and it was touching to notice the efforts which had evidently in many cases been made so that they might be suitably dressed.

As I made my way to the front, I found myself beside a pathetic group—a respectable-looking man, with a careworn face, probably a mechanic or small tradesman, standing behind his two little sons, and holding a black-eyed baby girl in his arms. The boys were clothed in dazzling white, from their large sailor collars to their small shoes, and their full-moon faces shone with the vigorous application of soap and sponge.

I entered into conversation, by asking leave to see one of the certificates, and the father's anxious face lighted up wonderfully when I admired his little boys.

The outfits, "for all two at one time," had been, he admitted, a great expense for people in their position,—“like we others,”—but he had wanted the “ragazzi” to be decent for their confirmation, and it needed no very deep insight to see that the poor little cotton suits and cheap shoes were the outcome of much sacrifice and scheming. Evidently, however, the proud moment when he stood behind them, keeping a strict eye on their behaviour, repaid all his self-denial and thought.

From time to time one of the boys looked up in his face, enquiring artlessly, “Am good I?” and from the sombreness of the father's dress I fear he had to do double duty for the little ones, and that Gaetano and Guido and the Mimina had no mother.

Close to this exemplary group was a more turbulent

spirit, who, according to his paper, bore the majestic mediæval name of Bramante di Bagnino—a title more suggestive of some gallant knight “pricking o’er the plain” than of a sprightly urchin with an enormous bow under his chin and a blue plush suit much the worse for wear.

While awaiting the Archbishop’s arrival, Bramante occupied the time and outraged the propriety of his neighbours by chatting audibly with his acquaintances in the crowd behind.

This conversation was carried on chiefly with a curly-headed boy whom he hailed jubilantly as “Francesco, O Francesco!” and to whom he imparted choice bits of information as to the doings in the arena before him, which, owing to the press of people, the smallness of his stature, and the fact that he was not of the elect band of candidates, were hidden from Francesco’s eyes.

“Seest thou not, Francesco, that priest who enters now? No? Madonna mia! if thou couldst see him! of a fatness such, and of an ugliness to make fear!”

Silence, followed apparently by a question from the obscure Francesco, which was negatived by Bramante, Italian fashion, with an impressively shaken forefinger.

“Fiore? I see him not, but Gigi of Maione is there, by the altar. Seest thou not his new suit? and figure to thyself, they have already shaved him the head! Also to me they will shave the head when the hot days come.”

A sudden stop was put to further confidences by the removal of Francesco, hustled away to a better place by his relations, and the obstreperous Bramante looked about for something else with which to amuse himself until the arrival of the Archbishop, who, after the pre-

liminary prayers, during which even Bramante had been silenced, was going the round of the children with a party of priests, confirming each in turn, but who, from the large number intervening, was hardly likely to arrive at this point for another ten minutes at the least.

Bramante's next neighbour was a chubby boy of innocent aspect, who knelt upright with all the devotion of an infant Samuel; but it must be owned that, although in obedience to his parents' instructions he covered his face with his fat hands, he did not cease through the fingers to pass a "demure travel of regard" around him, on his fellow-candidates.

Bramante, who was probably on intimate terms with him in his native Borgo, began, in subdued tones, to taunt him with the license of the holy place, and when this blameless youth refused to "correspond with him in words," assayed to rob him of his sacred ribbon—an insult which the other was not slow to resent with a smart slap.

This flagrant breach of discipline brought down a sharp rebuke for such reprehensible conduct from their mutual parish priest, which fell, unfairly, alike on the just and unjust, causing much soreness of heart in the parents of the injured Giuseppe, who, seeing their son thus undeservedly disgraced, cast such fiery glances at Bramante that if, to use the expressive Tuscan simile, he had been a piece of bread, they would undoubtedly have eaten him to the last crumb.

The mother of this jovial little soul was a fat, overdressed person, probably mistress of a market-stall or "Trattoria," who admonished him sharply from behind, and loudly prompted him to cross himself at the right times, with awful threats of future chastisement if he

took advantage of the sacred building and his own exalted position to disobey the maternal commands.

At last the Archbishop drew near: the children were hushed into silence; but Bramante's heart was obviously not turned to repentance, and his want of sobriety indicated, it is to be feared, that he was in no very fit state to receive the sacred rite.

The confirmation was a pretty sight, as any gathering of little children must be, but it was, none the less, singularly lacking in the dignity and reverence of a similar service in the Anglican Church. The candidates were all mites of six or seven—too young, even the best taught, to understand much of what was taking place, whereas restricting the age to boys and girls over twelve brings them under a solemnising influence at a far more critical time of life.

At length the Episcopal train paused in front of Gaetano and Guido, both models of good behaviour as they knelt upright with their small hands clasped.

The first priest took Gaetano's certificate and read out his name: the Archbishop confirmed him by the laying on of hands, the signing with holy oil, and a tap upon the cheek, which is called "putting in the nail," and which symbolises suffering for the faith.

Then, while he passed on to Guido, a priest following tied the white ribbon around Gaetano's head, the cross on the front of it covering the small cross signed with oil where once the baptismal mark had been set, this cross proclaiming to the world that the wearer is not ashamed to own himself a Christian—a symbolism probably dating from the primitive days when such a confession required far more courage than it does to-day. Every child must continue to wear this white ribbon for three days, and

scarcely a boy or girl of eligible age is to be seen in the street without one, although often very dirty and draggled before the expiration of that time.

So it went on all down the line, until every boy had his brow bound with white, and the Archbishop turned up the long rows of little girls.

These were all bare-headed, and there was a regrettable absence of the soft white veils which, for their confirmation, English children wear. These veils, among the Italians, figure only at the First Communion—a great event, which takes place at the age of thirteen or fourteen. On this occasion the girls are dressed in white from head to foot, with floating veils; and after the Communion in the early morning, walk about the streets for the rest of the day with their parents and friends, or pay visits, in the same costume—a pretty sight, rendered familiar to English eyes by many French and Italian pictures of “*La première Communion.*” The boys usually wear white gloves and a white ribbon round the arm.

During the confirmation of the girls an important figure was the “*Madrigna,*” or godmother—a lady who accompanied the Archbishop to represent the sponsor of each child. This deputy godmother is allowed at large cathedral confirmations, but if the ceremony take place in some small country church the sponsors of each candidate must be present.

In remote districts, where the Bishop only makes his rounds once in five or six years, mites of two or three, even infants in arms, are often presented, and funny scenes take place amid the wailing of the babies, the excitement of the parents, and the struggling and pushing of the sponsors of each child to make their way forward from

some dim corner, when required to witness for their own particular godchild.

These simple, half-civilised folk are at times so carried away with enthusiasm by the sight of the Bishop, the visible representative of their Church, as to make it impossible for him to deliver any address at all. Ecstatic exclamations of "Benedetto! Santo Padre! Benedicaci!" break out on all sides. In vain the poor man enforces silence: "Zitti, zitti! figli miei! voglio dire due parole! Sh! Sh!" It is quite useless: the presence of the holy father rouses their zeal to boiling point, the clamour increases instead of growing less, and the worthy Bishop has to content himself with mutely blessing, and retire without admonition or ghostly counsel and advice.

At last the little girls too were all blessed and be-ribboned; around the great circle no brow was visible unbound with white. The Archbishop was led back to his place, apparently quite spent with blessing, while the children, for whom the whole ceremony—individually so short—was long and wearisome, were becoming restless and unquiet.

I saw Bramante, who evidently did not brood upon rebuffs or grievances, whispering in a conciliatory manner to his neighbour; but the latter proved deaf to all blandishments, and received these advances with studied coldness, while his parents continued to look askance at the perverter of their son.

To judge from the way in which Bramante's mother shook him by his blue plush shoulder when the time came for the children to disperse, and the fact that Bramante himself did not seem very alacritous to leave the holy place, I should imagine that there was retribution in store for his indecorous conduct. Some parents might have

had too much respect for "Carne" not only "battezzata" but newly "benedetta," to resort to violent measures upon such a day; but Bramante's mother was obviously made of sterner stuff, and the light in her eye boded ill for her recalcitrant son.

However, it must be admitted that in this case "the curse, causeless, would not come," for if ever a small boy needed to have enforced upon him reverence for holy places, that boy was the sprightly scion of the house of Bagnino. Bramante, whose heart appeared to be "a very pebble," was not, it is to be feared, purged of his manifold and grievous offences by the laying on of hands, nor subdued by his parent's wrath, for when he left the Cathedral his eyes were dancing as wickedly as ever below his white fillet, and I doubt if the blessing he had already received and the punishment he was soon to undergo would be followed by any amendment of life.

The children trooped out, their little feet pattering over the pavement: the father of Gaetano and Guido was busy changing the white shoes for sturdier boots before braving the wet streets, and packing up the former in a newspaper. The virtuous Giuseppe was led off enveloped in a cloak, which gave him the air of a bland infantile monk. The crowd melted away with surprising rapidity: only a group lingered, awaiting the Archbishop, who passed out, blessing right and left, to the sombre-looking carriage-and-pair which always conveys "Monsignore" the few steps of distance which lie between the Cathedral and the palace doors.

All bowed low as he went by, and one old woman, in a burst of enthusiasm, caught the raised hand and kissed the great stone which blazed in the Episcopal ring.

With the Archbishop went the last pretext for linger-

ing, and in five minutes the building was cleared. Only the disordered benches, the wet footmarks on the floor, remained to witness to the crowd which had thronged it: the sacristan came down the aisle rattling his heavy bunch of keys to let any who might yet be in chapel or transept know that it was time for locking up, and the Duomo was left to shadow and silence, left with another sacred memory added to its great past—the memory of fresh faces and innocent hearts and renewed vows, and the descent once more, as on a long-past Whitsunday, of the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life.

XVIII

EASTER IN FLORENCE

IN the ancient heathen days, long before the coming of the White Christ, the Scandinavian races kept a yearly feast in the fair lengthening days of Spring to their goddess Oстера, whose dwelling was in the Eastern sky, the region of dawn, and who, conquering night and winter, brought back gladness to earth, and hope to the hearts of men. The Druids, too, celebrated by joyous festivals the sun's return after winter, and the Church, perceiving the lovely significance of these pagan myths as well as the profound symbolism of the Jewish Passover, still celebrates with deeper meaning the ancient feasts, adding the holier associations of the return, after the darkness and cold of death, of the Sun of Righteousness, who arose on the first Easter Day, bringing as His gift to a world a little desolate, an imperishable hope, and the promise of an eternal spring.

Among the Russian peasants, and even, so men say, in parts of England,—though of this latter I cannot speak with any certainty,—there lingers a belief that the sun on Easter morning dances in heaven for gladness, and that they whose eyes are opened by grace may behold, not only this wonder, but the very figure of the snow-white Lamb with the banner of victory, glittering in the splendour of that golden disc.

