Letters On Italy

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ADVERTISEMENT.

M. CASTELLAN is well known to the Foreign Literary World by his "Lettres sur la Mort, L'Helléspont, et Constantinople," to which his Letters on Italy form a sequel. The Visit to Italy, of which he gives an account in the latter work, was made at the conclusion of the last century.

These Letters are valuable, as they tend to show this delightful country in a new point of view. M. CASTELLAN traversed Italy with the eye and enthusiasm of an Artist, though not without bestowing due attention on the remains of antiquity and the interesting recollections with which the seat of Roman greatness abounds. Equally attached to the beauties both of Nature and Art, M. CASTELLAN has given a lively and spirited sketch of a country which is favoured beyond all others in its delightful scenery, and in its rich treasury of Works of Art.
TRAVELS IN ITALY,

&c. &c.

LETTER I.

Passage from Corfu to Italy—Arrival at Otranto—Earthquake in the kingdom of Naples—Temple of Minerva—Appearance of Otranto—Passage to Brindisi—Visit to a Villa—The Convents of Brindisi—State of the Town—Dresses of the Italian.

The passage from Corfu to Italy does not in general occupy more than four-and-twenty hours: we were eight hours or we passed the eastern side of the island, visiting, much against our will, every little port. During the night the mountains of Epirus presented a singular and imposing appearance: a thick red-coloured smoke rolled round their sides, or surrounded their summits with a fiery girdle. The wind added strength to the flames and forced them into long sinuous streams, no unlike torrents of lava, which seemed to blaze along the foot of the mountains, displaying their shape by the reflection of their blaze. In short, the scene had all the appearance of a vast volcanic eruption; it was, however, nothing more than the burning of the innumerable spicy shrubs which cover the face of the country; an operation which the husbandmen find very useful in supplying fresh shoots of herbage, the succeeding spring, for their flocks.

At length, after tacking frequently, and having approached very near the shores of Epirus, we were borne back on the Isle of Fano, or the Scogli, which are indeed nothing but shelves of rocks. A few half-starved wretches exist here, who were unable to offer us provisions of any kind, not even water. Our impatience increased when we beheld the Venetian galleys, which swept through the channel with great rapidity, in every part of it, by means of their powerful tiers of oars, and which could have conveyed us instantaneously to our destination, i
the captains could have been prevailed on to lend us their assistance. A real misfortune was now added to our perplexity; calculating upon the usual length of passage, the provisions, which we had not spared, were nearly all consumed, and it was found necessary to limit us to a small ration. To add to our difficulties the excessive heat of the weather had corrupted our store of water. This disagreeable situation was becoming very alarming, when most fortunately a favourable breeze sprung up which bore us through the channel, and our captain, like a new Achates, called out "Italy, Italy!" and pointed out in the horizon an elevated strip of land. "Italy!" this word echoed through our hearts, which beat as joyfully as those of the companions of Æneas, and with a kind of rapture which we could not help feeling—a sentiment which every artist would have felt in our situation, and which did not surprise even our Greek sailors.

The coast of the ancient Apulia is exactly such as it is described by Virgil, and it forms a striking opposition to the deep declivities of the other shore. We now caught sight of the turrets of Otranto, and with every sail stretched we ran to anchor, rejoicing that we had arrived at the end of our difficulties, when a cannon-shot, hissing above our heads, pierced one of our sails, and we perceived, on the other side of the roads, a galley which made a signal for us to come to, and send on board her. It would not have been wise to have refused such a pressing invitation, and we did not wait to be asked a second time. Our sailors let go the sail in terror, and the captain immediately entered the boat; my friend accompanied him, and they rowed away while we put the ship about to await the result of this ill-auguring circumstance. When they arrived on board the galley, the captain, who was incensed at our disregard of his signals, threatened to sink our little vessel. He had imagined it belonged to some fishermen who would gladly offer him the first-fruits of their labour, but when he recognised a French officer who could complain of this violent proceeding, he endeavoured to treat the matter as a joke, boasting of his skill in firing so as to attract our attention, and procure himself the pleasure of our acquaintance. My companion told him that his pleasantry was rather rough, and that we should have preferred a little less address and more circumspection. The return of our embassy procured us the liberty of coming to anchor, which we did at the entrance of the roads near a mass of rocks, on the summit of which a small church is built.

