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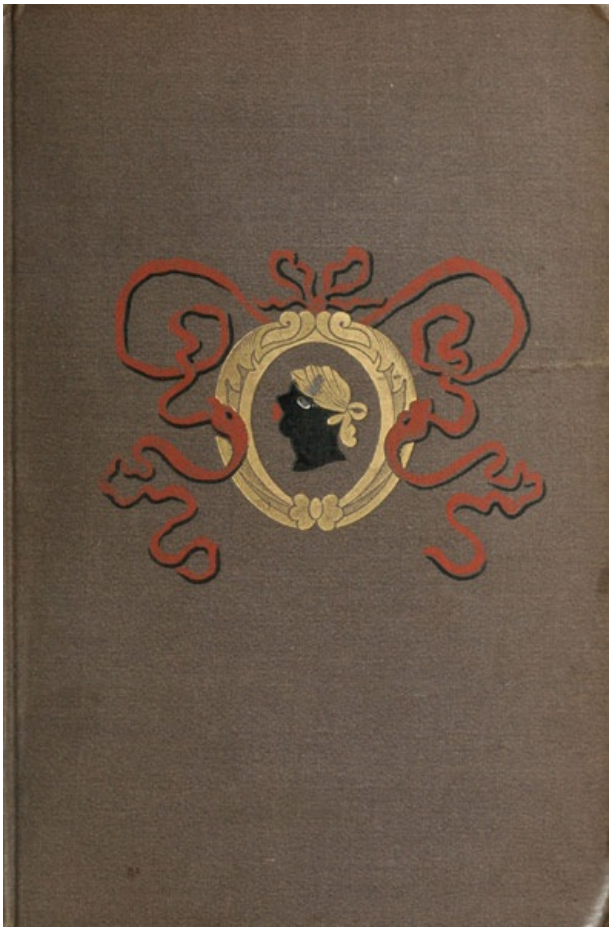

A LADY'S TOUR IN CORSICA.

BY
GERTRUDE FORDE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.
VOL. I.

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PREFACE.

The popularity of Corsica is increasing so rapidly, and information regarding the island is so difficult to obtain, that these sketches may not be unacceptable to intending travellers.

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A LADY'S TOUR IN CORSICA.

CHAPTER I.

PERILS IN CORSICA.

It is strange that Corsica should be as little known and visited as it is. Placed within easy reach of the most unambitious tourist, offering him the loveliest scenery and few serious difficulties of travel, it yet remains comparatively a *terra incognita*.

Many people have a vague idea that its sole claim to distinction lies in the fact of its having given birth to the great Napoleon, and that it is now a land of semi-savagery, snakes, brigands, and other horrors.

There is not a brigand on the island.

Snakes exist in some numbers, but the majority are harmless; and, of those whose bite is dangerous, there need be no fear on the part of the traveller, as they are in a far greater hurry to get out of his way, than he of theirs.

As regards the semi-savagery, that is perhaps a matter of opinion. The Corsican comes of a race

of heroes: he is proud, conservative, and reticent; phlegmatic until roused, then dangerous.

The lower orders are full of intelligence, but their domestic surroundings are utterly bare and unrefined, and the comparative luxury of our working class is unknown to and apparently undesired by them. In one respect the Corsican is certainly uncivilized; he is, as a rule, quite indifferent to the value of money, and prefers his own inherent idleness, or supposed dignity, to any pecuniary advantage. A gun is generally in his hand, a spade never; and he will often starve before he will work, beg, or cheat.

Rich lands lie uncultivated, and houses fall to ruins in Corsica, because the inhabitants are too lazy to spend a few hours daily in toil.

On the other hand, especially coming from Italy, the land of cheats *par excellence*, it is refreshing [3]
to be in a country where there is neither whining beggar, overreaching landlord, nor humbugging tradesman.

A traveller may go from one end of Corsica to the other, and if he behave courteously himself, will probably never meet with a discourteous word, from the time he sets foot on the island until he leaves it.

At the same time, it cannot be denied that the Corsicans, though polite and even friendly to strangers, have a weakness for shooting one another. It is nonsense to suppose the vendetta is crushed out; it is as lively as ever in some parts.

The almost inaccessible mountains are still the resort of escaped bandits (outlaws)—pursued by the weak arm of the law—who, occasionally bringing down their gend'arme, are never known to interfere with a stranger. Their object is not robbery, but concealment from justice, and the crime for which it follows them is generally the result of some private feud.

