

## A PILGRIMAGE TO VALLOMBROSA.

DURING the first part of our stay in Florence the name of Vallombrosa used to reach our ears occasionally, bringing with its sound an indefinite Miltonic roll and a suggestion of breezy coolness which, in the warm days of a Florentine April, were very refreshing. As April gradually melted into May, we began to inquire about this place with a cool name, but in such a way as to conceal our own blank ignorance on the subject,—a most unnecessary precaution, as we soon discovered that no one whom we asked knew more of Vallombrosa than we. Murray, when consulted, waxed poetic and misty. He had evidently never been there, but he tried to create the impression that he had. Baedeker was more practical but inclined to sentimentousness. He told us where to go by railway, where to spend the night and where to get dinner; also that Vallombrosa was a famous convent, beautifully situated in a valley on the western slope of the Appenines, founded in the eleventh century by S. Giovanni Gualberto. Already we began to take an enthusiastic delight in the monastery and to feel a certain affectionate interest in the personal history of its founder, and having once begun seriously to ask ourselves the question, Shall we go to Vallombrosa? we immediately and unanimously answered it in the affirmative.

Toward the noon of a doubtfully bright day in early May we took the train at the station opposite S. Maria Novella, and, slowly making the circuit of the city, proceeded up the valley of the Arno with a degree of deliberation known only to the Italian accommodation train. We were five in number,—three ladies and two gentlemen; and we looked forward with anxiety to the time when we should leave the train and the beaten track of travel for other ills of which we could not form the slightest idea. When, however, we arrived at Pontesieve, our first doubt, whether we could obtain a vehicle to take us further, was dispelled. The "hackmen" were as urgent and far more vehement than if they had been waiting at the Grand Central Depot for the arrival of the Boston express. After the usual amount of bargaining we engaged the services of a bandit with a yellow carriage who, for a specified sum, would take us to Pelago, where we were to spend the night.

Our arrival in Pelago was a great success.

After toiling slowly along for five miles, our horses suddenly started up and dashed into the village street and up to the *Albergo Buon Cuore* as frantically as if driven by the son of Nimshi himself.

The landlord and chambermaid were at the door to welcome us and we were ushered into a room in the second story with rough, uneven floor and altogether primitive furniture. Bedrooms were plenty, each decorated with religious ornaments of one variety or another, and each containing a bed large enough to have accommodated all the offspring of the old woman who lived in a shoe.

Having made arrangements for dinner we started out to explore the place. Pelago is not a nice village. It is not so dirty as many Italian villages. It is well situated. The inn is good, if you like genuine native inns. The landlord is obliging and the rates all that could be desired. But I must mention with regret that the rising generation in Pelago is not being brought up in the way it should go, as we learned by sad experience.

On leaving the hotel we went first to the church, not because there was anything to see there, but because of the power of habit. A small group of children, who were prowling about the hotel door, followed us, and we sent one of them for the church key. While we were waiting under the porch for his return, the children gradually gathered from all directions, chattering to one another and begging of us. Suddenly a bright thought struck the young professor, so he set the children in a row and counted them. There were twenty-four. This was the beginning of all our troubles. A very ancient woman who was lurking near, knitting in hand, evidently thought that this was prefatory to a distribution of alms, and when the professor turned his head for a moment, she displaced one of the smallest girls and filled the vacancy herself. Just then the key arrived and we went into the church, leaving the multitude outside. As our prophetic souls had told us, there was nothing to see, so we speedily came out again. The children were waiting for us, but instead of twenty-four there were forty-eight. We walked to the other end of the village; so did they. We came back; they followed us. We stopped in hopes that they would go on,

but they were in no haste and could wait as long as we pleased. We felt very much as if we were the Pied Piper of Hamelin. I wish the Pelagese had known that story. They might have kept their children at home. At length we took a foot-path and left the village behind. We said "*andate*," but it didn't have any effect. The patriarch of the party, whose knowledge of Italian was limited to some musical terms, said "*andante*," which was effective, though not in the way he expected. The professor undertook to use force, but he couldn't catch them. One particularly bad boy took a high moral ground. He was a kind of village Hampden, who with dauntless breast withstood the tyrant. He said that he had as good a right to go on that path as we had, and he would defend his rights while he had life. Then the professor tried to buy them off. They were to go away and come to the hotel at six o'clock, there to receive a specified sum of money. To this they instantly agreed,—but they didn't go away. At length the Fates themselves interposed,—at least two of them did. Slowly descending from the mountain, with distaff in hand spinning their thread, came two picturesque old crones, who told the children to go away and enforced the order by a few well-directed stones. If they had been the she-bears who once ate up some little children for bothering their better, I am afraid we should have welcomed them. However, the children were gone, and we could sit still watching the forest-covered mountain, with its shadows changing slowly as the sun sank in the west. At length, as we rose to go back to the village, the Fates, who had been spinning near by, approached us. Oh, degenerate Italy! where the *Parcæ* themselves are reduced to beg of the stranger. The Fates are not impartial. They have an eye for the main chance. I know it from experience.