Otranto has a very picturesque appearance: the view on the right is terminated by the extreme point of the rocks; in front lies a flat shore, which serves as a port for the un-
City of Otranto.

shipping of goods, and a steep causeway, terminated by two columns, and leading to the gate of the city. This shore is used as a promenade by the inhabitants. In the background; a few elevated spots of ground are covered with verdure.

The city extends on the left, and forms at the extremity a rounded promontory. It is built on a platform of rocks which fortify the shore, and afford a protection against the force of the sea and the attacks of artillery. The citadel, which was built by Alphonso of Arragon, and the plan of which is difficult to be comprehended, is commanded by a square tower which supports a belfry on the top, to alarm all the coast when the Turks endeavor to land. The remembrance of the horrors suffered during the siege in 1480 from the Mussulmans who mastered the city and threatened the surrounding country, still keeps the inhabitants in a state of watchful alarm.

Earthquakes are frequent in the kingdom of Naples. In 1450 one was felt which spread terror amongst all the inhabitants, and for many months they lived in fear of being buried under the ruins of their habitations. The province of Otranto suffered extremely; and the Terra di lavoro, Abruzzo, and Puglia were covered with ruins. Some castles were swallowed up without leaving the slightest trace behind them; and 30,000 persons are computed to have perished. At length, in order to appease the divine anger, king Alphonso commanded a procession to Brindisi, to the ancient church of Santa Maria di Leuca, situated on the promontory of Otranto. On this spot formerly stood a temple, which is said to have been that of Minerva, seen by Æneas on his first arrival in Italy.

We may here observe, that the temples of Minerva have resisted the attacks of time better than those of any other divinity—probably because this goddess, who was the patroness of wisdom, found more favour in the eyes of the Christians than any other heathen deity. Whatever be the reason there certainly remain many of her temples which have been converted into churches. We may mention that at Athens, which would still have remained entire but for an unfortunate accident; at Rome the temple of Minerva Medica, the church of Santa Maria della Minerva, &c.

We may also remark, that with very little alteration the statues of this goddess might have been rendered subservient to the Christian worship, and that many of the ancient Madonnas resemble in attitude and drapery the images of Minerva; for it was nearly the fifteenth century before the Virgin was represented holding the infant Jesus.

The houses of Otranto rise above the line of ruins which surround the crumbling walls, and crown them in an agrestable
and picturesque manner. In the simplicity of their form, in their flat roofs, in the terraces by which they are terminated, and in the small windows so distant from one another, we recognized the style which painters attribute to Italian buildings, and which differ exceedingly from that of the edifices of other countries.

Diversity of climate ought always to govern the mode of building. Here the absence of snow renders useless the pinnacles which disfigure our houses. The necessity of breathing the fresh air in the night, and the custom of sometimes sleeping in the open air, are the causes of their terraces and verandas; while their windows, being few and small, admit less heat into the interior of their habitations. The Italians, however, have nothing further to do than to pursue the taste of their ancestors; and we may see they still inherit their genius by the character of grandeur, simplicity, and beauty, which distinguishes all their buildings—from the simplest cottage to palaces and temples.

In consequence of the necessity of performing quarantine we were not allowed time to examine the interior of Otranto; we were therefore not able to judge of its riches and its population, which is said to amount to 3000 souls. The quay was covered with merchandise, and the number of ships which frequented the port made us conclude that commerce was in a flourishing state: the city also appeared busy and active. In the evening we perceived on the beach some equipages more rich than elegant, and some gentlemen on horseback well mounted. The pretty peasant girls wore bodices of taffeta and skirts of white muslin, and their heads were covered with straw hats or silk handkerchiefs. Until the night was far advanced the air resounded with strains of music, and with melodious voices mingling with the sound of all kinds of instruments.

