

AT THE OPRA DI LI PUPÌ.

HERE in Palermo there is a certain curve of one of the streets which has for me a singular charm. There a piazza, opening from the wide, modern Via Cavour, narrows itself all at once with a cordial pressure, as if to say, Welcome to the heart of the city! It is an entrance to the real Palermo; not the city as it is known by the tourist studying historic monuments under guidance of Baedeker, nor by the golden youth and large-eyed beauties who pass along the Via Macqueda or amid the myrtle paths of the Giardino Inglese, but instead as it is characterized by the great *rioni* where four fifths of the population live in their own way, which was also that of their fathers centuries ago. The lieutenant (it is no small advantage to have as escort a relative who is also that liveliest of beings, a young officer of the Italian army) joins me in affection for the warm-hearted, serious, prejudiced, industrious, generous, superstitious, courtly Sicilian populace. We are always ready to turn aside from the principal streets, which resemble those of all the other Italian cities, in order to lose ourselves in a maze of *vicoli* and *viuzze*, and of research concerning the life, physical and psychical, of the inhabitants.

One memorable morning, we went forth to find Don Achille Greco, — an heroic name, as is fit for a man whose business is all of paladins and their deeds. To come to facts, Don Achille is proprietor of one of the best marionette theatres of Palermo, the Opra della Vuciria. The father of Don Achille was the famous Don Gaetano Greco, with whom, at least according to the opinion of his sons and heirs in the profession, began the glories of the wire-drawn drama. The lieutenant and I hoped to be able to arrange with the *oprante* for a private representation; because, at an

ordinary performance, a woman in the audience would be a rarity, the mark for the wondering stares of the young men and boys who fill the benches and galleries. Not that the plays would offer any offense to feminine modesty; on the contrary, they are always unexceptionable in action and language; but so it is, women are almost never present. Perhaps I might have ventured to infringe the etiquette of the place, for nice customs curtsy to persons in search of copy. But a sufficient restraint was the idea of that crowded, unventilated room, where every cry of "Bravo!" would be as strong of garlic as of enthusiasm.

The audience, however, would have been almost as well worth seeing as the play. The lads are thoroughly acquainted with the personages and deeds of the legendary history of Charlemagne and his paladins, which forms the material of a cycle of plays running without repetition through the evenings of more than a year. The dramas, which ignore the unities of time, place, and construction, are founded chiefly upon the popular book *I Reali di Francia*, the chronicles of Archbishop Turpino, the Orlando of Ariosto and of Boiardo, the Morgante of Pulci, with excursions into the kindred story of Guerinio il Meschino or other texts. Sometimes farces and ballets are interspersed, and now and then a sacred representation, notably a Passion Play.

The marionette theatre, called in Sicilian dialect *opra di li pupi*, is here much more important and characteristic than it is upon the Italian peninsula. On the miniature stage of upper or of central Italy, the performances are more sophisticated, and, a far more significant difference, they represent detached episodes or modern plays; while in Sicily the epic cycle of Charlemagne and his knights moves with stately sequence to

its tragic close in the defeat of Roncesvalles.

The eminent Dr. Giuseppe Pitrè, whose studies of the Sicilian people are unsurpassed for verity, patience, and affectionate insight, finds that the Carolingian theatre "has an historic reason in the spirit of the southern population of Italy, and is kept alive by reasons at once psychological and ethnical, and wholly in relation to the nature of our people. . . . In order for a poem to become a song, a story a legend, they must have in themselves the conditions favorable to diffusion and popularity. Were certain fables of chivalry welcomed as soon as they were known by our storytellers and opranti? Did they find listeners to the former, spectators to the latter? Then they must bear, as they do, in themselves the elements which suit the vivid fantasy, the imagination of the Sicilian populace.

"The passion for mediæval chivalry dovetails also with a religious fact. The eternal struggle of the personages of the chivalrous epic always is between Christians and infidels. Religion is always in the front rank, or at least is apparent amid the loves and the profane undertakings. This is no small matter for a people deeply religious and devout as ours. When we remember that the virgin patron of Palermo, the daughter of Sinibaldo, lord of Rose and of Quisquina, St. Rosalia, is said to have descended in a direct line from Charlemagne, it is no wonder that the Sicilian people, tenacious in its beliefs as in its traditions, should hold in such honor the Carolingian epic cycle, speak with such enthusiasm of Rinaldo and of Orlando, and remember with something like national pride

'The dames, the cavaliers, the arms, the loves, The courtesies, and deeds of bold emprise.'"¹

The Sicilian lads have an insatiable

¹ G. Pitrè, *Biblioteca delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane*, vol. xiv. pp. 278, 279.

passion for the opra di li pupi; they will eat dry bread in order to save the little copper coins that would buy the *companatico* of onions or cheese, spending them instead at the box office of Don Achille in the Vucciria, or of his brother, Don Niccolò, in the Piazza Ballarò. They thrill at the sight of the examples of courage and honor; they take sides with one or another of the paladins, Rinaldo, Orlando, Oliviero; they discuss, award praise and blame, lament for the fallen and shout for the victors. If, in the course of history and legend, a paladin discredits himself ever so slightly, he is suspended from popular favor until, by means of a fine action, he is able to rehabilitate himself.