After dinner, we interviewed the landlord on the subject of Vallombrosa. As the advertisement of the inn declared, he could furnish us saddle-horses, and it would take us four hours to get there. But one of the ladies did not wish to ride on horseback. Could he not furnish a carriage? He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. There was no carriage road. However, he could furnish *una carrozza da buoi*. We were glad to be informed that a "cow-chariot" was at our disposal, but were somewhat suspicious of the offer. We were afraid that our landlord was indulging in unseemly lev-

ity at our expense. However, he offered to show it to us, so we followed him to a neighboring barn-yard, where he pointed out the chariot. I had seen a chariot in America, but there they called it by another name. I had always supposed that a chariot and a clothes-basket were different. I was mistaken. This particular clothes-basket was mounted on wooden runners and had a tongue like an ox-sled. The innkeeper assured us that ladies had gone to Vallombrosa in that basket on several occasions, and that it was very comfortable. So we ordered three horses and two oxen for eight o'clock the next morning, and then went to bed, where I spent part of the night in trying to discover what my enormous mattress was stuffed with. My researches were rewarded. It was stuffed with autumnal leaves. There could be no doubt that we were nearing Vallombrosa.

At eight o'clock we started. Pelago turned out to see us off; the dear little children with their fathers and mothers. We made an imposing procession. Two big horses and a little one led the van, each attended by a guide; then followed the *carrozza*, comfortably furnished with two chairs and drawn by two of those magnificent dove-colored oxen, which are known only to Italy.

Soon after leaving the village we began to ascend, and continued so to do with only slight exception all the way to Vallombrosa. From the first the road was beautiful. Sometimes it wound slowly up one of the steeper hills, at every turn revealing new glimpses of the wonderful Val d'Arno, and of that beauty of cultivated land which lends such a peculiar charm to much of the Italian scenery; and sometimes it ran along the edge of a precipice where a mountain-stream dashed and roared hundreds of feet below. The road was excellent for the first six miles,—as far as the little lumber village of Tosi. Then the guides turned our horses to the left sharply, and began to lead them up so steep a pitch that I thought at first that it was merely a log-slide. Nevertheless, it proved to be a path paved with square blocks of stone. Up this path we toiled for somewhat more than two hours. It wound up the mountain-side, over rough, half-cleared spaces, and through dark, trim, well-kept pine forests. At regular intervals stand immense crosses of dark gray stone, grand and lonely, which the monks erected as stations for prayer and as guide-posts for travelers more than seven hundred years

after the founding of the monastery. They made them massive and enduring, no doubt supposing that they would stand there, and the monks of Vallombrosa would kneel before them from time to time until the end of the world. Less than a hundred years have gone since then, and the very first of the crosses has fallen, and there are no monks in Vallombrosa, and the end is not yet.

A little before noon we emerged from the forest and entered on the broad, straight path that leads to the spacious monastery buildings. It is a *vall'ombrosa*. A little oval valley, in the side of the mountain, with the wooded ground sloping up on either hand, and at the head the heights of Pratomagno with dark forests hanging upon its sides: that is Vallombrosa.

The whole valley, inclosed by the hills on three sides and cut off by the forest on the fourth, cannot comprise more than half a square mile. On either side of the straight path already mentioned, are little grass-grown meadows sprinkled with innumerable wild flowers, and adorned with tiny ponds and clear, chattering brooks. We ordered lunch at the little inn, formerly the *forestiera* of the monastery, and until it was ready amused ourselves by roaming about and picking forget-me-nots and anemones.

After our meal of omelette and beefsteak, fried in oil, was finished, we started for "Il Paradisino," an old cloister built on the edge of an overhanging rock, two hundred and sixty-six feet above the monastery. We found it an easy climb of fifteen minutes, and when we reached the cloister, we at length saw what we came for.

Directly below us lay the shady valley with its great buildings. Below that again we could almost trace the way by which we had come up the mountain through the forests. And beyond lay the broad valley of the Arno, with glimpses of the river shining in the sun, and then Florence itself with its swelling dome, seventeen miles away as the crow flies. There was a slight haze over the landscape that changed rapidly, concealing and again revealing one object after another. At first we looked in vain for something which should be near the dome, but after a while the mist drew back and showed it to us, but soon covered it again as something too precious to be long exposed:

"Giotto's tower,

The lily of Florence blossoming in stone—

A vision, a delight, and a desire—

The builder's perfect and centennial flower,

That in the night of ages bloomed alone."

I wonder what those old monks thought, when this light-giving flower first bloomed upon their darkness, or whether they thought at all.

