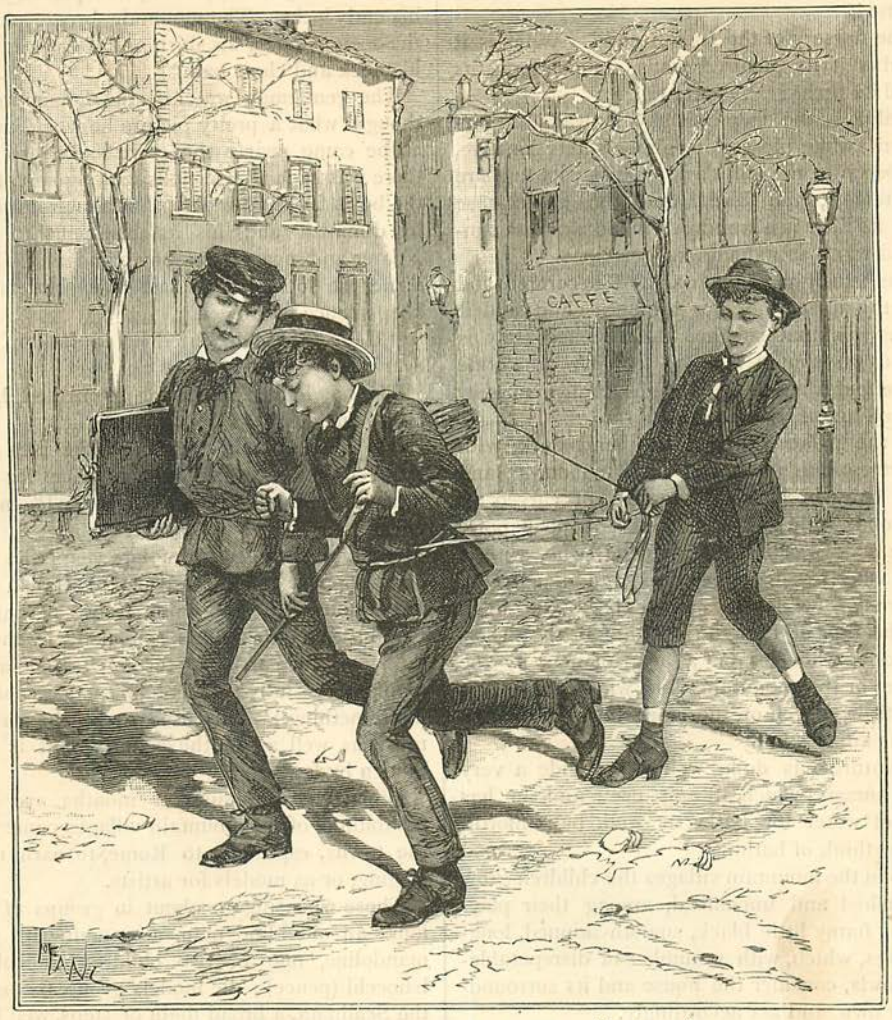

ITALIAN BOYS ON THEIR WAY TO SCHOOL. (*See p.* 157.)

CHILDREN OF ALL NATIONS: THEIR HOMES, THEIR SCHOOLROOMS, THEIR PLAYGROUNDS.

III.—ITALY.

Let us begin by describing the Italian nursery. And when we in England say "nursery" what a vision of cosy, pleasant, homelike rooms present themselves to our mind's eye, with their bright picture-papered walls, on which "Jack and the Giant," "Cinderella and her Sisters," "Hop-o'-my-thumb and the Ogre," "Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf," all live side by side in the utmost harmony—with their cheerful fires and high brass fenders, their cushioned rocking-chairs, their low stools, their chintz curtains of quaint patterns and many colours, their great rocking-horse, their toys, and last, but not least, their bath!

It is true that not every child has a nursery even in dear old England. The chill cellar, the cheerless attic, the damp steps under the arch by the river, the old broken-down hut, the still more broken-down shed, where the cold, and the wind, and the rain penetrate at will, are the only nurseries that many children know, the only recollection of childhood they will possess in after

years. More's the pity; I had almost said more's the shame!