In all this, I speak of the lower orders, the Corsicans *purs et simples*. The upper classes are not [4]
Corsican at all, save in their love for their country.

A Corsican gentleman essays to speak French like a Parisian, and imitates both the French manners and character. He is generally lively and talkative, and has quite cast away the ignorant apathy of his poorer brethren regarding the value of money. He is the advocate of commerce and railways, and all modern improvements, and dreadfully ashamed of such barbarous national customs as the vendetta, generally flatly denying that such a thing exists at the present day, and boldly telling you that not a bandit is now to be found in the mountains.

When we expressed our intention of visiting this unknown land, many were the warning voices raised to intimidate us by alarmed friends, and we felt that we were bold women to stick to our project. One by one, the terrible prophecies poured in, like so many shadows of Job's messengers, until the stoutest heart might have been excused a quiver.

The plague, malaria, sunstroke, serpents, brigands, bugs—these were a few of the horrors held [5]
out by sensible people, some of them travellers, for our consideration.

Notwithstanding these reports, however, we persevered; and the result showed how much faith is to be given in such cases to friendly advice.

Each of the threatened perils turned out, more or less, nothing but a phantom.

The truth of the matter is, that Corsica is a remarkably easy country in which to travel, totally without difficulties or dangers of any sort, to the person who is only careful to select a good coachman as his pioneer.

On the other hand, the accommodation is often extremely rough, and it is by no means the place for an invalid or a fastidious person.

The cooking is nearly always good, and the dinners excellent; but the village inns are sometimes filthy, and the bedrooms horrible. There is only one good hotel—really excellent—in the whole island, and that is at Ajaccio; and people who travel in Corsica must be prepared, not only for broken windows, sour bread, and no butter, but for bad smells, black floors, and a total absence [6]
of all the decencies of life. They will also occasionally find an army of black beetles in their rooms, and sometimes something worse.

Sundry and manifold remedies we tried against this last and most terrible plague; but all in vain.

One friend, a consul, counselled the use of carbolic soap, and we accordingly each invested in a slab of this not over inviting article, submitting ourselves to a scent like that of puppy dogs on washing day. But the enemy didn't mind it in the least.

Another, military, friend believed strongly in Keating's powder, and informed me how, one night in Poland, upon a threatened attack of vermin, he had put it to a severe test. He had thrown up an earthwork of Keating in a ring round the bed, reposing within peacefully unmolested until morning. The enemy had stormed the bastion, but failed to make a breach, being repulsed with heavy loss; and, when day broke, retired discomfited and utterly routed, leaving their dead upon the plain. But clearly the Polish bug has not the indomitable energy and insular enterprise of his [7]
Corsican relative. Our carefully prepared entrenchments were utterly futile; and the foe, when present, speedily gained possession of the battle-field, causing ignominious flight. But in many instances, where the village inn looked of the poorest and lowest, our anticipations, in respect of

uncleanliness, were agreeably disappointed.

Our party, when at last it started for the island, consisted of three unprotected ladies, whom, for the sake of distinction, we will call Nos. 1, 2, and 3.

It was towards the end of April when we left Leghorn for Bastia, and not a propitious day. All night long a high gale had been blowing, and the lightning dancing across a black sky; and when, at about 8 a.m., we left the quay in our little boat, the wind had not moderated much, and even in the harbour the waves tossed us up and down in a most lively manner. When we reached the steamer, we saw that she was a most wretched little concern, laden with merchandise, and of no beam at all; whilst the open sea beyond was covered with high white breakers. [8]

I think our hearts would have failed us, and we should have turned back, notwithstanding the good augury of a Sunday morning, had it not been for the tedious term of delay circumstances had already imposed upon us at Leghorn and at Florence. We felt that if we did not go by this boat, we might never go: the season was already late for Corsica: so we shut our eyes, and went.

For nearly three quarters of an hour that horrid little knife-shaped steamer rose and sank on the heavy swell inside the harbour; and then, at length, when every one was beginning to look pale, she heaved up her anchors and departed on her way. And what a way it was!

There were but few passengers on board beside ourselves, and no ladies. The others consisted of half a dozen French and Corsican gentlemen, one of whom, a stout, middle-aged individual, returning to his native land after a thirty years' absence in France, took a special interest in the three adventurous English ladies, who could brave such a sea for its dear sake. This person, [9] watching our failing powers, offered us much kindly sympathy and well-meant advice, received, I fear, with the amount of ingratitude usual on such occasions.

