

A FOREIGNER IN FLORENCE.*

ONE summer, at La Spezia, I met a lady well known throughout Europe,—I mean the great beauty, Countess Castiglione. She lived in Paris, but at the time I became acquainted with her she was visiting her mother. Madame Castiglione was certainly an exceptionally beautiful woman, a blonde, but not of the lightest type. The dictionary defines vanity as “an inflation of mind upon slight grounds”; therefore, she was not vain, for her grounds were strong, but her self-appreciation was enormous, and her frankness in regard to her beauty most amusing. She would receive in the evening, reclining on a sofa, in a graceful pose, very elaborately dressed, and in such a way as to show her neck and arms to the best advantage. A lamp was so placed near her as to throw the proper lights and shadows. Admiring guests would be seated in a row at a little distance, to gaze in respectful admiration. From time to time she would select one from this abject crowd, and signify, by a languid movement of her beautifully shaped hand, that he might be allowed to approach and gaze upon this loveliness from a nearer point of view. The honored one would reverentially advance, make a profound bow, kiss her hand, tell her how beautiful she looked, and then retire to his seat—but by another route!—taking a turn around the sofa, that he might see her from every point of view and in every light. When she entered a ball-room, the guests would crowd around the door to such an extent that many would stand on chairs to see her come in. These demonstrations never disturbed her equanimity,—she was so accustomed to adulation that she would probably have been more embarrassed by the lack of them.

After her return from England, where she went on a short visit, some one asked her if she had seen many handsome women. Her reply was of the briefest, and quite to the point: “None more beautiful than myself.” I have heard it said that, on her way to the beach for her morning bath, she was so followed and looked at that she finally was obliged to send her maid to the door, to make sure that the road was clear, before she ventured out. But this I consider an improbable story, as she was accustomed to be stared at, and enjoyed it.

Her husband was in the marriage *cortège* of Maria Vittoria, Prince Amadeo's bride, and fell dead at her side, which unhappy event was attributed by the Italians to the “evil eye.”

This curious superstition prevails in every class, and the unfortunate possessor of the disagreeable quality is avoided and disliked. They believe that misfortune follows the footsteps of the evil-eyed one, which can only be averted, when in his or her presence, by holding the first and little fingers stiffly pointed, while the other fingers and thumb are closed. This is the origin of the little coral charm so often seen, shaped like a hand in the position I have described. The Italians believe that the wearing of any kind of coral keeps one safe from the effects of the *jettatura*.

A servant who had been with me for a number of years, and who was above the average in education, was quite unhappy because I disregarded her repeated warnings. She implored me to put a coral necklace on my youngest child, of whom she had the especial charge, being firmly persuaded that the effects of the evil eye would otherwise overtake him. She had so exalted his personal appearance, in her affectionate heart, that she was sure there must be some one amongst the crowd staring at his beauty, as he toddled along the street at her side, who might injure him for life by a look.

One day he had a slight cold, at which she was almost distracted, being thoroughly convinced that the evil eye had caught him at last. She had a way of finding out, she said, and at the same time of convincing me, and I was actually made to assist in this most absurd ceremony. The child was seated in a high chair, while she held over his head for a few moments a tumbler of water into which three drops of olive-oil had been poured. Then this mixture was thrown out and the ceremony repeated twice again. If the drops of oil remained floating about on the top of the water, each one distinct and separate, everything was favorable; but if, alas! they blended, it was all over with the poor child, and his fate was sealed. I tried to look anxious and interested while this was going on, but I was so struck, suddenly, with my own absurdity, that I was seized with a fit of internal laughter which made it extremely difficult to keep up

* The present article (describing life in Florence many years ago from the point of view of an American resident) is by the author of the article on the same subject in this magazine for June, 1880.—ED.

the agonized expression I had adopted as suitable to the occasion. Dear old Bettina! She did it all in good faith, and I believe that, had the verdict proved unfavorable, she would have cried her eyes out.