Now this is perhaps a marvel which we in these days so little mystical may hardly hope to see; but there are many rites which may be witnessed by even an unilluminated vision in connection with the Easter festival and that solemn preceding week—which is as the Via Crucis leading to, and emphasising the gladness of, the Holy Hill.

In the old times of the magnificent Medici, when “King Carnival” was not the poor tawdry figure that he now is, but ruled the city splendidly with pageants and processions, feastings, balls and masques, those gay souls—gayer, gladder, surely than we are—must indeed have felt a sharp contrast between the night of Shrove Tuesday and the Ash Wednesday morning, when they gathered in the churches to receive the Benediction, and the olive ashes on their foreheads, and to prepare by fast and penance to expiate the sins and follies of the past riotous weeks. Yet some of the nobles kept up their festivities even in “Quaresima,” and in any case, for the devoutly inclined, that holy season had so many ceremonies of its own as to give almost as much variety to life—if of a different character—as the Carnival itself.

There were then, as now, sermons in the churches. Did not Savonarola, in the Duomo, preach that memorable course in 1497? There were the fairs, still surviving, held Sunday by Sunday at the city gates. Each of these “Fiere delle nocciuole” had, and has, its own distinctive title, “of the Furious,” “of the Lovers,” “of the Curious,” “of the Contracts,”—to which last the contadini brought their sons and daughters, so that marriages might be arranged; and though the young people do their courting now less publicly, he who will may yet attend the “Fiera dei contratti” beyond the great Roman gate.

Another diversion is the old Lenten game of the "Verde," or "green," which Mafalda and I play in Quaresima with much spirit and crafty stratagem. This game, which lasts from Ash Wednesday to Palm Sunday, is played in couples, and opens with the ritualistic tearing in two of a box-leaf, after which each player must wear a sprig of box—always fresh and never of less than three leaves—till Palm Sunday comes round. He who can surprise his opponent by night or day with the sudden demand, "Fuori il verde" ("Out with the green"), when the other is boxless, or finds his spray reduced to less than three leaves, is the winner of a prize previously agreed upon, although the bargain may be renewed, and the loser given a chance of retrieving his luck.

Mafalda is an ardent and subtle player: at all times of the day I hear her piping voice behind me, "Fuori il verde," and she is merciless in counting the number of my leaves, and scrutinising them to be sure that they cannot be disqualified as "secco," or dry. Only once did I outwit her, and then she was in her bath; but never again could I catch her, for, schooled by experience, she is as invulnerable there as anywhere, never, until Palm Sunday, laying aside her "verde," even when undergoing this cleansing ceremony, but clutching it the while in a chubby hand. In fact, Mafalda is in that, as in many things, too sharp for me, and even if I should have the heart to disturb her sleeping, it would be useless, as, standing beside her cot, I should see the box-leaves peeping above the counterpane, and there is no denying, at the end of Lent, that her box of chocolates is fairly won!

At mid-Lent, ladders of sugar, biscuit and chocolate appear in the shop-windows, and it was (and, alas! still is) the custom for street urchins on this day to fasten paper

ladders to the backs of women, or to stamp them on with chalk, approaching their victim stealthily, and then running off with the triumphant shout, "She has it! she has it!"

What the origin of this trick is no one seems to know, but some attribute it to the custom which once existed of fastening a guy representing "Lent" to the loggia of the Mercato Nuovo, and going on the Thursday of mid-Lent, with a long ladder, and sawing it in two. However that may be, it is a custom far too dear to the mischievous hearts of the Florentine boys to be allowed to die out, and a fresh generation of impish little lads is ever springing up to keep the memory green.

Another old game for the "Mezza Quaresima" is the "Pentolaccia," for which a large covered earthenware pot is hung up, full of cakes and sweets, or vegetables, groceries and charcoal, according to the society—nursery or village inn—in which it is played. The players must in turn strike at the "Pentolaccia" with a stick, and he who succeeds in breaking it is the winner of the contents. Of course a game so delightful must be played wherever there are children, and Mafalda, advancing with a resolute expression, as who should say, "seven at one blow," smote a pot in pieces, and found it, to her joy, full of "Quaresimali," a crisp brown biscuit—shaped like the letters of the alphabet—and the more to be prized since this delicacy is only to be had in Lent.

But although Lent has many observances, devout as well as playful, it is with the long quiet days of Holy Week that the ceremonies become so beautiful and solemn, as the "Royal Way" leads on by the Hill of Calvary to the garden tomb and the Easter dawn.

On Palm Sunday all images and crucifixes are veiled

or removed for the coming week, little crosses twisted of dried palm leaves are sold at the church doors, and olive branches blessed and given to the people in memory of the green boughs waved in the streets of Jerusalem before the Lord.

The palm branches symbolise the victory of Christ, the olives are reminders of the dove of peace, and both, carried in the procession which typifies the pilgrimage of life, are figures of the good works which the servant of God must gather by the way, that he may not appear empty-handed at the last.

During, or immediately after, the procession is sung the ancient hymn, "Gloria, laus et honor," of the origin of which a pretty story is told; for Teodolfo, Bishop of Orleans, being falsely accused to the Emperor, Louis the Pious, son of Charlemagne, was cast into prison, and there lay until Palm Sunday came round.

When, on that holy day, he heard from his cell the passing of many feet, he implored the Emperor, who, for the honour of God, was walking in the procession, to pause outside the prison walls. This favour being granted, the Bishop lifted up his voice and sang the verses, by him composed with much labour—sang them in a manner so touching and affectionate that the Emperor, feeling perhaps that words and voice so beautiful could not proceed from an evil man, at once freed him, and restored him to his bishopric, and from that day forward these verses have always been sung on Palm Sunday, and from churches both Anglican and Roman go up the words—

"All glory, laud and honour, to Thee, Redeemer, King."

The green twigs are carried home and set up on the walls, and in many a house the "holy bough" may still

be seen, when spring has faded to autumn, and the Easter "Alleluia" is hushed in the solemn chanting for the Day of the Dead.

My "branch of peace" was brought to me by Mafalda, who returned from her devotions bearing—like Noah's dove, but more abundantly—twigs for all the household.

"And you must never, never let it fall a leaf upon the floor and be broomed away," she told me impressively; "for this is the olive of the buon Dio and is benedetto by the priest. When it shall be dead, yes, one may burn it, but to broom it in the 'spazzatura,' No!"

As I fully appreciated the force of Mafalda's injunction, and promised to respect it, the olive, a little dry and dusty, but yet intact, has hung above my bed for many moons, and I hope may last until another Easter shall bring me another spray.

The priests, in Holy Week and the week preceding, have a busy time, as not only must they attend endless services and hear confessions preparatory to Easter, but must visit every house in their parishes, and bless each room by sprinkling holy water—an idea as beautiful as that of blessing the fields and the horses, if only the priests were a little more reverent in the doing of it, a little different from what they are.

On the evenings of the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday in Holy Week,¹ takes place the service of the "Tenebræ," consisting of the Matins and Lauds proper to the next mornings, recited the previous day, and known as the "Matins of Darkness," because in past

¹ Although I have since studied all details in various Italian books, I wish here to express my debt to an interesting article in the *Italian Gazette*, by the late Mr. E. Caulfield, in which I first read of the Holy Week and Easter ceremonies in Florence, and learned the sources where further information might be found,

times they used to be sung in the evening or late at night. They are now sung before sunset, but the old name survives, for not only does the ritual include the ceremonial extinguishing of lights, but also symbolises the spiritual darkness following upon the death of Christ.

The altar, draped with purple, is lighted by six tall candles, and to the south is set a stand bearing an upright wooden triangle on which fifteen lighted tapers are ranged. Of these the highest represents Christ, the other fourteen the twelve Apostles and three Maries, and during the recitation of the psalms they are quenched one by one until all is dark, save for the little yellow flower of the fifteenth taper, which, while the choir chants the great psalm of penitence, is hidden away behind the High Altar, symbolising the Saviour's loneliness in the garden, deserted by all, and the continuance of His life in the darkness of the grave.

It is profoundly impressive in the great shadowy churches as, in the intervals of the chant, the lights go out one by one, until in the final hush and darkness the air seems vibrating with those saddest, most haunting words, "They all forsook Him and fled."

There is a pause as the cry of penitence for the sin of man dies away; then the light hidden behind the altar is again brought forward, to typify the Resurrection after three days in the grave.

A noise known as the "Strepita Cula" is then made, by beating willow switches—which are sold at the doors, tricked out in coloured papers—upon seats and pillars, to recall the scourging and signify the disturbance and chaos into which all natural forces were thrown by the death of Christ.

Maundy Thursday is set apart for the pilgrimage of the "Sette Chiese," when the devout must visit seven

different churches, or, where that is impossible, as in remote villages, make seven separate visits to one, and so, with prayer, commemorate the Passion of the Lord.

In every church a "Sepolcro" is arranged—a chapel filled with plants, flowers, and a silvery grass grown in the darkness of convent vaults, to represent a garden. Some of the decorations in churches where the parishioners are wealthy are exquisite in their cool fragrance of massed ferns and flowers, but nothing is rejected, and the tiny pot of primroses, the bunch of gillies, of the poor, finds a place equal in honour beside the roses and orchids of the rich. In the Sepulchre is sometimes laid a figure of the dead Christ, surrounded by the instruments of His suffering, and watched over by the Blessed Virgin, her heart pierced by the seven swords of her sorrow; but to me there is something too painfully realistic, too emotional, in such an exhibition: I love better the little quiet gardens, where, since the Blessed Sacrament is reserved behind the altar, the Body of Christ is in very truth buried mystically in the Tomb.

It is a little difficult to understand why the scene of the burial should be anticipated, and the day *before* the Crucifixion appointed for visiting the Sepulchres instead of Good Friday afternoon or Easter Eve; but so it is: and the people, men, women and children, crowd into the churches, where the air is sweet with flowers, to gaze at the quiet Figure, and kneel to adore, and stoop to kiss the wounds. Italians are curiously childlike and picturesque in their devotions, utterly free from any touch of false shame; and I saw many pick up a bruised flower from the ground to take home, and, with a gesture very simple and loving, kiss it tenderly as they turned away. Some bring bunches of violets and olive sprays, and lay them at the

feet or in the hands, and although in the crowds which move from church to church there is doubtless much curiosity as to the decorations of the "Sepolcri," and a good deal which, to all but the most simple-hearted, is jarring, even theatrical, in the plaster figure with its nails and thorns and painted wounds, there cannot but be much good in a custom which sends the people flocking into the churches, and draws rough men from the street to stand bare-headed to gaze before a mystery so profound and so piteous, to kneel for a little quietly to pray, to bend and kiss the emblems of the Passion and the pierced hands and feet.

On Maundy Thursday the custom still survives, dating from the fourth or fifth century, of blessing the holy oils for the coming year—the oil of the sick, for use in Extreme Unction; the oil of Catechumens, employed in the ceremonies of Baptism, Ordination and Coronation; and the oil of Chrism, which is mixed with balsam and used in Confirmation, the Consecration of Bishops and the rites for the consecration of churches, altars, fonts and bells.

