

A CASTLE ON MOUNT ETNA.

By HAMILTON AÏDE.

With Sketches by the Author.



HAD long wished to pay a visit to my friend H—, at his father's castle on Mount Etna. The account of his active and interesting life in that savage region, where industry and an ample revenue had been substituted for idleness and a poor income during the course of fifteen years, inspired me with a desire to see the historic demesne, carrying with it a ducal title which was presented by a grateful king to the first Lord Nelson. Circumstances enabled me to carry out my design last February, when our yacht was anchored at Catania.

I left a fair imitation of summer behind me, on the seashore: a few hours brought me into a midwinter more severe than we often have to endure in our northern climate. And yet, though the wind was so bitter, and the snow was falling on the slopes of the mighty mountain, the purple irises were blooming in great tufts on the road-side, the heavy-scented narcissuses and violets in the castle garden.

I left the train at the Piedimonte Station, where I found the open carriage, drawn by three horses abreast, which I had ordered to meet me. The vehicle looked as if it would fall to pieces at every jolt over the stony road, but it was really not uncomfortable, and, after sailing for some days, without other exercise than a quarter-deck walk, the shaking I received during the next five hours was, no doubt, salubrious.

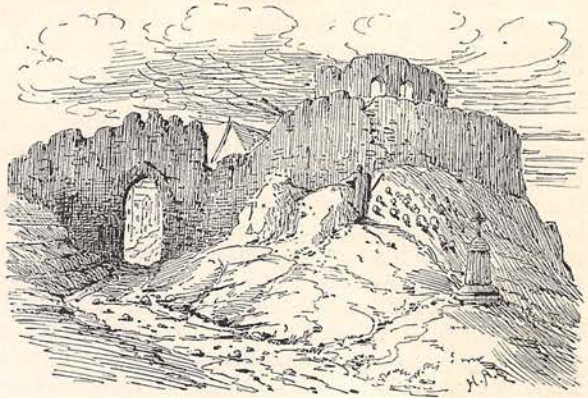
The road winds for three-quarters of an hour up a steep and stony hill between low walls, over which oranges and lemons, cactuses and olives peep down from low-terraced gardens. Then we reach the broad-flagged street of respectable antiquity called Piedimonte, where, I fancy, there can have been little change during the past one hundred and fifty years. There is a certain be-wigged and mildewed air about the last-century architecture of the church and house-fronts which does not inspire one with the veneration due to great antiquity; but bespeaks an existence where there is little movement or enterprise. There is no stir in the long street: a few men, muffled up to the eyes in long cloaks flung across their shoulders, saunter along aimlessly, as it seems; a few women, with distaffs in their hands, are sitting at the open doors, and that is all.

Another three-quarters of an hour, the orange-groves giving place to vineyards, brings us to Linguagrossa, a larger and more important town, though the streets are

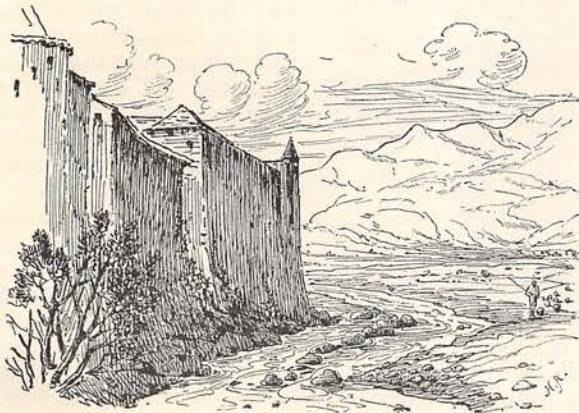


narrower and more tortuous than at Piedimonte. Here there is a Campanile, in the last stage of picturesque decrepitude : and the air suddenly becomes much colder ; though we are still a long way off from the snow. The streets are comparatively crowded : painted caratelli, much as in Virgil's day, laden with wine or grain, their sides made brightly horrible with gruesome scenes depicted with a vividness which, happily, a Sicilian sun has done something to mitigate ; men on mules, with carbines slung across their backs—probably rusty fowling-pieces, guiltless of other murder than of a few small birds—but which have a *couleur locale*, as suggestive of possible brigandage in the vicinity : a stunted population, ugly beyond redemption in its women ; squalid, but still with an air of doing something, instead of having fallen asleep, as at Piedimonte.