The range of hills that were the limit of the landscape in their misty indistinctness, had also an interest of their own. For they had yielded stones more precious than the diamonds of Golconda,—the material in which the sculpture and architecture of Italy were to find expression. The marble mountains of Carrara are a worthy background for such a picture.

When we had seen this view we had seen all. The cloister contained nothing of interest except the daughter of the old forester who inhabits it,—a very pretty girl that must look like Tessa, we thought. The monastery is now a school of forestry, the methods of which we did not care to investigate, and the church is bereft of the famous pictures which it once contained. We turned longingly to the mountain on whose side we were,—the Pratomagno of Dante, that overlooks Camaldoli and the green hills of Cassentino; but time would not allow us to undertake the climb, so we mounted our horses and got into our basket and said good-bye to Vallombrosa.

Whoever sees this beautiful valley among the hills cannot fail of a desire to know something of the man who first sought it out to make it his dwelling-place, in an age of the world when the beauty of external nature seems to have had little influence upon the course of human life. The story of S. Giovanni Gualberto, as it is told to us, is so simple and unmiraculous that I think it must be true. The tradition tells us that he was the dissipated, reprobate son of a noble and wealthy Florentine family, leading a wild life with dissolute companions. But his soul cherished one overmastering passion. His own nature and the custom of the age called upon him to avenge with blood the death of his brother, slain in one of the quarrels so common in the Florentine history of that period. On the morning of one Good Friday he was descending from the heights of San Miniato; the same old church was standing there, but in the city spread out at his feet was not yet erected *one* of the many structures that make Florence the most beautiful city of the earth. On that morning, however, the heart of the man was doubtless softened and touched by the wonderful beauty of the Val d'Arno holding the town in its lap, with the glittering river creeping onward and the city-

crowned hill of Fiesole leaning over it. Filled with the thoughts inspired by such a scene, what wonder if he hesitated to slay the assassin when he met him unarmed in the way? The man knelt before him and pleaded for life, and in the breast of Giovanni a mighty struggle went forward, a struggle between pity and right and love on the one side and the dictates of passion and conventional honor on the other. At length the good triumphed and he forgave the trembling wretch at his feet. He turned about and found his way again to the church and there, kneeling upon the floor with sweet forgiveness in his heart, he consecrated his life to the service of God. It was a Good Friday morning worth a remembrance even after eight hundred years. Taking monastic vows upon him, he entered the convent of San Miniato. But the discipline was too lax for his earnest nature, and perhaps also he yearned to be away from the city, alone with himself. So he went away and came and dwelt in Vallombrosa, upon the verge of the everlasting hills, where he might hold communion with his God; with Florence in the distance like the sins of his youth removed far from him, but never lost sight of,—a perpetual reminder of the depths of the divine forgiveness. Not the best way to lead a Christian life, but possibly the best he knew and not without a recollection of Him who went apart into a mountain to pray.

He must have looked much as Perugino painted him four hundred years later,—a tall, calm, earnest saint, one hand holding a crucifix and the other resting upon a staff with which he might steady his steps as he climbed to his lonely home upon the mountain-side. As he looks up and out from the great picture of the Assumption, so must he have looked to those disciples of his who gradually gathered about him, to profit by his counsels and guide their lives by his example. Thus, in his once solitary vale grew up a little community, and in due time he died, and in after years men wrote "Saint" before his name. And in his place a generation arose that knew him not, and they

lived the life of dull cattle through many centuries until, to their surprise, they were one day driven forth by the sword of justice, as those who ate up Christ's poor like bread.

One question must come to every speaker of English who visits Vallombrosa. Did Milton ever see it? The mere fact of his alluding to it would give us satisfactory ground for saying yes, were it not for the freedom and unerring accuracy with which he constantly alludes to places which he has not seen. But the occurrence of this mention with that of other places in the vicinity of Florence, leads me to think that it could only be an association of ideas, coming from association in personal observation, that would introduce a thought of Vallombrosa in this particular place. Mrs. Browning thought that he must have been there, or he never would have sung of Paradise. She thought, too, that the monks and beeves that she saw there were probably the same as when he came. Why did she not ask one of the old monks if he remembered a beautiful young Englishman that came so long ago? Of course he would not recollect all who had come, but such a visitor as that must make an impression upon even his dull mind,—perhaps, too, the first heretic that had ever come as a sight-seer to Vallombrosa. Of course we saw no monks to ask, only spruce young students of forestry that had the air of having just come and being about to go away. Neither did we see any beeves except the two stout oxen that drew our vehicle. But without any direct testimony from ancient man or beast, I have a firm assurance that Milton has been there and that his feet have lent to that soil a sacredness greater than any bestowed by San Giovanni or his innumerable monks. It must be that the rolling splendor of those lines and their undefined touch of surpassing beauty have come from these mountains and forests and the little, green, lonely valley that has lost itself among them:

"Thick as autumnal leaves that strow the brooks  
In Vallombrosa, where th' Etrurian shades  
High over-arch'd imbower."