For eight long hours we tossed, and rolled, and danced about on the bosom of that heartless sea. It was really bad weather, and the waves washed clean over the rickety little vessel. I lay vaguely wondering whether we should share the fate of a large Indian steamer, which the very day before had been wrecked in this sea, on the Elba rocks, on its way to Bombay. Starting from Leghorn at 5 a.m., at seven o'clock she struck upon the rocks, and before an hour was over the fine vessel was not only a total wreck, but almost entirely submerged. Fortunately, a fleet of fishing-boats in the neighbourhood rescued the crew, and passengers, who, after an unenviable cruise of seven or eight hours, and with the loss of all their baggage, found themselves relanded at Leghorn, where some of them came to our hotel and detailed their misfortunes. [10]

But over those eight hours I draw a veil. I would only caution any intending visitor to Corsica, who may not be a good sailor and a tough traveller, not to be misled by any popular delusions as to the "calm blue waters of the Mediterranean," but to be careful as to the boat and day he selects for his voyage. Also, to make sure that the boat marked in his time-table does really go at the hour specified, or indeed at all that day, which is by no means to be taken for granted.

"O that steamer to Bastia!
There could nothing be nastier,
Not even in Charon's dark wherry;
For *that* passage is quicker,
And you cannot be sicker
In crossing the Stygian ferry!"

[11]

CHAPTER II.

THE TOWN OF BASTIA.

Soon after four o'clock, our small vessel laboured its way into Bastia harbour, and a crowd of little boats came alongside to convey us and our effects to shore. I looked down, and saw the most wonderful sea, a deep Prussian blue, tossing against the steamer's sides; looked above, and saw a long, level shore, backed by low hills, the large town of Bastia rising gently from the water's edge, with complex streets and tall, factory-like houses. In a few minutes we were landed on Corsican soil; and, whilst our things lay before the door of the custom house just opposite the landing-stage, they became the cause of a lively altercation between the many female porters anxious to appropriate them as far as the hotel. We were the centre of an admiring, or curious, [12] crowd of about a hundred natives; and amongst these, twenty or thirty tall, stalwart women and a few boys pushed, and jostled, and fought over our possessions, with an intense determination good to see. The men, meanwhile, Corsican fashion, stood by, silent and dignified, their hands in their pockets, looking on indifferently at the struggles of their better halves. When at length we were ready to start, and the three trunks had been replaced on the hand-cart, we had to pursue and divest five women of our small handbags, sketching blocks, and bundles of wraps, with which, deprived of the trunks, they were separately consoling themselves, deciding, to their mortification, that it did not require that number of stout females, in addition to a strong cart, to carry our very moderate allowance of luggage. Three of them, nevertheless, followed us to the

hotel door, where, placing the heavy boxes on their heads, they marched with stately steps up the dark and dingy staircase, and deposited them in our rooms.

It is astonishing what weight Corsican women can bear upon their heads. From childhood upwards, they are accustomed to carry all the heavy domestic burdens, and to carry them on their heads. They will pile one thing on the top of another, until, in the distance, they look like an advancing phantom of monstrous form. Enormous piles of wood, two or three yards long, large baskets full of heavy family goods, great wooden or earthenware cans and jars full of water, with sometimes a baby on the arm, are their usual burdens. Nothing but a baby is ever carried on the arm; and so much more convenient has habit made it to them to use their heads rather than their hands, that I believe, if the baby could be induced to keep its equilibrium as surely as the can of water or the load of wood, it would long ago have been transferred likewise to that elevation. Here is a specimen of a woman, who, with a remarkably strong and plunging infant on her arm, and a very large jar balanced sideways on her head, remained placidly motionless for at least ten minutes before us at the village of Buchisano, to have her portrait taken. [13] [14]

The men of Corsica never carry anything except a gun or a heavily-knobbed stick; in fact, they rarely carry themselves, as they are generally on mule or donkey back; and it is no unusual sight to meet one or two of the nobler sex jogging along, pipe in mouth, on their mules, whilst the women of the family trudge behind, bearing babe and burden.

The Corsican women are much more lively than their helpmeets; they have less of dignity and a vast deal more energy. They can appreciate a joke, which, as a rule, the men apparently cannot.