A two hours drive higher and higher up the mountain-side, with the jagged outline of a plum-coloured lofty range of hills to the right, brings us to the lava-bed deposited here in the eruption of 1879. At this spot my friend's carriage, with an armed *campiere* on the box, he and the coachman in all the bravery of blue and scarlet liveries, fashioned not unlike those of old Italian postilions, is awaiting me. The Sicilian horses are so overflowing with spirits that we are nearly upset at starting, and are carried off at a hand-gallop, up and down over the black, undulating road for another fourteen miles. We pass Randazzo, a curious and interesting town, the first and last aspects of which, as we approach, and as we look back to its machicolated walls and crumbling towers, are very striking. It gave a title, in ancient days, to the royal House of Naples ; but its glories departed even before the Bourbons, I imagine. The walls that seem to bind together and hold



RANDAZZO.



THE SINETO.

it upright on the summit of the steep acclivity where it is set, are pierced by gateways, leading into narrow streets, paved with lava, which retain some pleasant features of sixteenth-century architecture. There is, moreover, a fine lava-built church, of the same period, and a smaller one with a charming Campanile. After this, follows a passage of great dreariness, partly across a range of what looks like rock, but which I subsequently learn is lava, where every inch of available ground is cultivated, and to good purpose. Here man and beast are labouring, one would think, with small result ; but it is not so. This is the beginning of the Maniace

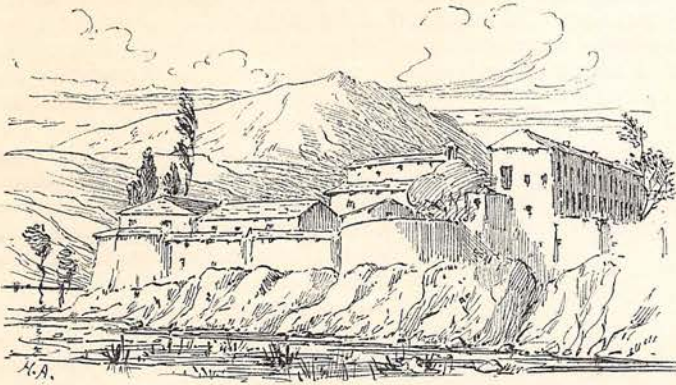
property, where the corn grows between six and seven feet high, and the vines are unrivalled throughout the island. To the left, under Etna, on the sky-line, lies what the *campiere* tells me is the town of Maletta, and over against it a strange mass of stone which looks like a fortress, called "Rocca Calandra."

The road runs like a skewer (the conical "arrow" has a feather of lightness which would be inappropriate as a simile here) through the heart of the black volcanic land. Now and again, the lava crops up almost to the height of a wall, crowned with orange lichens ; and everywhere it underlies the thin veil of mould which is so strangely productive. A turn in the road, and a sharp winding descent reveals the long half-grey, half-white building in a hollow, surmounted by a bunch of poplars, like an aigrette,

which the *campiere* points out to me as the Castle of Maniace, and a few minutes later we drive up to the gateway of the inner courtyard.

The name of Maniace is derived from the great general, George Maniace, who gained a mighty victory over the Saracens in 1032, near this spot, where the Sineto, or Fiume Saraceno, as it is still called, flows round a rock which also bears the name of the conquered nation. Part of one of the walls of the castle, still standing, is certainly of this date, if not older. The present dwelling has grown up out of the remains, and on the foundations, of the Benedictine Monastery erected by Queen Margaret, widow of William the Bad, in 1173. But that a castle existed here prior to the monastery, is proved by a deed I inspected, in which the site is spoken of as the "Castello." The monastery and church were partially destroyed by an earthquake in 1693; but the fine doorway, and pointed arches, and some of the monks' cells were left standing. In this church service is still performed every Sunday; and under the high altar lies the body of the Blessed William, the most venerated of all the Abbots who reigned here, to view whose well-preserved remains great numbers of the poor credulous peasants assemble here on certain days. Of this worthy a miracle is told, grotesque enough to be worth recording. He went forth, it is said, to meet the Saracens, hoping to convert them from Paganism by his holy words. Finding this of no avail, tradition goes on to declare that he seized the leg of a donkey standing by, twisted it off, and, brandishing the primitive weapon, smote the enemy, and put them to flight. When he stuck it on again, he, by mistake, put it on the wrong way, which of course attested to the truth of the miracle, beyond the possibility of a doubt! Pope Alexander VI.—that Borgia of infamous memory—was also Abbot of Maniace, early in life, and one of the vineyards still bears his name, "Vigneto Borgia." It is said that Queen Margaret's jewels are buried within an arrow's flight of Maniace, though in what stress of peril this was done, does not appear.