On this day three Masses used to be celebrated—one to reconcile penitents to the Church, the next for the blessing of the holy oil, and the third in memory of the institution of the Holy Communion; but these three functions are now distributed to different parts of the one Mass, and the priest consecrates, not one, but two wafers, the second being reserved under a veil and enclosed in a tabernacle in the Sepulchre until next day.

Another Maundy Thursday rite in Florence is the "Lavanda," or washing the feet of twelve old men by the Archbishop in the Cathedral.

Mafalda was my companion at this ceremony, and from the vantage-ground of a chair set close to the marble screen, watched the proceedings with profound interest.

The chosen band—who receive some compensation for affording His Holiness this means of self-humiliation—having shuffled to their places in white ephods and felt slippers, there was much delay and hurrying to and fro of priests before the procession arrived.

At last the Archbishop entered, and, after the preliminary prayers, went along the line, accompanied by many Cathedral dignitaries, sprinkling with water, and wiping in a most perfunctory manner the four-and-twenty feet.

“Have you seen, you, that he make them a bath to the feet?” whispered Mafalda excitedly; “but they will take it a cold, for they are not dry—they need more wipe, the poor old men.”

I tried to reassure her on this point, which much troubled her; but it was indeed to be feared that harm rather than good might ensue for the twelve old gentlemen, owing to chills taken during these unwonted ablutions at the Archiepiscopal hands.

On Good Friday only the Mass of the Presanctified is celebrated, the name signifying that there is no consecration, the elements having been reserved from the previous day; for, as St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “It is not becoming to represent the Passion of Christ mystically by the consecration of the Eucharist, while the Church is celebrating it as if really happening.”

Afterwards is performed the solemn rite of the Adoration of the Cross. The Celebrant stands on the south of the altar, the Cross, draped with purple, in his hand. Uncovering the top of it for the adoration of the people, he says, “*Ecce lignum crucis*,” and the choir continues, “*in quo salus mundi pependit; venite adoremus*” (“Behold the wood of the Cross on which hung the Salvation of the world; come, let us adore!”).

He then uncovers the right arm of the Cross, repeating the same words, and finally, standing before the altar, uncovers the whole, thus symbolising the preaching of the Gospel, first to a few disciples, then to the Jews after Pentecost, and finally to the whole world. The Cross is then laid on the ground at the foot of the altar, and the Celebrant, removing his shoes, and kneeling three times, kisses the wood; the other clergy follow his example, and then the congregation, two by two, while the old hymn "Pange Lingua" ("Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle") is chanted. After this, the Celebrant goes in procession to the Sepulchre to bring back the Host.

In the evening, the long procession of the Holy Cross winds round the dark Duomo, with lights and banners, and a silken canopy to shelter that sacred Emblem, and as it passes, the choir chanting the ancient Latin hymn, "The Royal Banners forward go," the people fall on their knees and bow their heads—a sight touching and beautiful, such as in no English church have I ever seen.

On the afternoon of Good Friday they show in the beautiful old church of Santa Trinità the crucifix of which, tradition says, the Figure bowed its head to San Giovanni Gualberto, "the Merciful Knight." Veiled the rest of the year, it is on this one day uncovered in the Chapel of the Sepulchre at three o'clock, when the hours of darkness and dereliction are past. And this is the story, as I told it in low tones to Mafalda, sitting on a bench in a corner of the shadowy church, looking across to the strange old Crucifix, so ancient and solemn among the masses of white flowers and blazing lights.

Giovanni, second son of Gualberto Visdomini, lord of the Castle of Petrajo, in Val di Pesa, and of Camilla Aldobrandeschi his wife, was riding one Good Friday

afternoon with a troop of gay companions up the solemn Via Crucis which leads to the hill of San Miniato, when he met his mortal foe, the slayer of his brother, coming down the narrow track. Then Giovanni, rejoicing that the day of vengeance was at last come, lifted his sword to strike him dead. But the other, falling upon his knees, pleaded for mercy in the most sacred name of Him who on that day had hung for the sins of all men upon the Holy Rood.

At this appeal Giovanni's heart was softened, and, sparing his enemy's life, he freely forgave him the wrong, and the two knights, reconciled, went together to pray in the church hard by. And then it was that a wonderful thing befell; for, as Giovanni knelt before the crucifix, the Figure of the Lord bowed the head in sign of approval, which miracle so moved him that, throwing aside his knightly arms, he betook himself to a monastery, and, on the snow-crowned heights of Vallombrosa, passed his days in austerity and prayer, founding that Vallombrosan Order which has guarded his crucifix as so precious a relic ever since.

Many villages keep up the old custom of a memorial pageant, and with a touching simplicity, rooted in reverence, carry a figure of the dead Christ in procession, accompanied by a company dressed as Apostles, mourning women, angels, and men-at-arms; and the sight is both touching and beautiful, as, carrying their tapers and torches, they pass chanting among the olive-trees and along the hilly roads.

On Saturday morning, while the Anglican Church is yet watching beside the garden tomb, waiting for the Resurrection in the grey dawn of the Easter Day, the Italians are rejoicing already over the Risen Lord, for at

the midday Mass the priest, turning to the people, proclaims the glad news that Christ is risen, and the words of the Easter annunciation ring through the churches: "Now let the Angelic Host of Heaven rejoice, let the mysteries of things divine exult; and for the victory of so great a King let the trumpet sound of things redeemed." The bells ring out, peal after peal, from steeple to steeple in the cities and over the olive-clothed hills, until the air seems vibrating with their clash and chime, and salutations and wishes of "Buona Pasqua" are heard on every side.

The City of Flowers possesses a unique ceremony, the "Scoppio del Carro," which has taken place upon Holy Saturday for nearly five hundred years, though when this quaint ceremony really originated is scarcely known.

The custom of blessing, and carrying about, the sacred fire on Easter Eve is very ancient, of Eastern origin, and practised since the eighth century by the Catholic Church.

According to old Villani, who wrote in the fourteenth century, "The sacred fire is carried through the city in like manner as in Jerusalem, and into every house there goes one to light it; and from this solemn usage came to the house of Pazzi the dignity, which they have enjoyed for close on a hundred and forty years, of the torch procession, through an ancestor named 'Pazzo,' a mighty man and great of stature, who carried a larger number of torches than anyone, and was the first to carry the sacred fire."

This bearing of torches may soon have suggested the greater convenience of a cart to carry them, and the cart may gradually have developed into the "carro" as seen to-day.

Various origins are ascribed by legend to the rite, one of which tells how an ancestor of the Pazzi, joining a crusade, spent Easter at Jerusalem, and, lighting his torch with the crowd at the sacred fire in the Holy Sepulchre, brought it home to Italy, riding backwards that the wind might not extinguish the flame.

The devil did his best to blow it out, but, as in many an old Italian legend, was outdone by the wit of man; and the people along the road, seeing a cavalier ride in so eccentric a manner, shouted "Pazzo! Pazzo!" from which the family was known as "Pazzi," or "the mad ones," ever after.

But the noble Pazzo, in spite of all, arrived safely with his candle, and presented it to the Baptistery, claiming for himself the privilege of being each year the first to take from it a light for his family shrine.

Another story tells how one Pazzo, a mighty man of valour, went crusading in 1088 as commander of the Tuscan band, and was the first to plant the Christian Standard upon the walls of the Holy City, for which deed of prowess his leader, Godfrey de Bouillon, rewarded him with three pieces of flint from the Holy Sepulchre.

These stones, "each a little bigger than a walnut," were presented by Pazzo to the Signory of Florence, and have been preserved ever since,—although the sceptical, who would rob us of all legends, declare that there is no similarity between them and the rock in which the Sepulchre was hewn.

From them, on the Saturday morning, the prior of the little church of the Holy Apostles—where they are kept in a bag of gold brocade—strikes the sacred fire and lights the Easter taper, which is carried in a brazier to the Baptistery, all who will having the privilege of stopping

the procession as it passes and lighting tapers from the holy fire.

When the new fire is brought into the church, the great Paschal Candle on the north side of the altar is lighted; and here also the people may light their tapers and carry them to their own houses, a beautiful and mysterious symbolism of the truth that from Jesus Christ comes the light of holy doctrine, the shining of His divine Face, and that our bodies shall be one day glorified by a touch to the likeness of His.

A little later the "Carro," a great black structure dating from the year 1622, when the more ancient one was burnt, is drawn to its place in front of the open doors of the Duomo, by four of the splendid Tuscan oxen, gay with flowers and ribbons, as if decked for some Pagan sacrifice. The Archbishop, fetching the sacred fire in procession from the Baptistery, lights the candles of the High Altar. A wire, running the whole length of the nave, above the expectant crowd, connects the altar with the car; on the stroke of twelve, while the choir chant the "Gloria in Excelsis," and the bells clash overhead, the fire is applied to the "Columbina," a mechanical dove made of wood, with a wheel and slow fuse inside. With a rush it hisses along the wire, fires the rockets with which the car is filled, and returns to the altar as it came. Then one explosion follows another, and, with the shouts of the vast crowd, almost drown the pealing of the bells.

The peasants believe that if the "Columbina" goes well, the harvests will be abundant, and therefore troop in from all parts of the country to witness the ceremony; and if the dove fails to perform its duties well, and sticks on the wire, or does not successfully fire the car, they turn

very gloomy faces to their homes, as the omen is a bad one for the coming year.

A beautiful Easter in Italy is a thing unforgettable, and never shall I forget the first time when happy fortune offered me an experience so sweet.

For days the weather had been dark and oppressive, but on Saturday a storm swept over the city with floods of rain, clearing the air and refreshing the thirsty earth. Late into the night the bells chimed, while the moon passed with white steps upon the hills and olive gardens, and Giotto's Campanile, itself white as the Resurrection Angel, stood awaiting to announce in the dawning the glad tidings of the Risen Lord.

Early, ah! very early, came the message, and Florence awoke joyously to keep her Easter in a world which was like a dewy garden, so pure and cool it was.

I rose, and passed by a quiet road into a little green valley, where the olives glittered silver between the vivid green of the springing corn and a sky of profound and tender blue. In one night it seemed, after the parched weeks, the trees had put forth leaves, and the tulips and daffodils among the corn had blossomed because Christ was risen, and these had sprung up beneath the passing of His feet. A stream in the grass, almost silent for weeks, filled the air with the joy of running water; and everywhere the birds were singing in the rapture of a spring which, though late in coming, had surely come at last.

Of course Mafalda, like all little Italian children, was soon busy in the garden, hunting to see if the beneficent "White Hare" had left its magic eggs to be discovered by bright eyes and clutched by eager hands in delightfully unexpected places where no hen or hare had ever before been known to lay: and of course, possessing many

relations and friends capable of influencing the Hare, she came in triumphant, bearing eggs which must assuredly have been from fairy-land, as no fowl would have recognised them, so transformed were they ; and not only eggs, but fishes and chickens,—which last was clearly a miracle, for whoever knew a hen produce a complete chicken, feathers and all, in a night ?