I should imagine that a woman is never, or hardly ever, ill-treated in Corsica. She is too useful, and the men of the family too apathetic; but, undoubtedly, she is looked upon as an inferior animal by the other sex.

"Les femmes sont si ignorantes," as a man said to me, with good-natured contempt; and certainly they cannot discuss the politics and resources of their country with the glib intelligence displayed by nearly all the men; but the country would be in a queer condition without their industry and energy. [15]

The men mostly slouch a good deal, the result of a lazy, useless life, spent in wanderings up and down the village street, and ceaseless gossip, varied by an occasional expedition with their guns into the country; but the women have a fine upright carriage, owing to their long habitude of balancing heavy articles upon their heads.

The dress of the men at Bastia, and indeed all over Corsica, differs little from that of the English working classes, and generally consists of brown fustian or black velveteen. The only variety is caused by the wide-awake hat, the high boots, and the invariable strap across the shoulder supporting the large yellow gourd, which, hanging at their side, contains their wine.

The women dress very quietly, nearly always in black or white, or some equally sober shade. They wear a skirt and jacket of different materials, with a large white or black handkerchief tied under the chin. This handkerchief, when pulled well forward, is a good protection against the sun; but, in the heat of summer, most of them perch upon it an enormous low-crowned, flat-brimmed, white straw hat, as big as an ordinary parasol, which, as it bears no trimming whatever, is somewhat trying even to a good-looking face. [16]

You never see a Corsican woman's hair, which is a pity, as there is reason to believe it is often pretty and luxuriant.

Every Corsican carries a huge cotton umbrella—red, green, or brilliant blue—both for the heavy rains and for protection from the sun.

Our first view of the Hotel de France somewhat appalled us. The street in which it is situated is a fine one—the finest in Corsica—wide and full of handsome houses; but the entrance to the hotel was mean and dark, and the outside decidedly dirty.

The first hotel in Corsica, after leaving luxurious Italy, is certainly a shock to a sensitive mind; and that at Bastia does not let you down gently. The food is good and abundant, the charges very reasonable, and the people exceedingly good-natured; but the stone hall and narrow staircase are unswept, the bedrooms dingy, and the floors and walls not above suspicion. [17]

Nevertheless, the Hotel de France is the best in Bastia; and, although we did not find it clean, we probably should have found the other hotels (of which there are several) a good deal dirtier.

Our fat friend, who had established himself as our guide and protector through the custom house and streets, and who had given his arm to one of our party who was in a shaky condition, owing to the voyage, now left us in the hotel hall, bidding us farewell till dinner time, and commending us to the care of M. Stauffe.

It was an amusing table d'hôte at six o'clock. There were about eighteen or twenty gentlemen, all Corsicans, we being the only representatives of our sex. All were exceedingly lively, our stout friend especially being the centre of much repartee and rapid argument.

As usual in Corsica, the conversation, carried on in very good French, was almost exclusively devoted to political questions, which were discussed very freely, and with so much animation that now and then hot words seemed imminent; but they always passed away in a joke. [18]

Our friend, after living so long abroad, found his opinions rather too cosmopolitan for his neighbours, and they hammered away at each other with an amazing freedom and familiarity.

But the old fellow continued to take a great interest in us, interspersing his political talk with polite remarks across the table, and recommending to us in turn nearly every dish. If we seemed to approve of any of these, he became quite excited, nodding his head with many smiles, and remarking in a satisfied tone, "Bon, bon, bon!"

This was repeated so often, being only diversified by an occasional "Bien, bien, bien!" that it was quite impossible to resist laughing, which at length we all did, including himself.

"Mais avouez, mademoiselle," he remarked to No. 3, "qu'il y a de beaux plats dans la Corse."

"Sans doute," she replied, politely; "and many other beautiful things, I believe." [19]

"Mais oui!" he returned, smiling. "Un beaux pays. Et," with a sudden happy thought, turning towards a good-looking young man seated next him, and who did not attempt to disclaim the compliment, "de beaux garçons! Blonds, comme lui. Et noirs—comme moi!"

The fair young man turned upon him quite fiercely. "*You* a garçon?" he asked. "How old are you? *I* am twenty-four."

"And I forty-seven—un bel âge!"

His neighbour pulled his long yellow moustaches with a scornful laugh.

"You are an old man—voilà!" said he, curtly.