The present building is devoid of architectural pretension; but its position and aspect from the north-west side, where the multi-coloured walls run sheer down to the stony torrent of the Sineto, are impressive. Here is every variety of green, from the emerald of the moss which enamels the stained lava and conglomerate, to the tender yellow of the sedges and the silvery grey of the alders. But there are not many trees near the castle—an old oak or two, the poplars aforesaid, a few olives, some truncated eucalyptuses, nearly killed by the severe frosts (while bamboos and oleanders are unhurt). These are the only indications of our being in the "Regione Selvosa" of Etna, if I except the pines planted



THE CASTLE OF MANIACE.

by the present proprietor. A little distance off are cork woods and chestnuts of great age; pistacchio nuts grow in abundance, and I noticed oaks which must be at least as old as the monastery. For the rest, until the eye reaches the snow topped hills around, there is little to be seen but vines. These, as I shall presently show, are the main prospective, as the abundant grain is the present, source of income on the Maniace property.

Of the interior of the castle little need be said. There is a gallery, upwards of a hundred feet long, built over some of the monks' cells, and corresponding, probably with a similar passage in the original building. In the muniment-room are many interesting records of the various hands through which the estates have passed, ending in its transfer (which carried the dukedom of Bronte with it) in 1799 to Lord Nelson, as a handsome recognition of the services he had rendered to Ferdinand IV. The letter in which this royal gift was offered to the English hero is preserved at Maniace.

A second patent was made out, at Lord Nelson's request, securing the property and title to his sister and her heirs, by one of whom it is now held.

To live all the winter on a snowy mountain-side, four thousand feet above the sea-level, far from civilization, in the midst of a primitive people, clinging to the habits and superstitions of the past, would not be an alluring prospect to many young men; probably to no Italian. But in these "ranching" days, Englishmen, at least, have learned the dignity and satisfaction of labour. And my friend's life at Maniace is one of constant and strenuous exertion. Without it no man could succeed in the task he undertook when he entered on the management of a neglected property in an almost savage region, where he had to combat ignorance, sloth and mendacity. In the course of a few years he has increased the income more than 40 per cent. Such a result is not to be attained but by infinite patience—experiments which must sometimes fail, litigation, the slow conquest of prejudice, the slow process of opening the eyes of the blind to their own interests. That is the only chord that can be struck with any effect in the nature of this wild peasantry; possibly after centuries of half-dormant intelligence in humanity generally. An old woman living at the castle, who could neither read nor write, was saving all her money to procure for her grandchildren those advantages of which she recognized the moneyed value, and deplored her own deficiency.

The original mode of preparing the oil (the Sicilian is the most detestable that ever defiled the mouth of man) is giving way to a better one. The new method of preparing the wine, under French direction, will in process of time commend itself to the

vine-growers when they come to find what a much higher price it will fetch in the market. I visited the vineyards, which are three hundred acres in extent, and where some one hundred and ten men, under a surveyor, were trenching the ground, in one long line. They were a poor-looking lot, but appeared to use their implements, which are more like axes than spades, to



SICILIAN LABOURERS.

good purpose. When they do not, at such times as English eyes are not upon them, the surveyor's stick or whip plays pretty freely about their backs, I believe; and without vigilance, they will not work at all. They come from their villages on Monday morning, and return on Saturday night. They are lodged, receive three meals, and about 8*s.* a day. The first two meals are given in the vineyard, each man having a sardine, a hunch of excellent bread, and a "pull" at the wine-barrel. The third meal, before dismissal in the yard at night, consists of porridge, served in a trough, from which they scoop it out with their fingers, having discarded the spoons originally provided them. They raised a shout in unison as H— and I approached, and twice again before we left the vineyard this barbarous greeting was offered to their young lord.