Overhead the sun blazed in the deep blue sky as perhaps it blazed on that Easter morning on which the outraged Amidei party, resenting the shame cast upon them by the jilting of their daughter, watched from their tower beside Santo Stefano, until they saw Messer Buondelmonte, gay and debonair, splendidly dressed in white and mounted on a white palfrey, approach from the Oltr' Arno and reach the foot of the bridge, when, dashing out, they slew him at the foot of the old god Mars.

The bells rang, the organs pealed through the open doors of the churches, there was music in the streets ; until the day quieted and cooled to evening, the blue sky flushed to rose, then faded to a clear and lovely green. The stars stole out one by one ; lights began to twinkle like a swarm of fireflies from the Villas on the slopes of Fiesole ; the loud voices in the streets were hushed ; the throbbing of mandolines died away ; and, in the stillness of the April night, beneath the white light of the waning Paschal moon, the cypresses, like quiet hands pointing heavenwards, whispered the Resurrection message, " Since ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above."

XIX

“THE DAY OF THE DEAD”

A FAINT peal of distant bells broke the stillness which had lain all night upon the land. I awoke with a start and a vague sense of homesickness, for bells, like Christmas carols, call up mysteriously the longing for home. The flicker of a match showed that it was five o'clock. I listened: all seemed quiet. Surely, then, I had been mistaken, and dreamed a dream such as those in which wanderers and wayfarers sometimes seem to hear chimes rising from the sea, or borne to them across desert sands or tracts of untrodden snow? Yes, it was my fancy. I blew out the candle, after a reassuring word to the dog who had raised bright, astonished eyes from his rug, and lay down again.

A brief sleep,—was it half an hour or five minutes?—then another far-off peal, answered by a second and a third, as if all the little white churches which the Tuscan hills lift towards heaven, cried one to another and said, “Holy, Holy, Holy,” in the autumn dawn.

It was very mysterious, very beautiful, but—what did it mean? Was it imagination or reality?

I listened bemused, half drowsy, not knowing what answer to give.

At that moment the metallic clang of the bells from the stout little grey tower near the Villa gates at once

disappointed and reassured me. This was no sweet echo of the chimes of Paradise, but an insistent summons to all whose eyes were yet heavy with sleep to rise and come to church. Then in a flash I remembered and understood: this was the second of November, it was the Day of the Dead.

Unaccustomed noises disturbing the early morning quiet of the house told me that the servants were already astir, getting ready for the "Messa"; and, fully awake now, I rose, dressed quickly, and slipped out into the grey of the November dawn.

It was but a few steps to the church. The priest's servant, the sleep still heavy in her eyes, admitted me, and, with the light of a candle, I stumbled up the stairs and along the tortuous passages into the gallery which serves as family pew.

Kneeling there in the shadow, unobserved by any, I watched the scene below.

Most of the *contadini* were present, for the Mass was said early to allow of their coming before the day's work began. Down through the dark woods, along the dim roads among the olives, they had made their way, and gathered there, simple labouring folk, to pray for "i poveri morti," to bring their offerings for the dead.

In the middle of the church stood a "memento mori," in the shape of a coffin covered with a heavy pall; a black banner embroidered with ghastly white skull and cross-bones was set up; even the priest wore a black velvet cope.

It was very dark and gloomy, and I shivered up in my gallery, feeling small and forlorn in a world where death and darkness reigned, and where, for the time, at least, the "Dies Irae" had drowned the Resurrection hymn.

Half-way through the Mass, the priest led the whole congregation, each member of it bearing flowers and a lighted candle, down the little road to the Campo Santo, the Holy Field, to join in the blessing of the graves. I saw the last yellow flicker fade, heard the weird chant die away, and was left alone with the deep silence which lingers in a place lately peopled, with the shadows which grew more ghostly as, through the windows, crept in the cold mysterious light of the dawn.

It was very still, very solemn. It was indeed "the Day of the Dead."

For us poor human creatures, with our fears, bereavements, and pathetic memories, few days can be more sweet and sorrowful than those of All Saints and All Souls; days of mourning and remembrance, but also of comfort and hope. "Our days would not be happier days could we forget," and the prayers and praises which then go up from every altar, the flowers laid among the crosses and grassy mounds in every graveyard, bear witness to the universal longing for some "Communion of Saints" and "Resurrection of the Dead."

In many parts of Europe they have a sweet and touching custom of lighting lamps upon the graves through the dark hours; perhaps symbolic of Christ, who is the Light of the Dead as of the Living; perhaps only an action prompted by the tender human love which longs to bring some touch of the old warmth and brightness of the family hearth to the one who lies alone in the darkness and cold. However it may be, it is a gentle thought, and on many a thousand graves on All Souls' night—on some, every night of the year—the small lights flicker like golden flowers, or shine through the gloom like quiet stars.

The church was full of cold light now; in silence the new day had been born. The tramp of many feet and a droning chant announced the return of the procession from the graveyard; they had, like the traditional sheep, all "come home," but left their flowers and lights behind them.

The service over, the congregation trooped out again; and when I followed from my gallery, most had already dispersed, and only a few lingered about the door.

It was a grey and sorrowful landscape, not yet warmed by the sun, which spread before me as I made my way back to the house. The garden was still mysterious in the cold light, with its sweet solemnity of dreaming flowers and drowsy trees. The voice of one bird shrilled through the silence and then was hushed, half afraid of the unresponsive quiet; as a child, calling in the night to the mother whom he thinks near, and suddenly realising himself alone, crouches in his cot, awed by the loneliness which wraps him round.

Far down on the plain, shrouded in mist, lay Florence, where the procession of carriages and black-robed figures to the cemeteries would soon be beginning, since all must visit their graves in the Campo Santo on All Souls' Day,—and well indeed may Florence keep the Feast of the Dead, for what city has greater dead to commemorate than she?

For days a busy trade had been carried on in memorials for the dead; whole shops had been devoted to wreaths and crosses and other devices. Yet too often, while the motive which prompts the observance is beautiful, the forms in which it finds expression are crude and tasteless; and it is strange that feelings so tender and pathetic can manifest themselves in objects so ugly as those often laid on graves. Gaudily dyed immortelles, twisted into a

lyre, anchor, or cross, are popular ; black everlastings being used to interweave some inscription, "Mia Madre," "ma sœur," "Mon cher mari," while sometimes a long crêpe streamer is attached, bearing a message in letters of gold.

Other favourite devices are tin plants (species generally unknown) sternly and rigidly erect in iron pots ; fantastic flowers, stars, and anchors, made of coloured beads threaded upon wire ; wreaths of tin leaves and blossoms, and bead frames holding portraits of the dead.

Certainly such things are hideous, strangely out of harmony with the spiritual meaning of the Festival and with the general fitness of things. Yet, if viewed with sympathetic eyes, they outrage our sense of beauty less and touch our hearts more, for these wreaths which the worthy tradesman or hard-working peasant carries with him on his pilgrimage to the cemetery, are comparatively costly, and bear witness, probably, to much self-denial for the sake of doing honour to the dead,—witness to the desire of those who can afford no monument, to leave yet some permanent token of affection upon the graves they love.

At Cologne, on All Souls' Eve, I have seen the streets near the station thronged with post-office carts loaded with great cardboard boxes such as milliners use, each containing a memorial in beads or tin or immortelles, going, probably, to some far-off cemetery where the "Liebe Mutter" or "Kleine kind" slept in a lonely but unforgotten grave.

In Switzerland, on these two days, every churchyard is crowded to overflowing with black figures, all bringing their offerings to the last resting-places of friends, and hardly a grave is without its decorations, its streamers, its lights. Around them flame the forests, gold and

scarlet; above, the pines clothe the mountain-sides with their motionless ranks; and beyond, the solemn snow-crowned peaks soar towards God. From the high slopes comes from time to time the tinkle of a cow-bell, the shout of a wood-cutter or herdsman; and, in the midst of this loveliness lies the little space of Holy Ground where the mountain people sleep their long sleep, and where the touching inscriptions, the ugly, pathetic offerings, the flimsy streamers of tulle or crêpe, prove that in the hearts of the living they still hold their places.

As I walked up and down the garden, recalling all this, the red cloud-flowers bloomed in the eastern sky like crimson roses after rain, and the sun, shooting his rays above the world's rim, flooded all the land with light.

Later in the day I went to visit the Campo Santo, and as I passed down the narrow road, the sun shone brightly upon the silvery olives with their gnarled trunks, upon the hedges of pink autumnal roses, and upon the white walls which shut in the space of Holy Ground.

The small enclosure with its green mounds, its tiny wooden crosses, its one or two more ambitious monuments, was empty, but the trampled grass bore witness to the passing of many feet. Almost every grave was gay with flowers, and here and there a candle which had not yet burnt itself out flickered pale in the noonday light.

There was only one new grave since the previous year, for these country-people are hardy and long-lived,—much to the exasperation of their priest, who covets his burial fees.

It lay in a corner of the cemetery, decked with many flowers and lights. It was that of a young man who had died of sunstroke while reaping under the blazing July

sun,—one of many who, during those scorching weeks, went out at dawn to their work, and, meeting death in the way suddenly, fell forward between the olives upon the golden corn which was bowing beneath their sickles, and, a few hours later, sons of the soil, were given back to the soil.

Poor boy! Gone in the fresh vigour of his youth, his warfare soon accomplished, he sleeps under the mound in his quiet corner, while the grass, eternally young, grows above him.

A sudden death,—to go out to work, strong in the splendour of the summer morning, and lie dead when the blessed cool of evening comes, and the stars shine out! Yet a sudden death need not always be a sad one, and who would desire a better place in which to die than the open field, beneath the olives, in sight of hills and woods and sky, passing swiftly, with little time for pain or fear?

Gentler thoughts of death, glimpses of a larger hope both for those already gone on the wind of time and for us who must follow, came to me in the Campo Santo than had come in the dark church gallery in sight of cross-bones and skull. Under the open sky it seems easier to think calmly, hopefully, of “our Sister Death,” to look on to the sure day when the great Resurrection Angel shall come.

As I sat there, the voices of the contadini rose, softened by distance, from the vineyards below; and, clear and shrill above the rest, a little lad shouted one of the old “stornelli” dear to the Tuscan peasant’s heart. The dead, who had been the centre of all hearts in the early morning, were already half forgotten in the pressing occupations of the living, as their small, pathetic tapers,

which had shone so bravely in the dark before the dawn, were blotted out by the full light of day.

Yet if a little crowded out of the thoughts of men, they were yet safe in the heart of God, who does not forget; and if the prayers for them were granted, and "Light perpetual" indeed shone upon their souls, it was but a small matter that the candles of men burned down quickly and the quiet graves lay untended for another year.