Hers was the strong, passionate love which belongs to her race, and she lavished it in its intensity on the family she had lived with for seven years. Our parting was truly tragic, and such as would never be seen in this part of the world, where all demonstration of feeling is carefully suppressed—the more's the pity! What kindly feelings might oftener be stirred, what warm, life-long friendships be cemented, if we could read a little clearer into each other's hearts, and let out a little of nature's warmth, instead of toning our manners down to the cool polish of a bland propriety! The child-like expression of feeling in the Italians is their most lovable trait, and the irrepressible glow of their warm hearts reflects a heat even into our colder natures.

I am quite sure that I was as dramatic as my poor Bettina when we parted, she so wrought upon me. She literally tore her hair—at any rate, she gave several decidedly hard pulls at it; she fell on her knees, and actually kissed the hem of my garment; she screamed; she covered my hands with kisses. Then, seizing the child, she moaned and sobbed over him, while pressing him tightly in her arms, and refusing to give him up. All the other servants in the house were present, and all in the depths of gloom, crying with sympathy, until I felt that I was taking a powerful part in the last act of an elaborate opera, surrounded by my chorus.

Before leaving my good Bettina, I will relate a remark of hers about sea voyages, as a specimen of the ignorance of her class. Thinking, at one time, that I would take her to America with me, I asked her if she thought she would be sick on the ocean.

"No, no, *signora*," she said, with the air of one who has traveled. "I was once on the Arno in a boat, and was not sick at all"—the Arno being what we would consider rather a stream than a river. In fact, in summer it is often only a bed where the stream ought to be.

I was about to say, when I fell upon the recital of Bettina's sayings and doings, that the reputation of the evil eye always stuck to poor Maria Vittoria. Whether it first arose from the death of Castiglione, or whether she had had it before, I do not know; but everything terrible that happened after that was put down to her account. The burning of a theater, a few evenings after she had been there, was one of the plagues attributed to that poor, persecuted princess; also, the destruction of a small town by earthquake, in less than twenty-four hours after she had left it. The

fainting of a lady, upon whom she turned her fatal gaze as she entered a ball-room, was another; and so the report grew and spread until, at last, people dreaded the sight of her. The only redeeming point of this horrible gift is the unconsciousness of its possessor. The magical arrangement of the hand, therefore, is done with dire secrecy behind the back, or under a table. To point the fingers openly would be the greatest insult.

Although the Tuscans are a peaceable, good-humored race, if once aroused, their temper is uncontrollable; but only for a few minutes—just long enough, perhaps, to get out a knife and stick it into you. When you are dead they are very sorry, and bemoan their hastiness.

They are very prone to jealousy, which is the chief cause of quarrels that end so disastrously. An exciting scene took place in the house of a friend. She was sitting quietly at dinner, when her maid rushed wildly in, shrieking for help and protection. Before my friend had well collected her ideas, a former butler, whom she had dismissed, came dashing furiously into the room, pushed past Mrs. K—, nearly knocking her down, snatched up the carving-knife, and made for the maid. Fortunately, before he reached her, Mr. K— succeeded in seizing him and pinioning him against the wall, while the police were sent for. So easy, however, is the law, *for natives*, that he was only locked up in the station-house half an hour.

"Mercy tempered with justice," and very slightly tempered, is the idea upon which the law acts in the punishment of Italian offenders. For the poor unfortunate foreigners, it is another thing.

I never got any satisfaction from the law but once, and that was owing to a sharp reprimand which I administered to the judge. But thereby hangs a tale: One summer, at Viareggio, I had a watch and chain stolen from my room. By a lucky concatenation of circumstances we were able to trace the chain to a pawnbroker's in Pisa,—only a few miles distant,—and shortly after, the thief was found and arrested, tried and condemned. At that point, I thought it time to get back the chain, as I had identified it and sworn to my ownership many and many a weary time. The Italians are a slow people and cautious, and very wearing at times to one's spirits and temper. I waited a week; then, no chain appearing, I sent to our lawyer for it; and to my amazement, he came to me with this surprising proposal: "I would like you to identify it." I suggested to him that I had done that thing, on a hasty calculation, say ten times. He calmly but