But the nursery of the Italian child. What is it like? Has it its pictured walls, its comforts, its toys, and its baths? Yes and no.

Its ceiling is the deep blue sky, its walls are pictured by the white-blossoming almond-tree, the olive, the mulberry, or the still dark cypress; its toys are the butterflies, the birds, and the golden-rose beetles; its floor is a wondrous inlaid work of sunshine and warm soft shadows.

Nature herself has prepared and decorated and warmed the nursery for her southern child, and it is just as well that she has done so, for Italy is poor, and we should have to look far and wide before we found anything like an English nursery in its small and dirty cottages.

Even the palaces are gloomy and dark, with thick fortress-like walls, and small windows; and the rich baby in its costly cradle, of carved or inlaid wood, with silken hangings, is no happier than the poor washerwoman's child, who, with a clothes-basket for a cradle, crows and laughs by the river-side, while its mother beats the linen before she dips it into the stream; or the fisherman's baby, who lies on a heap of nets by the sea-shore; or the mountain child, whose cradle is a wisp of straw, placed on the stone steps before the door of its father's hut.

Yes, Nature has done well to provide a very beautiful nursery, which all must use; and she has thought of water for baths as well, but unfortunately few think of bathing.

For up in the mountain villages the children grow up, unwashed and uncombed, among their playmates, the funny little black, smooth-skinned, long-legged pigs, which, with a number of disreputable-looking fowls, consider the house and its surroundings their own, and act accordingly.

A foreign gentleman was once wandering among the mountains in the early morning. A boy of about twelve, with bright black eyes and curly hair, came singing along the mountain-path. All Italians sing—boys and girls, men and women, well fed or hungry, happy or sad. The Italian proverb says:—

> "S'io canto tutto il giorno, il pan mi manca
> E s'io non canto mi manca a ogni modo."
> (If I sing the whole day I'm without bread,
> And if I don't sing I'm without bread still.)

So, what's the use, thinks the Italian, of making matters that are bad worse? He sings in spite of fortune. The boy was tall and slender, and looked very picturesque in his faded brown jacket, his old knee-breeches, and dirty sandals. He swung a stick in his hand, and what remained of an ancient felt hat, bound by a red ribbon, was placed jauntily on his curly locks. The mountain breeze played with the open collar of his shirt, and wafting it aside left his neck and chest bare.

The gentleman watched the lad approach, and thought what a pretty picture he would make; but as he came nearer the shirt looked so dirty and there was such a suspicious-looking sort of paste on the boy's face and breast, that his admiration began to diminish and his astonishment to increase. Nearer and nearer the boy came, and dirtier and dirtier he looked. At last the gentleman could keep silence no longer.

"Heda, my man," cried he in Italian, "did you ever wash yourself?"

The boy looked up rather astonished, but not at all ashamed.

"Washed!" said he, as if the idea that one could wash occurred to him then for the first time; "giammai, signore, giammai!"—never, sir, never!

Begging has been till of late years the principal occupation of whole districts of Italian children. Up among the mountains troops of bare-footed, bare-headed little fellows run along by the side of the tourist's carriage, turning somersaults and crying incessantly: "Datemi qualche cosa" (give me something.) This used to be the case in the towns as well as in the country, but is now forbidden by law.

When the hot summer months are over the inhabitants of the mountain villages come down to the towns, especially to Rome, to earn money by singing, or as models for artists.

Those who sing go about in groups of three or four—an old blind man, a woman with guitar or mandoline, one or two children to collect the baiocchi (pence); the models group themselves on the Scalinata, a broad flight of steps, well known to all who have visited Rome. A strange sight it is to see these villagers, dressed in their native costumes, sitting or lounging about in all manner of attitudes, most of them idle, some few of the women knitting or plaiting straw. The children play around; some of the boys clothed with a dirty sheepskin are intended to represent child John the Baptists, the little girls are angels, the mothers Madonnas, the men Josephs of Arimathæa.

Such is the child-life of a large class in Italy, a shade preferable, though, to the life of the bandit's child.

He, poor little fellow, is perhaps the most to be pitied, for he has no chance at all in the wild lawless life that the brigands lead of learning anything good or of escaping an outlaw's fate.