XX

IN AND OUT OF THE CHURCHES

THE first impression of the traveller on his arrival in Italy must surely be that he has reached the land of Saints; that here, if anywhere, dwell the people of God. From morning till night he hears the pealing of unwearied bells, calling to Matins, Lauds and Vespers; punctuating work and rest alike with the Ave Maria. On every side the open doors of cool, spacious churches invite him to enter and pray in some quiet chapel before crucifix or saint. At every street corner the face of Mary Virgin looks down, as she holds out, before the eyes of all passers, the Holy Child; bunches of flowers on the ledge show that the people do not forget her, and at night dim oil-lamps burn before her, so that even in the darkness men may not miss that silent appeal. Everywhere he meets priests, monks, friars, Sisters of Charity. In the shops and workrooms, where his business takes him, he sees a light burning before some holy picture, Madonna or patron saint. In the country he finds sacred images in niches in the walls of the peasant-houses, and shrines or crosses bearing the instruments of the Passion, rudely shaped by rustic hands, standing among the olives and cypresses along the winding roads. Everywhere the Gospel story is pictured before the eyes of the people. And on the great Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, he may

still read the Divine Monogram set up in 1529. For in that year, the city, in a meeting of the Great Council, at which 1100 votes were registered, chose, disdaining all other sovereigns, Jesus Christ as her King in perpetuity, and carved the inscription "Rex Populi Florentini," which simple avowal was afterwards changed—perhaps by order of the Medici—to one of more general application, "Rex regum et Dominus dominantium," which stands to-day above the central door.

Surely these are irrefutable proofs, both ancient and modern, of a religious people; and yet, on closer acquaintance, one begins to doubt whether, partly owing to the antagonism between the Quirinal and the Vatican, partly for other reasons, of which the discussion would be here misplaced, this spiritual fig-tree bears fruit in any proportion to its leaves.

Yet although I care little for the services in the churches,—where the priests gabble the beautiful old Latin, and punctuate a Credo or Sanctus by spitting with precision into the box of sawdust set beside the altar for their use,—for the churches themselves I care much.

I love to wander among them, especially in the early mornings when the pale sunbeams stream in through the painted windows, and, in the cold light, a few figures gather round some side-altar for the first Mass; or in the evenings, when they are aglow with a golden radiance; or in the winter twilight, when the cavernous interiors are dark save for a few candles and the dim flicker of the sanctuary lamps. At such times they seem sweeter, more sacred, relieved of the presence of the ubiquitous tourist with his guide-book and Kodak; and, realising them as homes of an ancient faith, imagination peoples

them with the figures of a past day, and the dreams of a golden age,—never perhaps to be.

Nor do I love the churches only for their architectural interest, and the sweetness of the radiant faces which look down from fresco or altar-piece; for the historic interest of the scenes which have passed in them, and the memory of the great men lying buried in their altar tombs and under broad marbles in the aisles. All these things charm me; they are a perpetually springing fountain of delight and interest. But there is another attraction for me in the churches, and that is in the people who pass in and out of them, in the pathetic or joyous glimpses one catches on faces veiled at other times by a conventional calm, but from which all disguise is cast before the altar where Christ dwells in the Sacrament, or the niche from which the Virgin looks down with tender eyes.

Whatever errors may have gathered about the Roman Church, whatever slackness may have crept into her life and teaching, these buildings have been, for hundreds of years, the people's sanctuaries. Through centuries they have been the caskets containing Divine mysteries; their air has been stirred so often by prayer and worship, that an atmosphere of devotion yet lingers in them. Even for the unbeliever, the stranger within spiritual gates, they are places of happy quietude and peace.

Outside is the busy street-life, the noise of motors and carriages. At the door is the inevitable beggar, the blind man, or cripple, or woman nursing a baby, with their whining appeal, "Un centesimo, per l'amor di Dio": some of whom, I am sure, prefer to be door-keepers in the house of the Lord than to dwell in the

tents of the industrious, supported by the work of their own hands. But as one drops the heavy leathern curtain which guards the door of all Italian churches, it falls as a defence, and one enters upon a holy place.

Some of these churches have, it is true, been put to strange and most unholy uses. The Pazzi chose the choir of the Duomo for their attempted assassination of the Medici brothers at the elevation of the Host. It was significant that even the worst ruffians hired to do the work hesitated a trifle at the sacrilege, and, though ready to kill a dozen if need were, preferred to do it in some less hallowed place. But their qualms were quieted by finding, as example, a priest who, from long experience, had lost all reverence, and was as ready to knife his man at the altar as in some dark alley or cut-throat court. In the old Church of Santo Stefano, the Amidei, furious at the insult to their family offered by young Buondelmonte, who had been pledged to marry a daughter of the house and had instead chosen another bride, gathered their relations at midnight to meditate revenge. It must have been a strange scene, the dark church, the red glare of torches, the fierce faces, as Schiatta Uberti proposed to stab the treacherous bridegroom in the face till none should dare to behold what had once been so fair; and Mosca Lamberti answered sternly that he who only wounded had best think first to dig a grave which should be his own refuge, concluding with the ominous words which have passed into a proverb, "Cosa fatta, capo ha!" In San Jacopo, the little church of which the chancel wall is washed by the Arno, the nobles, led by Berto Frescobaldi, whose palace was—and is—hard by, met in 1293 to protest against their exclusion from the Government by the popular party

under Giano della Bella, and vowed to resort to arms rather than submit.

So one might go on through a long list of sacrilegious deeds and vows enacted in the Florentine churches. But these have passed and left no traces; the buildings, very peaceful in their age, give no witness of the grim companies they have housed.

There is one thing which strikes English eyes immediately in Italian churches: the people are at home there; a church is, to them, not a ceremonious temple, but the Father's house. Perhaps they are too much at home; familiarity has had its proverbial effect, and that is why there is so little reverence. But if there is, on the one hand, little reverence, there is, on the other, no false shame. No one is troubled by another's notice; each is free to stand or kneel, to walk or sit, as he please. There are no reserved pews, no superior places; all are equal and unabashed in the house of God. Men and women alike, who have turned in, perhaps, for a moment from the street, with tools or bundles, sign themselves with holy water and make their genuflexion to the altar; and even tiny children are taught never to pass the altar without making their funny little courtesy to the Holy Place.

One spring evening I saw a touching instance of childish devotion as I sat in the old church of Or San Michele, which Arnolfo and Taddeo Gaddi built as a corn-market, before, in 1348—out of gratitude to a miracle-working Madonna hung there—it was changed into a church.

It was six o'clock. The benediction had been given. It was still light outside, but the church was dark save for a few candles and the faint light which

crept in through the massive tracery and dim stained glass of the windows. The noise of traffic came, dulled by the thickness of the walls, from the adjoining "Stocking-makers'" street.

On a pillar in the middle of the church hung a picture, a common oleograph of St. Anthony of Padua, holding in his arms the Holy Child. Before it, by way of altar, was a small table and a wooden stool. Several candles burned upon the table, and a number of flowers—all kinds and colours mixed together—had been set there in ugly glass and china pots.

Presently the stillness of the church was broken by the patter of small booted feet, and three children appeared, girls of nine or ten, each holding a bunch of flowers, a little wilted from being clasped in small hot hands. Standing on tiptoe, they squeezed their flowers into the vases; then, kneeling in a tight row, their three tam-o'-shanter caps just reaching the top of the altar, they said their prayer to the other Child, who smiled down from above. When they had finished, they got up, kissed the ledge of the altar, and, reaching up as best they might, each one pressed a fervent kiss on the picture frame, crossed herself, dropped a little courtesy, and trotted off again into the street.

It was a sweet little episode,—children coming to visit, with flowers, the Holy Child,—and such a visit could not but be pleasing to One who invited all children of every race and time to come to Him.

One other evening, passing along the brightly-lit Tornabuoni, I heard the sound of singing, and turned into the Church of Sta. Trinità, one of the loveliest—in fact one of the few really lovely—in Florence. It was

nearly dark inside, for only a few candles, shining like tranquil stars across the gloom, cast a soft yellow radiance on the old stone pillars and frescoed walls; while the pillars, rising to the pointed arches, almost lost themselves in a mysterious twilight.

A Lent Service of the Stations of the Cross was in progress. The priest, preceded by an acolyte bearing a large wooden cross with the emblems of the Passion, moved in procession round the church, followed by the choir and a throng of people. Under each "Station" they paused; the people knelt, the cross was set up, and a brief Office said and sung.

The effect of the dark kneeling figures, the white-robed priest and boys, the great upraised cross, the monotonous chanting, the yellow light falling softly on the upturned faces, was profoundly impressive,—but there was something which struck me even more.

In a dim side-chapel, remote from all the rest, an old man was kneeling on a bench with his back to the church, and his face pressed close to the cold wall, praying,—or was he really praying, or only kneeling there, numbed by some great sorrow or some unattainable desire? I did not see his face, but there was a peculiar pathos in the bowed white head and bent shoulders, and I hope he found a little comfort in the quietness, even if he did not receive the boon he begged.

Yes, it is these little episodes which touch me more profoundly than the elaborate ritual, simply because they impress me as more sincere.

But even if in these Italian churches there is often much irreverence, if one could well dispense with the multiplied figures of the saints and the paper flowers, they are yet the Homes of an ancient Faith, which must, some

day, be it now or a thousand years hence, purify herself of error, since she is ever part of that Holy Catholic Church which Christ Himself founded, and against which He has declared the gates of hell shall not prevail.

And until that day come? Well! though the fool may say in his heart there is no GOD, the world is really full of prayer, articulate or inarticulate, and everywhere goes up, night and day, conscious or unconscious, the cry of the finite to the Infinite, the appeal of the human to the Divine.

XXI

AT THE SHRINE OF MADONNA

THE Order of the "Servants of Mary" was founded long ago by seven wealthy Florentines of the Laudesi Brotherhood, a confraternity vowed to sing the praises of the Virgin. The devout seven at first retired to the wilds of Monte Senario, but later, they or their followers returned to Florence, and built, little by little, the Church of the Santissima Annunziata, where yearly the feast of their Patroness is kept with great pomp and splendour, and where I found myself, with a vast crowd of the faithful, one 25th of March.

As this church of the Servites contains one of the most famous miracle pictures in Tuscany, an "Annunciation" painted, they say, by the hands of angels, pilgrims from all the country round crowd to it, as well as half the population of Florence, and it was a typical example of an Italian church festival in modern time.

The scene in the old Piazza, upon which the Della Robbia babies looked down from their places on the Loggia of the Foundling Hospital, was such, granting differences in costume, as Romola herself must have seen at this same feast five hundred years before.

The Square, and even the approach to it through the street of the Servites, was crowded and noisy, gay under the bright shining of the March sun. Rows of little

booths had been erected for the sale of oranges, sweets, cheap toys, and aniseed biscuits, around which the people thronged, chaffering over and cheapening the goods. Men were shouting rosaries for sale, two soldi each, and a blessing included; old crones offered candles and small religious prints; all the cripples in the town seemed to have gathered on the steps and under the portico, clamouring for alms; the pilgrims, who during the two preceding days had poured into the city in thousands, were gazing around them in amazement, bewildered by such noise and movement and excitement, after the quiet of the farmhouse among the olives, or the old "castello" in the hills.