firmly stuck to his purpose, saying that I was to sign a paper, swearing it to be mine. Necessity knowing no law (I wish it knew no lawyers), I did as requested. I waited several weeks, but still no chain. Then I went to him, and we repeated the same ceremony, and I signed another paper. More months of waiting, still no chain; and I went again, this time taking two or three members of my family with me, in hopes of their being able to fathom the mystery. But this only complicated matters, and they were all made to sign a paper and swear to the chain; and we were told such a long and involved history about the process as regarded restoration of stolen property, that we fled from the office in dismay and utter despair, and our last hope of getting that chain vanished forever. Some years after that, one of my servants stole some pearls from me. He was also caught, and the pearls delivered into the Hands of the Law. As the trial was not to come off for some months, the judge came to my house for my deposition and identification of the pearls! I must explain here that judges of the criminal courts in Italy do not hold the high position they do in this country, ranking only a little above a tradesman, and with no social position, or my readers might be amazed at the fact of this promiscuous sort of visit from one so high in authority. When I swore to the pearls, I gave them a last long look, being persuaded that I should never see them again.

I made up my mind, however, that I would make a fight for them. Accordingly, when I saw this "grave and reverend signor" carefully tucking them away into his pocket, I said, mildly: "What are you going to do with those pearls?"

"Keep them to show at the trial, *signora*."

"Then," said I, with the sweetest smile, and a most polite inclination of the head,— "then I will bid good-bye to my pearls. I shall never see them again, for I know by bitter experience that what goes into a lawyer's pocket never comes out again."

Startled, he turned upon me, and said:

"What does the *signora* mean by that?"

Upon which, drawing myself up with regal dignity, I replied:

"Exactly what I say, sir. I lost a chain many years ago at Viareggio, and have sworn to it, and written about it, and signed quires of paper, but have never seen it since! And it is still in the hands of the lawyers!"

Upon this he started, and asked me how many years ago it was and the name of the thief, and, when I told him, he put on an immense show of astonishment, and said:

"Why, *signora*, I was the judge who con-

demned him! And do you mean to say that you never have had the chain restored to you?"

And I answered, "Never!"

Then he took out a note-book, made several elaborate entries therein, said he would inquire into the business, and, with a low bow, handed me my pearls!

But the chain I have never seen to this day.

Physicians have, like judges of the criminal courts, no social position, and no knowledge of medicine, according to our ideas. They are, as a rule, far behind the age. They still cling blindly to bleeding,—unless they have changed during the last few years,—and weaken their patients by the old system of dieting. I have seen cases conducted with such ignorance of the commonest laws of nature as would make any of our physicians faint with horror. Heat, starvation, and dirt are their general remedies for almost everything. In cases of scarlet fever,—which are not common, however,—they order the doors and windows to be carefully shut, that no breath of air may get to the patient—absolutely drawing the bed-curtains around them; forbid washing of any description, even to the hands and face, and no change of bed or body linen during the entire illness.

There is one malady prevalent in Italy which I sincerely believe to be produced, nine times out of ten, by their doctors, and that is miliary fever. Unless a patient's symptoms in the beginning of an illness indicate the disease very clearly, the doctor, on the principle of "when in doubt play trumps," pronounces it "miliare"; but there being no eruption, which is an evidence of that disease, they regard it as suppressed, and so, very dangerous. They then proceed to produce a rash by covering the poor sufferer with as many blankets as he can bear, excluding every breath of air from the room (canning him, so to speak), and then forbidding any nourishment saving the weakest of weak broths. Now, as this special fever is usually brought on by overheating, and consequently should be treated by a cooling system, they succeed in producing the disease in its full glory, rash and all, and they then set about curing it, which, of course, becomes a doubtful undertaking, so weak is the patient from heat and fasting.

A friend of mine, spending a few weeks in Florence, was taken ill with what proved afterward to be an internal cancer. She sent for Doctor Z—, one of the most noted of the Florentine doctors. It was August and very hot, and his orders were not only to shut out the air and cover herself with blankets, but to remain entirely immovable—not to stir hand or foot. She carried his wishes

out faithfully for twenty-four hours,—not even raising her hand to brush a fly away,—and then, becoming nearly crazy with nervousness and weakness, she sent for an English physician. If you had seen his look of horror when he came into the room!