The brigand, however, is very fond of his

children, and it is singular to see that though he has burst asunder all ties of religion and law, with regard to himself, he does not despise them when his child is in the question.

Not long ago an old priest was travelling from one village to another. It was dusty and hot, and the way was long. The priest was glad on looking back to see that a peasant woman, seated in her donkey-cart, was coming that way. Of course the woman asked the priest to take a seat in her cart, and of course he very willingly consented. At a turn of the road three robbers sprang out of the thicket.

"The Madonna has sent you to us," said one of the rogues, in a pious tone of voice. "Do not fear, worthy father; come down and go with us."

It was all very well to say "Do not fear," but the poor priest did fear, and the peasant woman shivered in her sandals. Still there was nothing for it but to obey.

After three hours wandering through woods and over mountain-paths, they came to a small open space or plateau, where a group of bandits awaited them, one of whom held a little child in his arms.

"Worthy father," said he, approaching the priest and showing him the child, "this is my son, and I wish him to become a Christian. Christen him, or you shall be hanged."

You may imagine that the worthy priest made what haste he could to christen the baby. It received a long row of high-sounding names, beginning with Michel Angelo and ending with Guiseppe.

When the ceremony was over, the bandit-father presented the priest with a purse of gold, the woman with a pair of costly earrings, and then both were led back to the turn of the road, where the donkey was munching thistles by the wayside, very much astonished, no doubt, but not sorry at the delay.

Sometimes the bandits will even have their child christened in church.

On such occasions they descend in a body to one of the mountain villages, and force the priest to christen the child. The priest and the villagers are, as a rule, so frightened that they do all that they are told, but they have generally no cause to complain. The brigand is at such times a gentleman; he fires salutes in honour of the event in the village streets, throws money on all sides, and pays for barrels of wine, which priest and villagers drink without any scruples of conscience.

Besides the little beggars and the little brigands, there is another set of children to be pitied—those who are sent away from home to wander into foreign countries, and pick up a scanty living as best they can. We all know the poor little Italian with his marmot, or his barrel-organ, or his tray of figures, and have wondered how or what his home could be that he should be sent into the wide world at so tender an age, alone and uncared for.

Alas! there was no room in his home for him, and the cake of *polenta* was all too small for the mouths it had to fill.

This *polenta*, the favourite Italian dish, is very simple, and to our taste not very good. It is made as follows:—A pan of water is placed on the fire, and a certain quantity of flour, with a little salt, is stirred into it for some time till it hardens to a yellow-looking mass, when it is turned out on to a board. The father of the family then takes a piece of twine, and by means of it measures the cake into equal portions, corresponding to the number of the family. A very small piece of cheese made from sheep's milk is given to each child to eat with his *polenta*, and that is his principal meal. Now and then, if it is the patron saint's day of little Antonio, or Guiseppe, or Giulia, the mother fries a few slices of liver in lard, but it is seldom that such luxuries are indulged in.

Such is the life of the children of the very poor, and they form in Italy by far the largest class. Then there are the children of families which were noble and were rich once, but have become poor. They are much to be pitied. Too proud to work, too poor to study, they lead for the most part a lazy, useless life, always wishing for the good turn of fortune which never comes.

Not all, though. Some, even when children, throw away their false pride, and working their way up with steady resolution, become great and good men and women.

Then there are the children of the rich landed proprietors in the north of Italy. They have generally tutors and governesses at home, and with the help of the priest, who always forms one of such a household, receive a tolerably good education, till they are old enough to be sent to one of the schools or universities of the large towns.

Life on one of these estates is very patriarchal in its style. The tenants who cultivate the land have to give the half of what the land produces to their master, and be subject to his will in a variety of ways. The children of master and tenants grow up together, the master's son feeling himself a kind of protector of his poorer comrades. He plays with them, visits them when ill, and takes an interest in all their doings.

A large class of children are spoiled and petted during the first few years of their life, and are then sent to cloisters to be educated.

Those who are destined to become monks and

ITALIAN CHILDREN AT PLAY. (*See p.* 157.)

nuns have a sad life. The first thing they are taught to do is to forget father, mother, and all home ties. Not only are they told to forget them, but they are told that to continue to love or remember them is a sin which must be done penance for. At first they are allowed to write at intervals, but gradually all connection ceases.