By this time the lieutenant and I have threaded the Via Gagini and crossed the Piazza San Domenico, and now we take heed to our steps on the slippery round stones of a steep viuzza which leads into the Vucciria Nuova (so called, not, as some philologists opine, from the vociferations that rend the air there, but, like the *boucherie* of the French, because of the provisions sold in it). The centre of the piazza is occupied by stalls full of every known and conjectural fish, flesh, and vegetable. Around the stone basin of the fountain, men are busy washing bunches of *finocchi*, with threadlike leafage and white bulbs; donkeys wait, with the sufferance of their tribe, until their loads of cabbages shall be bought; vendors carry about baskets of fruit or bread, trays of sweetmeats, cheap trinkets, stay-laces, fans woven of cane fibres, to be used to kindle fires. The shouts are very confusing, until the ear, somewhat accustomed, learns to distinguish them. It is a system of individual *motivi* that would have pleased Richard Wagner. The seller of fish has his traditional cry, quite unlike that of the lemon-vender, who in his turn is not to be mistaken by an intelligent hearer for him of the cabbages or of the crockery. At one side of the piazza is the theatre of Don

Achille Greco. Its sign is a cartel, on which are painted, in water colors, with much effectiveness, some principal scenes from the plays to be represented during the week. The lower half of the wide door is closed; the upper part is ajar, in order to admit air. The little ticket office, the rows of benches, and the stage are half seen in the twilight of the windowless room.

At the moment, we were told, Don Achille was not in the theatre. A stout *comare*, who sat near by in the sun, encouraged us to seek for him; the meat seller, next door, said that the oprante was gone to his house, and sent a little boy to show us the way there. We turned into the narrow street upon which opens the iron-barred window of the green-room of the marionettes. An assistant of Don Achille was inside, busy with polishing the armor of a paladin.

"Which of the royals of France is this?" I asked of the little guide; who, with perfect acquaintance with facts, replied, "He is Orlando."

If the child had been asked concerning the identity of any one of the hundred men of valor who populate the stage of Don Achille, he would not have been once at fault. Each paladin has his distinctive mark: Charlemagne is known by his closed fist — tradition choosing to represent him as rather unroyally economical — as well as by his regal mantle and crown; Oliviero has upon his shield the sun and the moon, and is portly of person; Rinaldo wears the lion as sign; the strong-minded heroine, Bradamante, is distinguished from her brothers-in-arms by her long hair. Don Achille does not spare expense; the metal armor, the cloth and tinsel, of the poorest of his paladins would cost twenty to twenty-five lire, while Charlemagne represents a money value of more than one hundred and fifty lire. The enemies, if Spanish lords, are also finely attired; but if pagans, custom and religion will have them meanly clad, in or-

der to show contempt for those renegade dogs of Turks.

The lieutenant and I were invited to ascend to the apartment of Don Achille, who, with his family, received us very courteously. The open sesame to his favor was the mention of the name of Dr. Pitrè, who, as fellow-citizen and physician, possesses the perfect confidence of the Palermitans. Don Achille is a very dignified person, fully persuaded of the historical and artistic value of his profession, and an untiring student of the somewhat extensive library of the literature of chivalry, including a valuable old manuscript copy of the Chronicle of Archbishop Turpino, from which he selects and combines the material of his plays. It was easier to talk with him about paladins than about prices; confronted with his seriousness worthy of an impresario, — not Mr. Henry Irving is more deeply in earnest, — we hardly liked to make moderate offers of so many lire. Yet that was needful; because, gracefully veiled by the ideal, Don Achille has practical views. He would have wished to give us a magnificent *serata particolare*, with all the paladins at their best, combats unlimited, illuminations, ballet, an orchestra of trumpet, flute, and violin, cushions for the benches, — worth forty-five lire, for it would be fine to see!

"Ah, too much elegance, Don Achille! Rather, let us see things as they ordinarily are. In fact, what we desire is a sample, a little hour, in order to know how the Reali di Francia move and speak."

"And since that is so, truly I do not know what to say. Let madame suggest her own terms."

"Imagine! 'T is an art, yours, Don Achille, and I should not know how to set a price on it."