“Open the window,” he almost shouted; “take off those coverings; get right up, and lie on the sofa. In a week you will be able to go on to Paris.”

And in a week she did go on to Paris.

The Italians love medicine, and have the greatest faith in it. They take it not only for every little ailment, but after a fit of anger or grief.

From medical treatment we naturally and easily glide to the dead and dying—toward whom they show little or no respect, as we look upon it. But so differently are our ideas formed by custom and education, that they think us heartless and cold-blooded in the extreme for remaining with dying persons. As soon as all hope is over, every near relation of the poor creature rushes from the room, leaving only nurses and priests to witness his death-struggles and administer consolation.

A friend once described a scene she had witnessed herself, which she said was perfectly heart-breaking. It was the death of a young American, who had been married only a year to an Italian whom she devotedly loved. They said it was pitiful to see her wistful looks, and to hear her implore some one to make her husband come to her—“Only to bid him good-bye, and to give him her wedding-ring.” Her friends at last succeeded in forcing him into the room by dint of persistent and earnest entreaties; but he was almost dragged to her bedside. After all, it was most unsatisfactory, as he would not look at her, covering his face with his hands, and behaving like a frightened child. Their conduct under such circumstances is partly owing to fear, but partly to their dread of being forced to realize the dark side of life. They are a gay and light-hearted people, living only in the present, thrusting aside everything gloomy and depressing.

The dead are carried to their last resting-place at night. No one must be shocked during the day, while in the midst of sunshine, and light, and gayety, by a reminder of our inevitable doom—by a thought of how some day there will be no sunshine or gayety for us in this bright world.

A funeral in Florence is one of the saddest of sad spectacles, with its procession of priests and boys in draggled gowns that once were white, carrying large candles, which drip their waxen tears along the road—or would do so, if they were not caught as they

fall in little cups, carried by more boys and priests, chanting, or rather whining monotonously, as they step briskly along, with a most indifferent air. One can judge somewhat of the wealth of the departed by the number of candles furnished. The shorter the purse, the fewer the candles, until at last the very poor are thrown into a cart, carried outside the gates of the city, and shuffled into a pit, one on top of the other—a sight to make the angels weep!

One of the most grievous characteristics, to me, of a Florentine funeral is the absence of any relative or friend of the deceased. Not one creature who loved or cared for him to follow him to his journey's end, or to shed one tear over the grave of a lost companion; left, to be almost thrown into the ground by a few priests, who sometimes, it is to be feared, look upon the ceremony as a disagreeable, though profitable task, to be got over as soon as possible.

To be enveloped in a cloud of beggars during one's morning walk is not conducive to tranquillity of mind, but such, many years ago, was a daily trial. Of late years, begging in the streets has been forbidden, and the police are very strict and vigilant. A curious scene occurred soon after this law was made. A favorite resort of beggars was the hill leading to Fiesole, where a slow walk was the only means of getting to the top, and they could cling persistently to the weary traveler until, half-way up, he would almost, in desperation, fling to them his coat, hat,—anything,—to get rid of their importuning.

Now, one day, a detective in plain clothes sauntered carelessly along, humming a little gentle song of joy, as he thought of what was coming. The poor, unconscious beggars clustered about him, imploring his charity, showing him their crippled limbs, their blind eyes, and all their numerous ailments; but he strolled on, ever humming his little song. Still they grew in numbers as he ascended the hill; still they entreated, and swore to heaven they were all dying of hunger, or disease, or something. But the indifferent stranger rambled on, and the song continued. At last, the procession having become large and long, they reached the top of the hill, where was a very ominous omnibus, out of which stepped several *gens-d'armes* ready to pounce upon these indigent gentlemen. The sudden way in which the lame not only walked, but ran, the blind saw, the deaf heard, and the dumb spoke, and the amount of muscle developed by the consumptives, was a thing to strike the feeble mind of man with amazement and wonder. They scattered to the four winds of heaven, but those breezes declining to bear them far

on their way, they were captured, hustled ignominiously into the prison-wagon, and carried off under the surveillance of the tuneful stroller.