The process of wine-making is simple enough. The floor upon which the grapes are emptied, through a large window, is of scrupulous cleanliness. Here a certain number of men, in slippers, especially kept for the purpose, are turned in to tread the grapes down—this primitive process being said to produce a better result than the compression of machinery. The juice, collected in a reservoir, is then poured into vats and left to ferment for two days, after which it is strained off. If the skins remain longer, the colouring process begins, and this is never permitted to the finest quality of wine. Though the grapes are all black, the liquid is a rich gold, and resembles Madeira in flavour more than anything else. When mellowed by age, this Bronte wine, which has not yet come into the market, will be highly esteemed by connoisseurs. There are secondary qualities, some of which are stained red by allowing the dark skins to soak in the juice; but this wine is rough, and though sound and wholesome, is no better than many other Italian wines. The average number of *litres* made annually now on the Bronte property is 150,000.

Under the shadow of the mighty mountain, all vegetation that can withstand the bitter winds and driving snow flourishes in so remarkable a manner that one is led to think that Nature, like a wise parent who does not "spare the rod," knows that the



FEEDING FROM THE TROUGH.

severity of the castigation prepares and purifies the soil for the parching heats of summer that strike through it to the lava below.

As spring advances, flowers break up in abundance from the warm earth. Already the almond blossoms are powdering the leafless trees, and the purple flags flaunting in the

meadows. Already is the small walled-garden overlooking the torrent bed to the blue range of sharply-articulated hills a poem in itself, with narcissuses and violets—though it is still early in February. The granary tells its own tale of abundance in the past year, the crop of wheat appearing to be almost fabulous in proportion to the acreage. Man, indeed, seems the only product of the soil that is slow to mature, and bring forth his fruit in due season under these vicissitudes of climate. But there is improvement, and *ci vuole pazienza*. Early and transmitted habits of untruthfulness are not easily erased. A people so familiar with lawlessness that hundreds of banditti have, until very lately, been harboured and protected amongst them, are not to be reformed in a day. It is true that the Italian Government is sensitive as to this word, and insists on it that the bandit is an extinct animal. But when you are seized, carried off into the mountains and a heavy ransom demanded for your recovery, or when, with a pistol at your head, you are laid flat upon the road and despoiled of all that is on you, we are not curious to inquire the distinction between a bandit and a robber.

The *campieri* of Maniace have had more than one encounter with what I shall continue to call bandits, within the last few years. It is no more than five since that strange attack was attempted, the audacity of which was only exceeded by its stupidity. Garbled and exaggerated accounts of the affair have been so often repeated that I may as well give the facts. It was early in the afternoon, and my friend was in his "office," when some affrighted servants burst in, exclaiming that his father "il Duca" (who was staying at the castle) was being carried off by brigands. As a matter of fact, they were never near him, as the river divided them from him; but armed men were there, crouching behind the trees, and that they meditated his capture is more than probable. H— seized his rifle (he is never without his revolver) and started at once with some of the *campieri* in pursuit of the scoundrels, who retired. One of them escaped, the rest were taken prisoners, tried and condemned to penal servitude for some years. Of these, one turned king's evidence, when it transpired that the head of the band was an outlaw, well-known throughout Sicily.



MOUNT ETNA.

There has been another affray since then, in which a man was wounded; but as

the mauraunders have in no instance gained their end, there is ground for hoping that these raids will soon become a matter of history.

The life of a dweller on Mount Etna is not all roses, it will be seen ; neither is it all scorïæ and snow. There are pleasures of divers kinds for those of country tastes ; partridges and woodcocks for the sportsman ; wolves for the man who is ever keen to kill something ; studies for the geologist, the botanist, the student of human nature, in its primitive forms ; and there is, above all, that poetry and charm that belong to a simple existence of practical usefulness away from the tumultuous pleasures and the heated struggle of great cities.

TO WORDSWORTH.

By MARY LUCY BLACK.

WHAT power is thine ! that at thy word, a beck
Flows at my feet, a daisy blooms, o'erhead
A lark hangs singing, fair green fields outspread
That each wild flower beloved by thee doth deck ;
Or that I trace along its pebbly bed
Thy river wild ; or watch the cloudlets fleck
Thy mountains with their shadows—comes the check,
Magic with music ceased, and vision fled.
Fled—but the heart is sweeter for the gift
That, midst of all the smoke-grimed ugliness
Of this dull northern town, avails to lift
To where wild Nature revels ; so I bless
Thy Master, Wordsworth, who did compensate
For lack of beauty, bidding thee create !