Our passage from Otranto to Brindisi, where we were to finish the period of our quarantine, was very short. Our hearts seemed to expand with the thought that we should shortly be no longer exposed to the caprice of the winds and waves, and that after a period of captivity, too long for our wishes, we should be permitted to traverse a land which we almost considered as our own country.

The city of Brindisi is built upon a point of land, the angle of which juts into the port. A lofty column of ancient white marble rises on this spot, surmounted with a rich composite capital; and near it lie the pedestal and base of a similar column which they told us had been transported to Lecca, the chief town of the province so called, where it adorns the principal...
square, and supports the statue of the tutelary saint. The other edifices of Brindisi are constructed of brick and stone; churches covered with roofs of flat tiles, or with depressed domes, with their square and arcaded belfrys supported by little columns, gave us a good idea of the Lombard architecture which preceded the revived style, and which displayed a character very superior to that of the crowd of buildings of later ages where the beauty of the edifice is lost in the excess of useless ornament, and in the contortion of every architectural part. Here and there palm trees rise, intermingled with a few cypress and other trees, which form a fine contrast with the buildings, and render their outline very picturesque.

At length the period of our quarantine expired. Impatient to enjoy the pleasure of once more walking at liberty, and to satisfy our curiosity, we traversed the city in every direction. After having been so long shut up in our little vessel without the least exercise, the height of every thing we saw, and the length of the streets appeared prodigious to us; every new object drew from us an exclamation of joy or of surprise, and the view of the country above all produced the most delicious sensations.

This taste was particularly gratified by a visit to a villa, which possessed great attractions for the artist and the antiquarian. Although the buildings were sinking into ruin, and the gardens were abandoned to the dominion of Nature, who seemed to have asserted over them all her rights, we were no less surprised than enchanted by recognising in this situation all the characteristic marks of an ancient villa. These it has preserved by reason of its never having ceased for ages together to belong to contented families, who, averse to change, thought it was sufficient if they enjoyed the pleasures of their ancestors, and who had not therefore been tempted to make any change in the order and ancient disposition of the place.

It is not built on a very regular plan, and the builder has confined himself to the advantages which the inequality of the ground afforded, which is supported in some places by terraces, under which there are vaulted halls, ornamented with stuccoes and paintings, and which served the ancient proprietors, as they may still serve the present, as a refuge during the intense heat.

The part which appeared best preserved was a large gallery (ambulacrum), shadowed by a very ancient vine, if one may judge from the size of the branches, which twines itself around the marble columns. Most of the capitals bear marks of antiquity; their form is very simple: it consists of a square basket, on the planes of which are carved in relief the symbols'
of agriculture, or animals, such as sheep, goats, &c. A few of these capitals, which exhibit marks of repair, clearly of modern date, enable us to judge more accurately of the antiquity of the others.

Less curious to examine the city of Brindisi than to distinguish amidst modern structures, or those of the middle age, traces of the ancient Brundusium, we should have preferred calling up the manes of their ancestors to conversing with the present inhabitants. However, we were obliged to be content with the living, and we prepared to pay some visits. Our first was to the Governor of Brindisi; he could not receive us, as he was in the access of a fever. Our next was to the Archbishop, but he was too ill, and had been carried into the country. This account gave us much concern, as he was represented as a very respectable character, a man of learning, and a lover of the arts. He possesses a rich cabinet of antiquities.