Nothing can startle the Italians out of their politeness. Not even the wild mistakes made in their language by the foreigner. I have seen a servant, when told to order "the spoon to harness the horses," receive his instructions as if spoons harnessing horses was a sight he had been accustomed to from childhood.

This sort of mistake is very commonly made by strangers, as coachman and spoon, in Italian, are words much alike. So, also, are "cabbage" and "horse," "hair" and "hats." But tell your coachman to harness the cabbage, or your valet to hang up your hair, and they would bow, and retire to carry out your absurd orders—which they perfectly understand, however—with most decorous solemnity. They would never presume to disagree with you, or openly to hold a contrary opinion, though I have known them very firm in the pursuance of their own views.

I once had a cook whose aversion to cats was as great as my fondness for them. I knew nothing, however, of this dislike for a long time, as he always agreed with me that they were most delightful animals, and charming to have about the house. At the same time, I used to notice that I never could keep one long. Not more than a week after the advent of each kitten, it would mysteriously disappear, which always threw Serafino into the depths of despair. It had either got run over, or had strayed away, or was "killed by a dog."

Almost anything amuses and interests this child-like people. Their excitement over the merest trifle is ludicrous.

All Florence was roused to a state bordering on frenzy, during one winter, because three sisters appeared always dressed alike, and with such close resemblance of feature that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. They always drove together and went to the opera together, and no fourth person was ever seen with them. They seemed to know no one, nor wish to do so, and were rarely seen speaking to one another. All that was known of them was the fact that they were from Peru, and so they came to be known all over the city as "the three Peruvians." They could not stop for an instant at a shop-door without having their carriage instantly surrounded closely by men, who would stare into their faces in the most unblushing manner. Caricatures of them appeared in shop-windows, and, in fact, they were the sensation of the season.

Amusements are so cheap that the lower classes need never be without recreation. One of their favorite entertainments is the

"Stenterello," a diversion not usually known by passing tourists. It is chiefly for the lower classes that this delightful person figures upon the stage, as his jokes are fashioned to their understanding. I can scarcely translate the word "Stenterello," but I think the nearest approach to it would be "clown." Whatever part he may take in the play, certain characteristics in his "get up" mark him as "Stenterello." Besides a very exaggerated vest or coat, he invariably appears to be minus one front tooth, and plus a long, curling cue at the back of his head. Even were he representing the most elegant and refined of men, the pig-tail must be there and the tooth must not. Of course, as my readers may infer, he is extremely comic, but always the protector of virtue and the triumphant annihilator of vice.

The gay season for the upper class is from Christmas to Lent, when balls and dinners fill up the evenings; but the real fun for rich and poor alike begins three weeks before Ash-Wednesday, when the streets and theaters are one wild, continuous scene of merriment. An American who has never had the good fortune to see an Italian masked-ball can form no idea of one from what he sees here. In this country they are stiff and spiritless, and every one is ill at ease, not knowing what is expected of him—wishing to be funny, and yet afraid of saying or doing more than is quite proper. Then the true enjoyment of mystification, in keeping some one ignorant of your name, while astonishing him by a real or pretended knowledge of all his actions, revealed by little facts that you have half-guessed at, perhaps, or really known, is lost here by the masking of both ladies and gentlemen. In Florence, men do not wear masks, but wait to be attacked and bewildered by the fair sex, and even made love to, which, under such circumstances, is not considered improper, it being only a part of the regular performances.

I knew an American lady who succeeded in deceiving her brother so completely, making him really believe that she had been violently in love with him for some time, although prevented by the usage of society from showing her affection, that he not only corresponded during the whole year with his *innamorata*, but, not being well acquainted with Italian, he actually made a confidante of his sister and got her to write his love-letters, addressing them with the name and direction she had given him when masked.