"And if you should say to me, 'I make you the compliment of such a flower' —"

"Eh, in short, say something your-

self, Don Achille!" interposed the lieutenant. And it was arranged that a sample of the representation would cost twenty lire. But the performance proved so delicious that we voluntarily added a few more "flowers to the compliment."

At eleven o'clock, one morning, — an hour chosen in order not to interfere with Don Achille's engagements with the public, — our little theatre party stood before the door of the opra. It may be permissible to mention the distinguished names of Dr. Pitrè and Professor Salomone-Marino, who illuminated with their explanations every part of the performance, so that it was a most valuable lesson upon the nature and mind of the Sicilian people. Don Achille met us at the door, and ushered us into the theatre; his sons brought some pillows in clean linen slips, in order to mitigate for the ladies the hardness of the wooden benches. The theatre is merely one of the ground-floor rooms, called *catodi*, used as shop and dwelling, or both at once, by the poorer classes of Palermo. But in its arrangement and decoration it surpasses the rival establishments of the city. A neatly painted ticket office is at the door; near by, a few ladder-like steps lead up into the very narrow galleries which extend along the sides of the room. The parquette is full of benches, very close together, a real martyrdom for the knees of the audience. A strait passage at the left hand of the benches is the sole aisle of the theatre, which might contain a hundred persons. In a stage-box is a piano-organ, presided over by a young son of Don Achille, who turns the crank, and also plays the cymbals, for the marches and dances of the marionettes. The drop curtain represents the combat of Rinaldo with Agramante; but this, be it noted, is an innovation, the earlier opranti contenting themselves with a simple cloth and a few touches of paint.

With a joyous expectancy, such as

one recalls among the impressions of childhood, we waited while a march was ground out from the organ and the cymbals rang. A little bell tinkled; the curtain gave promising starts and quivers, then rose to show an empty stage set with a scene in Charlemagne's palace of "Paris of France." The scenery is astonishingly effective, in its ingenuous designs and small dimensions. The proscenium is about eight feet wide by eleven high; the stage, five and a quarter feet in width by five in depth. The perspective and proportions are so good that the little paladins seem not to lack dignity.

The marionettes enter with a portentous stride, so much to the taste of the public that in some theatres a personage who should appear without this conventional gait would be reproved by shouts of "Il passu!" (the step), and must retreat into the wings to make his entrance all over again.

But the paladins of Don Achille did their duty. Not one failed of the noble strut, the pirouette in the centre of the stage, the salute to the audience, and the provisional jiggle upon his wires, before he subsided into quiescence, and the next man of war took the stage. The glittering ranks were arranged, with their pink, innocent wooden faces fronting the audience. A few eminent paladins had glass eyes, which rocked from side to side, emphasizing still more the immobility of their countenances. The march became more fervid as Charlemagne entered, exchanged compliments with his lords, and embraced at a right angle his nephews, the valorous Rinaldo and Orlando, not less worthy. The dialogue was stately, with occasional lapses into the vernacular. Whoever spoke moved incessantly; the others stood still. The voices — all from the mouth of Don Achille himself, who, with assistants, was pulling wires behind the scenes — were amazingly well differentiated. The virile notes of the pala-

dins; the deep voice of Charlemagne, which appeared compounded of equal parts of majesty and laryngitis; the boyish treble of the messenger page; the clucking discords of the Turks; the fierce roar of the Sultan of Babilonia, — all these were a real triumph of tonal variation. Charlemagne was extremely unhappy. He wept, rubbing his hands alternately across his face, with elbows raised and sharply bent. When the paladins had inquired the cause of his tears, and had learned that the Turks and Spaniards, allied, were about to besiege the walls of Paris, they expressed themselves more than ready for a fight. This consoled Charlemagne. Don Achille's boy wreaked himself upon the crank of the organ and clashed the cymbals, while the knights, one by one, after an obeisance, a twirl, and half a dozen strides, made their exit.

The second scene displayed the bulwarks of Paris, below which were encamped the tents of the wicked. The infidels filed in: the Turks very ill clad and awkward, the Spaniards richly cloaked in velvet and satin. The Sultan of Babilonia was magnificent in scarlet and vair, with the silver half-moon of Islam wrought upon the back of his mantle. What a great white beard he had, and how ferociously his arms threshed the air as he incited his warriors to the siege of Paris! He was an enemy worth fighting. But when we heard him laugh — ha, ha, ha! — at the Christian religion, it was evident that he would come to a bad end, dog of a Moslem!