By dint of steady pushing and much patience I edged my way through the cloisters, decorated with green wreaths and red curtains, and at last reached a good place beside the chancel rails.

The church was crowded. Every arch was draped with crimson curtains bordered with gold and silver tinsel and heavy fringe. Innumerable wax candles burned in cut-glass chandeliers. Masses were going on simultaneously in many side-chapels, and every few minutes the Sanctus bell was heard.

At the High Altar many priests were celebrating, with elaborate ritual and singing, with many lights, gorgeous vestments and much incense, the mystery of the Mass. The sun came in, a little subdued by cotton blinds, through the white glass of the clerestory windows, and paled the candle flames.

The congregation, with the free-and-easy manners of Italians in church, moved about all the time, staring, talking, criticising. Young men chatted together audibly, with an appraising eye upon the pretty girls; groups of

soldiers pushed and whispered; women examined each other's dresses; two children, brought by their respective mothers, made friends in shrill voices over a stodgy bun from which they bit in turn; babies cried; chairs scraped noisily; and, looking round on the congregation, one could not but think that very few were worshippers, so irreverent were their attitudes, so careless and indifferent their wandering eyes.

The pilgrims, simple folk from the mountains or the country, seemed the only ones to whom the scene made any religious appeal, the only ones intent on prayer or praise. Sunburnt men, roughened by a lifetime's exposure to sun and wind, gazed up wonderingly at the splendour of the cut-glass and curtains, the vestments and lights. What to me seemed tawdry and theatrical must have been magnificent in their eyes, accustomed to the bareness of some homely country church. Old women, brown and withered, with dark sunken eyes, and gay red and orange handkerchiefs on their heads, poured out prayers with fast-moving lips to the miracle-working Mother of Sorrows, fumbling with skinny, toil-worn fingers over their rosary beads;—pious old souls, come on pilgrimage to make their petitions to the "Santissima," who, being herself a woman, knows the pains which only women suffer, understands and pities the anxieties and sorrows of a woman's heart.

The air was close and heavy with incense and garlic,—the latter being an odour in regard to which everyone's feelings are either hot or cold. I know that the children of Israel, unwearied grumblers as they were, sighed for the onions and garlic of Egypt, and murmured against Moses because he did not provide them with those nutritious vegetables in the wilderness; and, judging from

all the Italian religious ceremonies I have ever attended, a host of Italian pilgrims would probably sigh for precisely the same thing. Experienced cooks say that dishes should have only a bowing acquaintance with it; that as a flavouring it should be a hint which never becomes a certainty. But the lower classes in Italy and the garlic-tribe are on terms of terrible intimacy, which must always form a little rift in my friendship with them, as, personally, I prefer to cut it dead.

It was almost impossible to get near the Shrine of the Madonna, so dense was the crowd of her worshippers, so eager was everyone for a glimpse of the fresco which is only uncovered now at the yearly feast, though in olden days it was also exposed when any of the Grand-Ducal family was menaced with death.

It is a very beautiful Annunciation, painted upon the west wall. In front, to enclose it, a chapel has been built, and all around hang votive gifts. Silver hearts, limbs, and other tokens of gratitude are offered in such numbers that from time to time they are taken from the hanging glass cases to make room for the new ones ever arriving, and melted down into more silver lamps for the church; a wise plan for putting the gifts—which, however sincere the affection which prompts them, are tawdry and unfitting the dignity of the shrine—to worthy use.

Hung upon the adjoining walls are many other offerings: a large mother-o'-pearl ship set on a black velvet background, and framed in gold, from the seafaring people of Viareggio, sent in gratitude to the "Star of the Sea"; artlessly tragic pictures commemorating the miraculous intervention in danger, or the healing in illness, of "Mary Virgin,"—for among the people there yet lives a profound belief in miracles, as this little gallery testifies.

Here are brightly coloured drawings of men being run over by fiery steeds, or of children falling into deep rivers. In one a butt of wine rolls upon a man, the picture being completed by realistic blood splashes; in another is a sick person in bed, mottled with large round spots suggestive of small-pox or the plague,—and in each picture the Virgin, from a cloud, or a little throne poised in heaven, smiles down serenely upon the person whom it was her pleasure to save. There are small gilt frames, also, enclosing flowers painted in thin water-colours or embroidered in crewels or silk. One of these is an offering from an old woman who at eighty years of age fell from a fourth-floor window and was uninjured,—truly a miracle! All bear touching little inscriptions, proving them to be tokens of affection, perhaps from those too poor to buy any offering, who had therefore with their own hands worked or painted these quaint little flowers to offer to the “Rose of the World.”

Among the crowd who thronged the shrine to make their requests to Madonna on her festal day was a poor flower-seller. I had heard him earlier, in the streets, pleading with the passers to buy his flowers, as his little children at home were hungry, and he had nothing to give them. But his violet bunches were small and wilted; they compared badly with the masses of fresh roses and carnations which were being offered on every side, and no one stopped to buy.

I saw him work his way forward, set his basket down, and, kneeling, pray very earnestly, and knew, as well as if I could hear the prayer, that it was that familiar petition which the Mother of Sorrows must hear so often, “a little bread, give us this day our daily bread.” Then he rose, kissed—since he could not reach the fresco—the copy of

it on the alms-box, at least a dozen times, Virgin and angel alternately, obviously in fulfilment of some vow.

When he went away I followed him out.

The violets were certainly very withered, but—he had appealed at the shrine with such faith and devotion! Was I wrong to confirm belief in a miraculous Madonna?—for nothing less than a miracle did he see in this prompt emptying of his basket.

Ah, well! even if Madonna on the church wall did not really deserve the thanks he hastened back to give her, there is little doubt that earnest prayer always finds its way up to some pitiful and unseen Power; and though, in the eyes of the orthodox, I may have been encouraging idolatry, I remember a day long ago in Cana when the Great Miracle-Worker did not refuse a request which reached Him through His Mother;—and in any case, it can never be a very grave error to give the hungry to eat.

XXII

A SERMON

THE sermon in Italian churches plays a far less important part than in English, not being a regular and indispensable part of the Sunday routine, but generally reserved for special feasts and seasons, of which the favourite is Lent.

During the weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter, courses are preached in all the churches,—in the principal ones daily,—and the preachers are usually members of one of the great religious Orders, the Dominicans being specially in request.

It was nearly six o'clock on a March evening when, attracted by the streams of people entering, I turned into the Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella. The light inside the building was already growing dim, and seemed the more so owing to the black, tent-like canopy which had been erected above the nave, midway between the ground and the vaulted roof, to concentrate the sound, and which had the gloomy effect of a pall extended above the people's heads. The last light of the setting sun, creeping in through the lancet windows of the clerestory, touched the dust and lingering mist of incense in the air until it glowed like golden haze; and, stealing into side-chapels, caught the gold of old pictures, and flushed the stone mouldings and painted glass.

The scene was a striking one, for a crowd of people had collected,—not the ordered rows of an English congregation, but an ever-growing throng, gathered around the pulpit, to which all faces were turned.

There were no pews. Such as wished to do so hired chairs at a penny each from the sacristan, who presided, in a soiled white ephod, over a great stack of them. Those who had thus provided themselves set their chairs in an ever-widening circle; many had seated themselves on the steps of confessionals or of side-altars and chapels; a large majority of the hearers stood the whole hour through.

Presently the tinkling of a hand-bell was heard approaching from the sacristy, and the crowd opened to make way as the preacher passed along with bowed head and folded hands, preceded by an acolyte who was responsible for the ringing of the bell.

This small boy mounted the pulpit-stair, held open the wooden door, shut it with a snap upon the preacher, and then seated himself upon the topmost step to wait.

The great pulpit, which Brunelleschi designed, was set high against a pillar. From it projected—a favourite addition to Italian pulpits—an arm holding up a crucifix, a symbol that the preacher's mission is to display "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" before the people's eyes.

The preacher was a Dominican; one of that Order of the "Dogs of the Lord," founded by St. Dominic to refute heresy and teach truth,—an end to which the Brotherhood is still trained.

He was a tall man, with close-cut grey hair, and a wonderful face: thin almost to emaciation, with a beautiful and ascetic mouth, and clear eyes which wandered over his hearers with a look at once tender and stern.

His very presence seemed to dominate the people before he opened his lips, and there was a great silence as he stood there in his picturesque black-and-white dress, and, without a single note, spoke with all the eloquence of one who has added the art of oratory to intense personal fascination, deep spiritual insight, and high intellectual gifts.

He was listened to with profound attention. No one slept or yawned. The sermon was not, as it seems at times to be considered in English churches, a necessary evil, an integral part of a long and tedious service, a quiet space in which to meditate on the business of the coming week. It was an event complete in itself; it was that alone which had brought the people there.

At the close of each division or "head" of his sermon, the preacher sat down on a chair in the back of the pulpit to rest for a few moments, and instantly a buzz of comment, commendation and applause, arose, almost as if in a theatre, and curiously unlike the impassive calm of an English congregation while undergoing spiritual instruction or reproof.

The church grew gradually dark. The pale Christ loomed ever more faintly from the Rood above the High Altar, and finally disappeared. There was no illumination; the few flickering candles in far-off chapels only accentuated the gloom. The faces of the people faded. The Dominican in his high pulpit beneath the black awning was wrapped in shadow which one tried in vain to penetrate: he had faded; his personality was lost; the man was merged in the message; he was nothing but a voice crying across the wilderness of men's lives. The air was charged with emotions; and though the face of the speaker was hidden from the hearers, as the faces of the

hearers from the preacher, spirit spoke to spirit across the gulf.

The sermon had lasted quite an hour when the congregation broke up, yet no one showed impatience to be gone.

The scene was both picturesque and impressive. The dark, moving figures might have been of any period, so completely did the darkness veil all signs of modernity. One was back in the Middle Ages, in the passionate, fervent life of the Age of Faith. These were, surely, the old Florentines,—who dwell as a rule above canopied tombs and on frescoed walls,—dispersing after the preaching of Peter Martyr or Savonarola, or some Dominican of a long-past day?

It was with a curious sense of unreality that I made my way out into the Piazza, and, half-disappointed, saw the illusion dispelled and the shadowy figures resolve themselves, one by one, beneath the gas-lamps, into a modern crowd.

Dissatisfied, I turned back into the dark church, where a very few lingered, and made my way up to the High Altar, and on, by some subtle impulse, to the chapel which holds that great Crucifix which Brunelleschi carved.

The steady glow of the sanctuary lamp fell upon it but faintly; it revealed more clearly another face below—that of the preacher, who, with cowl half thrown back, knelt at its foot. Ten minutes ago he had swayed the hearts of hundreds, the wind of his eloquence had blown where he would. Now, in the moment of self-abasement and utter dejection which follows upon strong spiritual emotion and exaltation, he was pouring out all his unworthiness in this dim, and as he believed, deserted place.