The craziness of the scene, as one enters a *veglione* (mask-ball), is beyond all description. The one high nasal note which all adopt as a disguise to the voice, and which is like no

other sound on earth,—a sort of combination of Punch and Judy and a parrot; the music crashing; the whirling, jumping, rushing mass of gayly dressed men and women; the creeping, stealthy step and manner of the black dominos, threading their way in and out, bent upon their mysterious plots,—all make it one of the most extraordinary, fantastic, bewildering sights in the world! One of the funniest of its many wild scenes is the bonneting of some unhappy wretch, who has had the audacity to wear one of those abominations of the fashionable world—a high beaver hat. In this guise he becomes fair game, and he knows no rest in body or mind until every vestige of his hat is scattered far and wide. A party of maskers will combine together, join hands around him, dancing, hooting, crushing his hat over his eyes! There is no escape for him. He remains the center figure of these whirling demons until his hat is in shreds. Through all this he must be perfectly good-natured, it being one of the inexorable laws of the *veglione* that no one must ever show vexation or rudeness to a masker. They are allowed perfect liberty, of a good-natured sort. Woe be to the hatted one should he attempt to resent their actions, or speak sharply to them! They would hustle him unmercifully, and perhaps push him out of the place altogether, and he would have no protectors. All the sympathy would be with the maskers. Another very amusing thing, in a different way, is to see the guileless, middle-aged Englishman or American enjoying his first masked ball in Florence. He is not to be mistaken in this mad jumble, as he stands surrounded by his family, motionless and dumb with astonishment and bewilderment, gazing on the shifting, screaming crowds around him, not quite sure that all this is entirely proper, and determined to protect his innocent daughters, should they be spoken to, at the risk of his life.

The last *veglione* takes place on the night of Shrove-Tuesday, ending at midnight, that the sacredness of Ash-Wednesday may not be broken; but into those few hours is crowded a concentrated pandemonium impossible to describe.

It is difficult to understand why tourists should always rush to Rome for the Corsos, which are inferior in many ways to the really beautiful ones in Florence. Instead of *confetti*, which hurt and sting, people throw bouquets and *bonbonnières* to one another. The ladies dress exquisitely for these occasions, and drive in their handsomest carriages, their horses

gayly decorated with flowers and ribbons, coachmen and footmen in their most gorgeous liveries. Young men often dress in costume, and act the characters they represent as they ride or drive through the streets. One sees, for instance, a large boat on wheels, filled with sailors dropping *bonbons* and flowers from the ends of their fishing rods and lines into the ladies' carriages as they pass; or a long procession passes, representing an English hunting party, red-coated, some on horseback, some in dog-carts with their hounds, and others in wagons, with their trophies of game hanging around high poles. Children, too, are often dressed in character, and the prettiest sight I ever saw was a sweet little fair-haired couple dressed as bouquets, smothered to the chin in roses and lilies—their fresh young faces, prettier than any flower that ever grew, rising from the center of this sweet nosegay.

A frequent amusement during the last gay days of the Carnival is visiting a friend's house in mask. A party of six or eight, perhaps, will go together at night, rush into somebody's house, make themselves perfectly at home, dancing and hooting in a circle around the poor puzzled hostess, or sitting about the room, staring at her in grim silence, like so many horrible black fiends, embarrassing her to the last degree; or conduct themselves in any other pleasant fashion conducive to making their visit an agreeable one. In fact, at this season, the city is a large nursery of wild, gay, grown-up children, ripe for any mischief or sport, until Ash-Wednesday enters, in her solemn garb and with warning, uplifted finger, and brings the unruly establishment to order.

During the fifteen years that I was in Florence, I saw many changes and many interesting political events. The marriage entry of the Archduke Ferdinando, the abdication of the Grand Duke, the entrance of Victor Emanuel, the marriage procession of Prince Humbert and the sweet Princess Marguerite, and, finally, the departure of the King to take possession of Rome.

Through every change and at all times, Florence was Florence still, with its brightness and sunshine, its gay, pleasure-loving people, with their warm hearts and their good-natured faces, and their trick of drifting happily with the great tide of life, in easy disregard of coming clouds or shipwrecked hopes; cheerful and light-hearted always, in sickness, or adversity, or poverty,—enjoying the time that is, and letting the time that is to come take care of itself.