The final act had its scene in a solitary field near the walls of Paris, whose casements and towers were illuminated. The moon began to brighten, — a softly radiant disk of oiled paper; then was darkened, before the pink dawn appeared and flooded the battleground with light. Orlando and Rinaldo entered, discussing the situation in the true style of the paladins, who always speak in rounded

periods, often repeating the phrases to which they reply. They went off together to summon the warriors to fight. The combat was according to the best traditions of the marionette stage. With sound of music entered two or three paladins, and were met by a corresponding number of infidels. There were duels, *mêlées* of six or eight men, defenses and attacks. At first the combatants were of the rank and file; later appeared the distinguished heroes. The more notable the paladin, the more protracted were his signs of life after having fallen. Certain elbows and knees, projected into the air with the angular impulses of a grasshopper, proved that a royal of France lay there, conquered, not subdued. Some of the Moslems had detachable heads, which, being sliced off by the Christian swords, bounded and rolled over the stage. There was a tremendous stamping of mailed feet and clatter of weapons, noises produced behind the scenes; and lacking which, an audience with understanding of its own rights would be seriously offended. As new relays of warriors met and clashed, the fallen were piled up like firewood on the stage. The living hopped nimbly over the slain; sometimes, in the ardor of challenge or of battle, the feet of the paladins disdained to touch the stage, and the laws of gravitation appeared to be annulled in their favor while they swung and quivered on their wires, uplifted by the idea of glory. Lastly came the Sultan of Babilonia in person to fight the flower of chivalry. Some one — perhaps it was Orlando, famed for his strength more than human — caught up that lord of heathenesse and bore him off into captivity, kicking and screaming to Mahomet. When the field was won, Charlemagne entered, took possession, and congratulated the victorious paladins. It is to be suspected, however, that they received nothing but words, for the royal fist was tightly closed, as usual!

After the epic play Don Achille gave

us a ballet, in which a Moor, wearing a blouse, a turban, and full trousers of red-and-white-striped cloth, danced to lively music. Then from the skies descended another pair of legs, likewise in red-and-white-striped integuments, and danced on their own account. Next, the legs of the Moor detached themselves, and reveled independently, while he, undismayed, continued to dance. Even when his head hopped off from his shoulders, and took its own steps, his trunk went on contentedly gyrating. There never was a more adaptable person of color! The turbaned head made a sudden somersault, turned inside out, and appeared as a dreadful little necromancer in a black robe, with a wand. He postured and made passes, until, one by one, those pairs of striped trousers billowed and fluttered, and were transformed into four small witches with scarlet gowns and black bat-wings. The ballet grew madder, — such a *ridda* as is danced under the nut-tree of Benevento to celebrate the infernal Sabbath. Of course the decapitated and limbless person of the Moor was not there for nothing; under the wand of the wizard it shook and shuddered, and went up in the air, and came down again in the form of a sort of caldron, from which issued four little red devils. These (hung upon elastic cords instead of wires) had impish movements all their own, and were, moreover, tossed back and forth by the witches as if in a game of ball. From the caldron came next a throng of hissing snakes, which writhed and slipped over the stage. Then the caldron itself had a convulsion, and became a roc, — a fowl too familiar to readers of the literature of fantasy and fable to need description. The necromancer sprang astride the bird, and, to the admiration of witches and imps, was about to ride away, when sulphurous flames burst from the ground,

and the whole unblessed crew — and good enough for them! — went up in flame and smoke.

Don Achille's boy gave a final turn to the handle of the organ; and the select audience applauded heartily as Don Achille himself came out from the hole under the proscenium, wiping from his brow the moisture of honest labor, and ready to be congratulated upon the ingenuity and the good will of his performance. The praises were cordial, as they were well deserved.

Ingenuous, even childishly absurd, as are some features of the marionette theatre of Sicily, the spectator who should find in it only matter for derisive or indulgent laughter would do it much wrong. Viewed with an affectionate wish to understand it as a manifestation of the spirit of the people, — and this is the sole disposition of mind by which facts can be made to reveal their meaning, — it recalls the time of the Norman rule, from which Sicily derives its passion for the chivalrous legends. An historic phantasmagoria suddenly rises in front of the humble little stage of the opra; there blooms again the courtly reign of Emperor Frederick, — a strange blending of the East and West: with temples of Christian faith and Moslem workmanship; massive marbles and jeweled and golden mosaics; royal troubadours who wandered in the perfumed nights, singing poems in the Sicilian tongue, which might have been, but for the rival Tuscan ennobled by Dante's cares, the *lingua aulica* of Italy, — a period wholly inspired with the ideals of Carolingian romance; fanciful as a dream, yet potent to impress itself upon the successive history of Sicily down to the present date. For the student of the Sicilian character and popular problems, a treasury of indications can be unlocked by the door-key of the opra di li pupi!

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