The convents only were left, to give us an idea of the society of Brindisi: let not this sentence astonish the reader, for his surprise must soon cease. The cloister and society! these certainly in former times were incompatible expressions, but they are now no longer so—we are told that the Jesuits gave to their order the title of a society, and that in fact they caused a revolution in the monasteries, which seem from this period to have almost become the asylum of tolerance, politeness, and proper enjoyment. The monks, without losing any of the dignity of their situation, have adopted the tone and manners of polished society. This change is very perceptible at Brindisi, where, without any exaggeration, nearly half the people are inhabitants of convents. The reason of this is very simple: in a confined situation, possessing neither the advantages of industry nor of commerce, the citizens are exposed for three-quarters of the year to obstinate maladies, which make them prefer the comfort and assistance which association affords to the solitude of a private family; the poverty of many individuals is another powerful cause. In the convents are found cheerful company, games of all kinds, and music; so that, in fact, their apartments are become saloons. We have visited several convents of females: the ladies crowded into the room, and shewed much anxiety to see us; they overwhelmed us with questions as frivolous as our answers, but some delightful music came to our assistance; voices such as we then heard are only found in cloisters; the hymns sung in perfect harmony, accompanied by the organ and other musical instruments, produced a great effect—it seemed almost like a concert of angels in the middle regions of the sky.
of refreshments were offered us, and we departed with a very agreeable impression of these religious establishments.

We have mentioned the poverty of the town; the interior of it is consequently gloomy and silent; the least article of luxury cannot be obtained here; in fact, sickness has depopulated whole streets. There are some large houses which are called palaces, but they are uninhabited, and the long grass waves in their court-yards; the proprietors have fled to seek elsewhere a purer air, and a less monotonous life; on the walks a few women may be seen, and now and then some monks: we remarked three heavy-built coaches drawn by mules; they contained monks.

The port, which should present an animated picture of merchandise and commercial bustle, is even more dull than the town; it only displays a stranded galley and a few boats. The works ordered by Government languish, affording employment to some galley-slaves, who are guarded by almost an equal number of soldiers, for the most part sickly and diseased: the usual food of both is large white onions, and the inhabitants do not fare much better. Troops of beggars assail the church, and the doors of the convents, where soup is distributed: misery is here so great, and disease so extended, that one hospital was not sufficient, and they were obliged to erect another. The inhabitants of the country seem to enjoy an easier life, at least if one may judge by the costume of the women, which is very neat.

In general, I believe there is no country where dress is more elegant and rich than in the kingdom of Naples—it varies from canton to canton, and from village to village, with the strangest singularity. The costume of the inhabitants of Brindisi appeared very remarkable, especially of the men, who wear our fashions of fifty years since; our fashions, indeed, make the tour of Europe, but they arrive very late at its extremity. Paris, which is the centre of activity, necessarily possesses less influence in proportion to distance; fashions there are like the flowers which bloom during the day, and fade at night; carried into the provinces they live a little longer, and when, at last they reach foreign countries, they take root and flourish there a long time.
LETTER II.


We set off from Brindisi, and it was too late ere we reached San Vito della Macchia, to flatter ourselves with the hope of seeing this little town to advantage, which we were told would well repay the trouble. It is also called San Vito degli Schiavi, from a tradition that it was built at the commencement of the 16th century by slaves, who erected there a magnificent church and a splendid palace. We had no opportunity of judging of these, but we were sure of one thing, that the founders had extended very little of their munificence to their inns, for that where we lodged, and which was the best or rather the only one, was very miserable, and yet the population amounts to 4000 souls.

The Vetturino did not fail to awaken us an hour before our departure, that we might not make him wait, as we had a day's journey of 35 miles before us.

The sun, as it arose, discovered a very interesting country. The chain of the Apennines was on our left, and the blue summit of these mountains had a very picturesque effect. On our right the sea burned with the rays of the sun, which seemed to pour down from the top of an ancient fortress called Santa Sabina, one of the strongest on the coast. Here and there some trees were scattered, and some shepherds' huts, whilst the flocks were seen hastening to the pasture grounds. We could also perceive the little town of Ostuni, situated on a hill, and surrounded with woods, which supply the inhabitants with the pleasures of the chase. The appearance of the country, the fine weather, the open air, and the exercise,