I had played the part of eavesdropper all unwittingly.

Turning, I crept down the now empty church, very softly, that he might not perceive my intrusion, and so out into the Square, turning more than once to look at the great pile which held in its silence those two figures face to face,—the One looking down with grave, kind eyes from the ancient crucifix, the other gazing up in faith and penitence,—beneath the yellow flower of the sanctuary lamp.

NOTE.—The preacher whose personality is here described was a French Dominican, giving a course of Lent addresses in Sta. Trinità. The Italian Dominican Fathers whom I have heard in Santa Maria Novella have been, while eloquent men, less striking, and perhaps less representative of their Order, than he, so that I have taken the liberty of transposing the greater preacher to the greater church.

XXIII

OLD MADONNAS

It was the month of Mary. Before every altar of the Madonna in church or chapel, before her picture in private oratory or shop, under the shrines in the walls of the narrow, twisting streets, or along the white, olive-bordered country roads, flowers were set for the Rose of the World; prayers went up to the Lady of Pity; votive lights burned in honour of the Queen of Angels; reverent eyes were raised to the Mother of God.

The Italians love "Mary Virgin." She reigns in the hearts of all good Catholics. And although May is the month especially sacred to her, she has other festivals; for is she not the "Santissima Annunziata," and does not every convent break out into an illumination of tiny lanterns on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, although the birth of the "Gesùlino" at Christmas rouses them to no such demonstration of artless joy?

Almost every home, shop, or workroom possesses a plaster statuette or coloured print of Our Lady, a domestic shrine before which a lamp burns day and night. Children wear about their necks, sleeping or waking, a "Madonnina"; and few men and women, even the least devout, are without the little medal of gold or bronze on which her image is stamped.

She is the intercessor, consoler, and protector of her

people. Mariners before setting out on a voyage used to pray to the "Stella Maris" to guide them across the pathless fields of green water; travellers to entreat the companionship of her who journeyed into Egypt for the safety of the Young Child; her image looks down from the street corners; and, that none may forget her, the bells three times a day ring out the Ave Maria, the music of the Angelic Salutation chiming across life's common duties in memory of her who has made obedient service for ever honourable, since she was herself the *Ancilla Domini*, the meek handmaid of the Lord.

Whatever errors may gather around the cult of the Madonna,—and that they are many and grave is not to be denied;—however great the sin of venerating the creature above the Creator, of giving to the Girl-Mother the worship which should be reserved for God whom she bore,—there is much in this exaltation of Womanhood which is beautiful, and which we, of an alien faith, can ill afford to scorn.

The idea of a Mother-goddess has always found a place in the hearts of men. The Egyptians worshipped Isis, who nursed Horus; the Assyrians adored "the moonè Ashtaroth, Queen and Mother both"; Brutus, in obedience to the oracle which promised the inheritance to him who should first kiss his mother, stumbled as he sprang from the vessel, and kissed the warm red earth, the Universal Mother of whom we, and all God's creatures, are born and fed; she who, if we will submit to her influence, lays upon our hearts cool hands which bring rest and healing, and upon whose breast all her children will some day sleep.

The reaction in England has been so violent that to some virulent Protestants almost the name of Mary, the

Maiden Mother, is anathema ; and there are not lacking aggrieved parishioners to raise the war-cry of "Popery" over the singing of a simple hymn. But this is to our loss, for is she not for ever, after the "Padre, Figliuolo e Spirito Santo," the most adorable of all beings? She is pure and pitiful, the perfect woman, the ideal mother. She claims nothing for herself; and although, in the moment of her exaltation, she sings of herself as the Handmaid of the Lord whom all generations shall call blessed, she points, in the only words of instruction recorded of her, from herself to her Son,—"*Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it.*"

Eastern tradition ascribes to St. Luke the first portrait of the Blessed Virgin; and however unfounded this may be in connection with one art, it is eternally true with reference to another; for whether or no he painted her with the brush, it is to his pen that we owe the loveliest presentment of her character and the sweetest picture of her life.

Was it, one wonders, from her own lips he learned what none but herself could know; or did she, in the quiet of St. John's home, dwelling upon every detail of her great joy and sorrow, tell these details, so mysterious in their awe and gladness, to the adopted son, and was it he who told the Evangelist?

Certain it is that, whether or not St. Luke were the first to paint her, the face of Mary Virgin, with its tender mouth and melancholy, loving eyes, has since been the inspiration of a thousand poets and painters of every age and land.

A large proportion of the most beautiful pictures in every gallery represent Madonna in one of the seven glad or sorrowful Mysteries, and to consider them with the

sternly orthodox as *merely* superstitions, or with the æsthetic as *merely* artistic, is in either case to appreciate but half their value, to feel but half their charm; for that worship of the Mother of God of which these pictures are the outcome, has done much for the exaltation of woman, for the raising of the ideals of her place and mission; and to this influence women owe their improved position, their added powers, to-day.

That men should worship her *with* her Son resulted naturally enough from the adoration of the Baby, "Figlio dolce e piacente; Nostro dolce Fratellino." "Il gran piccolino Gesù nostro diletto," as, with the caressing diminutives in which the Italian language is so rich, the old monkish writers loved to call Him; dwelling tenderly, though they might never themselves know the joy of fatherhood, upon the thought of the small fragile body; and realising that a baby without his mother is a pathetic little figure, though He be God from everlasting; and that an infant Prince, though He receive the homage of angels, can reign from no worthier throne than His Mother's knee.

It was not, however, till nearly the end of the tenth century that the Virgin-Mother began to be venerated apart from her Divine Son, and that the custom arose of adding the Angelic Salutation to the Lord's Prayer,—a form which a century later had been adopted into the Office of the Church. The title of Our Lady,—“Notre Dame,” “Madonna,” “Unser liebe Frau,”—came into general use in the days of chivalry, when nobles were proud to enroll themselves as her true knights, when the French Servites gloried to be called “Les esclaves de Marie,” and in honour of her purity the robes of the Cistercians were white.

Those mediæval days were the time of her greatest triumph. Cathedrals and churches, chapels and shrines, rose everywhere in her name. Dante sang of her as "Ennobler of human nature"; Petrarch dreamed of her as crowned with stars; Chaucer implored her aid—

"Thou maid and mother, daughter of thy Son,
Thou wel of mercy, sinful soules cure."

The sweetness and splendour of her titles, *Rosa mystica*, *Vergine Madre*, *Stella Matutina*, *Stella non erratica*, *Regina Coeli*, rise ever higher and higher, until one can follow the glorious thoughts no farther; it is like watching the morning star lose itself in the brightness of the perfect day.

One May evening, in the great Dominican Church of Santa Maria Novella, I saw a striking instance of the two points of view from which she is regarded in modern days.

Vespers were over; the congregation had dispersed, but a few still knelt before the altar of the Virgin, where the tapers were being put out. The light in the nave was growing a little dim, but the level sunbeams shot, arrow-like, through the jewelled windows of the clerestory, and painted their saints and angels in gold and crimson upon the stone of the opposite wall.

In the raised chapel of the south transept six great candles burned before Cimabue's majestic Blue Madonna, casting a soft radiance upon the solemn face, the stately form, the gold of background and frame. It was a good opportunity for studying a picture of which the light, and its own sombre tone, seldom permit a good view, and I sat down in a quiet corner to look and think.

It is a noble picture; the work of an artist who, if not

yet free from the restraining bands of Byzantine tradition, was yet striving towards movement, freedom of conception, and truth of expression; who softened by a touch of nature the stiffness which convention demanded in religious art, and whose Madonna, despite her gaunt face and almond eyes, shows a tiny hint of sweetness and tenderness, as when the brown, scented buds of the callycanthus burst through the hard branches with the first breath of spring.

Down in the nave the twilight deepened; a few lights gleamed from distant altars; a few dark figures went by to the confessionals; a few Dominicans moved to and fro in their picturesque black-and-white dress. An open door gave a glimpse of the green cloister, where the sunset glow still lingered on the turf and pink roses, and where a bird sang divinely in its safe retreat. From a chapel out of sight came the voice of a priest in monotonous chant, and again and again the people's answering cry, "Ora pro nobis." From time to time a burst of organ music filled the church.

A step upon the stone stairs recalled me abruptly from vague musings over the past to the realities of the present, and the ruddy face and robust, black-coated form of an English curate were presented to my ungratified eyes. He carried a flaming Baedeker, which he now consulted, and, prompted by what it told him, turned his attention to the picture above the altar.

As a painting it made little impression upon him; the consideration which he gave it was too superficial to produce emotion; it probably, at this cursory glance, struck him as remarkably ugly; but, having been informed by his guide-book that it was valuable, he had entered the chapel; he would then go away and say that he had

“seen” Cimabue’s Blue Madonna,—always supposing it to be by Cimabue and not by Duccio or somebody else.

For my part, I love the story of the Merry Suburb, the jubilant city, the triumphant painter, the glad procession which streamed into the great church, too well to resign the old tradition, which is true in spirit if not in fact, and characteristic of the century if not conclusively certain of the man.

When Charles of Anjou paid his visit to the artist’s bottega, when the people blew their trumpets and hung garlands across the street and strewed the way with flowers, they were welcoming, not merely a new altar-piece for the Dominicans, but the forerunner of the Renaissance, and rejoiced because the “Desire of Nations,” the Beautiful, was born once more of dreams and vision and much patience, before the eyes of men.

The Borgo Allegri stands to this day; and if some choose to call my Cimabue Duccio or Margaritone, it troubles me not a whit. Shakespeare or Bacon, Duccio or Cimabue, what matter? The souls of men live in their works, and it is their souls and works which concern me, far more than the knowledge that one particular name belonged to a tenantless body, long since returned to dust in some Campo Santo or ancient church. “Cache ta vie et répand ton esprit,” wrote Victor Hugo, and this was what the majority of these old painters, voluntarily or involuntarily, did. They went through life known by chance titles, taken from the masters under whom they worked, from their native villages, or their personal qualities or defects; of humble birth, most of them, and rich only in genius and in dreams. But their works yet witness for them, and though names be blown away like leaves on the wind of time, a high title, and more endur-

ing, awaits those who add to the sum of the world's beauty, for "they shall be named priests of the Lord; men shall call them the ministers of our God."

To return, however, to my curate.

At the Divine Mother herself, he looked a little distrustfully though without hostility; but the candles burning in her honour outraged his orthodoxy to a grievous extent. In the galleries he could look at such pictures with the same composure as at any other domestic scene. No one, of course, denied that the Saviour of the World was born of a woman; indeed, he frankly admitted as much daily in the Apostles' Creed; but that men should burn candles before her, that an altar should be set below her image for the encouragement of idolatry,—*No*, these things he could not countenance! His disapproval was written large upon his ingenuous red face; he cast a final hostile glance at the tapers, pursed up his lips, shut his guide-book with a snap, and clattered down the stone steps. I breathed a sigh of relief. He was doubtless an excellent young man, and I do not deny that his disapproval was entirely orthodox, but in those surroundings he was an offence to me, and I was very glad that he had gone away.