Poor child, who is taken from his warm home to a number of strangers who tell him it is a sin to love his mother!

Till a few years ago it was only the rich who gave their children an education by sending them to cloisters or nunneries; schools for the people there were none. Now the happy faces of children running to school, or shortening the way by playing at horses, are to be seen in Italy, as in other countries, for since Italy became a kingdom in 1859 the state of things has been slowly improving. Schools are being established everywhere, and parents are required to send their children to them from the ages of six to twelve. This law is not enforced, however, as yet. About two-fifths of the children who are of an age to go to school do go; three-fifths have no education at all. This is all the more to be lamented, as the Italian child learns quickly and well. Children of the better classes who have had opportunities given them learn to speak and write four or five languages perfectly, are well informed on a variety of subjects, and are almost sure to excel in some. The girls especially are showing a great deal of energy and zeal now that they have other advantages than those that a convent education afforded them. The study of music is a very favourite one.

Italian children, especially those who live in the north of Italy, are fond of out-door games, and excel specially in a variety of games with the ball. Of these *pallone*, a kind of racket, is the favourite one; then there is *bocce*, played with one small ball and any number of large ones, the game consisting of planting the big balls close to the small one. *Ruzzola*, disc-throwing, is also much played.

In the parks and gardens, during the cooler evenings of spring and autumn, the children assemble to amuse themselves with one or other of these games, skipping-rope or hoop, till late at night, while the papas and mammas saunter along the pleasant avenues, and a stray carabinier with feathered hat looks on in peaceful enjoyment of the scene. Besides these amusements we must mention bird-catching. In autumn, when the birds fly from northern countries across the Alps to winter in Africa, and in spring when they return, Italian men and boys go to the chase. The poor birds are brought down and caught by guns, nets, and traps, and the bird-markets in the towns are, we are sorry to say, filled for weeks with countless strings of larks, swallows, finches, etc.

Rich families have even special villas up among the mountains for their convenience while indulging in this sport. They place their *rocollo*, an immense net, on the high rocks and overhanging precipices. Below the precipices they strew seeds, and hang up cages with tame birds in them to entice the others to descend. When the flocks of birds are passing they sweep down in immense numbers. The boys and men fire at a given moment, and the sound of the firing is echoed from rock to rock. The birds fly up at the sound, but they have the habit, when frightened, of sinking again, and then they always settle on the edge of the rocks. There they are entangled by the net, and are taken easy prisoners by the men and boys. This sport is not without danger, as in the eagerness of the chase a man or boy sometimes falls over the rocks. Poor little *ucelli* (birds)! One feels sorry to think that the pretty songsters should not be allowed to fly to their warm winter quarters in autumn and back again to us in spring without running such dangers, and one cannot help thinking that the men and boys of Italy might find a less cruel amusement.

Other pleasures are the processions, the festivals —such as that at Christmas—and the Carnival.

In Lent buns are eaten, which the children are very fond of, called *maritozze*, made of the kernels of the pine-cone mixed with oil and sugar. On St. Joseph's Day there are the *fritelli di San Guiseppe*, dough-nuts, made of flour and rice fried in oil or lard. At Easter there are eggs; in May the *berlingozzo*, a kind of mixed cake cut in rings and ornamented with fine red tassels. At Christmas, when they hail the coming of the *Santissimo Bambino* (holy Christ-child), the Italian children eat *torone* and *pan giallo*. *Torone* is a hard candy made of honey and almonds, and covered with crystallised sugar. *Pan giallo* is a mass of plums, citron, almonds, sugar, pine-seeds, and pistachio, all made up into a tight tough mass.

But the great festival of the year is the Carnival, when the streets are full of harlequins, clowns, bear, dog, and donkey-headed individuals, giants and dwarfs with immense noses and laughing masks; when boys and girls may be as mischievous as they please, and play all kinds of tricks on any one they choose without it being taken amiss; when bouquets and bonbons, sometimes flour and eggs, are thrown from balcony to balcony; when the laughing and shouting have no end; when every one is merry, no one is cross. Ah! then I think all children would like to be in Italy, if it were only to dress up in masked array and to join in the endless fun.

L. LOBENHOFER.