There was silence for a few minutes; and then another step upon the stair. A girl this time, probably a dress-maker or servant, for she was bareheaded, and carried a large bundle under her arm.

Laying this down, she kneeled upon the altar step, and gazed up at the picture, her lips moving. The candle-light fell upon the upturned, oval face, a little pinched and pale; upon the waves of black hair and the great dark eyes, which were in harmony with the wistful droop of the mouth.

Why had she sought out this old, stiff Madonna in the

dark chapel, instead of one of the pink-faced, prettily-dressed figures in the church below, whose popularity was evidenced by the profusion of their flowers and lights and silver hearts?

Was the black dress a sign of bereavement, and was that the story she was pouring out to the pitiful Mother of God? Or was it that she found herself far from home, alone in a great city, and wanted her mother; and, if not her own, some other mother's tenderness, counsel and care? Or was she, young as she was, to know all the joy and suffering of women, the burden and the triumph, and was that why she appealed to the woman's heart, which had known, also, the awe and gladness of a baby at her breast? Perhaps it was a sadder story; I cannot say. I only know that the dress was dark, the white, pleading face very earnest, and that more than one large tear splashed down upon the dusty floor.

She rose at last, crossed herself, laid a bunch of violets below the picture, and, leaning forward, kissed the frame. Then took up her bundle, and, with one last look, went away down the steps.

Ah, Madonna, you had indeed varied visitors at your shrine that evening! What diverse impressions and feelings must the two have carried away. And how much happier are you, with your candles and flowers in your dim chapel, than your many sisters, torn from their seclusion, and set in rows in the great bright galleries, where only the critical eyes of strangers rest upon them, and where no one burns candles in their honour, nor lays violets at their shrine.

There is an intense fascination about these old, stiff Madonnas, with their sloping eyes, and grave faces and side-long gaze; not because they are beautiful, but

because they were born of faith and vision, and have been consecrated by centuries of prayer. To condemn them as ugly is no less crude a judgment than to praise them as fair. They are neither the one nor the other, but they have a value and poetry of their own, and to form any just conception of their merit they should be seen in special surroundings, or at least considered from a special point of view.

“Look once if what you want is beauty, look twice if what you want is true perception,” says a French writer; and as he who would really know the life of the past, must know the places, scenes and people, with no sketchy and superficial knowledge, so by long study, by much knocking at the door of the Interpreter, we attain to vital realisation, and to the close intimacy of which love is born.

Artistically these pictures belong to an age when the tree of beauty, long barren, put forth in them its first trembling buds, before the unfolding of those flowers which bloom still in unfading loveliness in gallery and church. The mysterious charm of dawn, the joy of re-awakening, the magic of the spring, yet linger in early Florentine Art. It has a quality which disarms criticism, and, as a recent writer has said, in unforgettable phrase, “It strokes the heart.”¹

Those old Florentine painters were the explorers who set sail in search of the El Dorado of beauty, the Land of Heart's Desire. In their work there is the freshness of those who, if they know disappointment, do not know disillusion. There is the brave endeavour, the patient feeling after those right methods which should bring their descendants, if not themselves, into an undiscovered land.

¹ Maurice Hewlett.

There is a naïve charm in their very awkwardness; they possess a devout sincerity, and an intangible something which most modern painters, for all their achievements of tone and technique, pitifully miss.

Spiritually, too, these old pictures must be considered from the point of view of that mediæval world for which they were painted.

No thoughtful person can fail to feel something profoundly touching in the faded Madonnas which, having outlived the generations by whom they were loved and revered, are set on the gallery walls to be stared at by crowds of tourists, who know little and care less about their sweet old legends, and, viewing them with the cold, appraising eyes of criticism, see in them at best but the basis of a later school.

Their days of pomp and pageantry are over; no one offers them silver hearts now, nor burns tapers in their honour; and there is something wistful in the gaze of their half-closed, long-lidded eyes, which have looked down upon so many faces, fierce with passion or illuminated with prayer and dreams.

True, they have not the grace of Raphael's blooming virgins, nor the pathetic loveliness of Botticelli's Madonna, who is ever the "Mater Dolorosa," whether she clasp the Holy Child, a warm soft baby, in her arms; or, in the moment of her supreme exaltation, dancing angels strew roses about her who is herself the Mystic Rose.

Such perfections were yet far ahead.

"Credette Cimabue nella pittura,
Tener lo campo, ed ora ha Giotto il grido,
Si che la fama di colui oscura."

It is the old story; "He must increase, but I must

decrease ;” and the morning star fades before the rising of a greater light.

These old Madonnas have, however, a touching value, even an austere beauty, of their own, for those who care to conjure up their past, to recall their history before they were torn from their homes on the wall of convent or church.

They came into being in stormy times, when the narrow, mediæval cities were harassed by internal faction and external feud ; when Guelfs and Ghibellines were at each others' throats, and the streets were loud with the clash of swords and red with blood. Many a time must the artist have heard the bells call to arms, and the tumultuous crowd sweep past the quiet “bottega” where he sat realising his dreams in colour,—not sparing, for the glory of Mary Virgin, those most costly materials, the gold and ultramarine.

Those days, for all their fierce passions, were characterised by a vivid faith in the unseen ; days of a stern mysticism, when, however the world might sin against God, it did not frigidly ignore Him, and men painted Madonna with the reverent love with which one might paint his dead or far-off mother. The pictures, when finished, were borne, amid the joyous acclamations of a whole city, from the artist's house to their place in church or cloister, while princes bowed before them, and bishops, priests and monks came forth in solemn procession to welcome them to the shrine which was henceforth to be their home.

There they dwelt honourably, served with reverent care, adorned with lights and gifts and flowers. Miracles were ascribed to them, and the tokens of these hung about their altars. He who had been cured of lameness brought a leg in wax or silver, and hung it up as a thank-offering ;

she whose baby was recovered of a fever brought an image of the child. Crowns of gold and precious stones were set above their heads, costly necklaces about their throats; and many an old Madonna possessed a fortune in votive gifts of gold and gems.

In times of plague, war, or famine, their assistance was implored, and their pictures carried in procession through the streets with penitential chant; and that they did not refuse their help is proved by many an old story of miraculous protection, and help in time of need.

When the Florentines marched against the Sienese Ghibellines in 1260, that city was inspired by God in its perilous hour to choose as leader a man whose very name of Buonaguida seemed, at so desperate a crisis, an omen for good.

Now Buonaguida possessed a living faith in the powers of the world invisible, and this was proved by the plan which he conceived,—a plan so unlike what would occur to any modern mayor or alderman in a crisis, that of itself it proves how very far remote are those olden days from ours. For his plan was nothing less than to offer the city and all within it to the Blessed Virgin, since surely, in the joy of possession, she would protect her own. So, throwing off his upper garments, he led the way to the church, barefoot, followed by all the people; and there was much confessing of sins, factions for the moment forgot their differences, and enemies were reconciled, kissing each other on the mouth.

Then Buonaguida, confident of being listened to, knelt at the head of the people before the great Byzantine Madonna, and said: "Oh, most pitiful Mother, I offer and present to thee the city of Siena, with all the inhabitants of the country and neighbourhood. Here I consign to

thee the keys; keep thou thy city from the evil works and tyranny of the Florentines.”

After this offer of themselves the people were less fearful, and that night the men marched out of the city, ready for the morrow's fight.

But as, keeping watch and vigil, they turned stern, grave faces towards the beloved city where the women were at prayer, they saw a sight, strange and beautiful; for, in the darkness, they beheld above their homes and towers a white light, as it were a sheltering wing spread over Siena; and though there be some who say it was but cloud and vapour, who shall doubt that it was Madonna protecting her city, since the next day, in spite of the disparity of numbers, the great victory of Monteperto was won?

And when the plague raged in Florence, so that they who were laughing and joking one hour lay dead the next; and men died, untended, in street or workshop, or threw themselves from the windows, or into well or river in their despair; the famous Black Madonna of the Impruneta was brought from her distant shrine to intercede for the stricken city, and at last, after two-thirds of the population had perished, the Angel of Death stayed his hand.

In seasons of triumph the images were wreathed with flowers and radiant with festal lights, and alike in joy or sorrow, feast or fast, they reigned in the people's hearts.

Such pictures, to be rightly judged, should be set back in their old surroundings,—some hushed chapel, where only the flicker of votive lamps lit up their grave, wan faces; where clouds of incense veiled their holiness, and the air vibrated only with their chanted praise, “Queen of Virgins, Queen of Martyrs, Queen of Angels, Mother of God!”

Who can wonder if they look gaunt and faded upon the alien walls of the galleries; if the colours, which glowed from the golden background, in some dim consecrated place, look poor when set in the pitiless light of day? The critical or careless glance of strangers cannot rightly appraise faces which, however faultily drawn and crudely coloured, were gazed at through centuries by eyes wet with sorrow or penitence, radiant with faith and love. The modern tourist cannot enter into the feelings of the violent men, the weeping women, who looked up, as he does now, into the quiet faces, not to analyse their artistic value but to implore their aid.

To them mothers prayed for sick or dead or wayward children, sure that their sorrows would be pitied by her who had known the anguish and joy of motherhood. Orphans sought the protection of one who must ever have compassion on all young children for the love and memory of a little first-born Son.

Young girls came to pray for their lovers, since these were tender troubles with which a woman, even if near the Throne of God, must surely sympathise.

One of the old songs of the people still expresses such a petition—

“O Santissima Vergine Maria,
 Concedetemi il vostro gran favore
 Porgete ascolto all' orazione mia,
 Vi prego pel mio ben che se ne muore,
 Maria. Maria.
 Fo voto di donar vi quell' anello
 Che mi comprò la mamma, son quattro anni,
 E il vezzo di corallo, tanto bello.
 Ma fate che guarisca il mio Giovanni,
 E se quel povero mi sarà reso,
 Ogni sabato avrete il lume acceso,
 Maria. Maria.”

Love lends beauty, and true mothers are always fair in their children's eyes, though they be shabby among the splendid, worn and faded among the young. How then could these pictures of the Universal Mother, these symbols of supreme Motherhood, with their wonderful quietude, their grave eyes and pitying, side-long gaze, be anything but beautiful to the sons and daughters who loved every detail of their life and story, turning to them in sorrow and beseeching their intercession after sin? How can they be altogether ugly to us if, with illuminated vision, we realise something of that past of which they are the relics, of that atmosphere of love and mystery in which they dwelt? How can we scorn them, remembering that they represent, not for one age, but for all time, the noblest ideals of womanhood: the woman as Queen, ruling by love, controlling, quieting and elevating the hearts of all around her; as Mother, nursing the world's future, a white bud, upon her knee; as the "Steadfast Star," by whom men may guide their course, and, trusting in her, may reach the goal of all good, even the place where the Young Child is.

THE END

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