The wind that night at Bastia was remarkable. This part of the coast is noted for its constant and varying gales. Whether this particular wind were the "Sirocco," or the "Grecale," or the "Libecchio," or any other of the various currents which afflict this town, I know not; but it was a most unpleasant wind, and one that seemed especially weird in the darkness of night.

My bedroom was a thorough Corsican room; not a bolt nor a lock fastened properly, and doors and windows were confidingly open to every sound within doors, and every breeze without. [20]

Chimneys and roofs constituted the chief look-out, but my view likewise comprised, between the two high towers of the church of St. Jaen, a small stretch of blue black sea, lying heaving angrily in the fitful moonlight, with now and then a gleam of sheet lightning illuminating its dark bosom.

Wonderfully still and soundless was the night air, until suddenly, every quarter of an hour or so, came a wild gust that rattled loose slates outside, and shook the doors and windows as if they were wrested by some violent human hand. This sort of thing, repeated all night long at short intervals, and accompanied by a dismal howling like the wails of lost souls in purgatory, is not exactly conducive to repose; and my first night on Corsican soil was spent in pondering over insular phenomena, and speculating how many would be of an equally disturbing nature.

We spent several days in Bastia, during which time, either the sirocco, or one of its family, continued to blow with unabated vigour; and, as I found an equally squally wind in possession on my return many weeks later, I concluded that this sort of thing had been going on all the time. For which reason alone, if for no other, I infer that Bastia is not a desirable place for a prolonged residence. [21]

It does not take very long to explore the town. It is a rather compact place of about eighteen thousand inhabitants, curiously built, as are most Corsican towns, running up the side of a hill, with one large main street, joined to the lesser ones by flights of steps, or more often by steep stony ascents.

The houses are perfect factories for height and baldness of architecture, being, however, a shade cleaner and less repulsive-looking than in any other Corsican town, except perhaps Ajaccio. Seven stories is the usual height; some of the houses having windows closely barred and wired (the remains perhaps of the outward symbols of a vendetta in higher life than is now the fashion). It is the only town in the island, except Ajaccio, which really has any shops to speak of; but they are rather difficult for an English person to find, as comparatively few of them have "shop windows," and you have to peer in through dark, dingy doorways, to perceive the wares sold within. It took us nearly half an hour to find the photographer, and a long walk up steps, and down steps, and through gardens, among which an occasional guiding placard encouraged our wearying search. But, on the other hand, I found quite an ornamental straw hat, trimmed with blue wool, was to be bought for the modest sum of fivepence halfpenny in the high street! [22]

Judging from their shops, the people of Bastia must be uncommonly fond of sweets. The streets are pretty equally divided between the "patisserie" and "confisserie" shops, and the coiffeurs, with here and there a jeweller's window. But the best jewellery shops (and they are not much to speak of) are in the Rue St. Jaen, behind the church; and here, as in duty bound, we invested in little yellow gourds and silver-mounted daggers. These daggers—the smaller ones made of coral, ebony, or silver, in silver sheaths, and the larger ones of metal—are inscribed with the fatal words, "Vendetta," or "La mort," and are very thrilling to a stranger. But the thrill cools somewhat when one learns, as we did later on, that whatever may have been the fashion in olden times, the dagger is now comparatively unknown to the Corsicans, and its use confined to the Italian and "Continentale." Probably, in the days when the vendetta was the fashion amongst the upper classes, the dagger was its usual instrument of vengeance; but now that murdering is [23]

banished in great part to the lower ranks, guns and pistols have almost entirely taken its place.

The Hotel de Ville at Bastia, with its high flight of steps, and containing some specimens of native marble, is considered a fine building; but to eyes fresh from Florence, the land of enchanted palaces, there was not much to admire about it.

The same may be said of the church of St. Jaen. Its two high towers were imposing at a distance, but otherwise the exterior was commonplace. Inside were some large Norman arches of white [24] marble; and the different altars were surrounded by balustrades and pavements of local marbles —green, and red, and variegated—curious, but not nearly so beautiful as the Italian marbles. The six or seven wide steps up to the church door were covered by groups of picturesque, barefooted, dirty little children, who roamed unchecked in and out of the building, laughing and chatting, and occasionally enjoying a game of hide-and-seek behind the pillars. Some black-robed women, and a man with tin-tacks in his mouth, were busy arranging a large figure of the Madonna on a pedestal within the altar-rail, in front of the principal altar.

This position of dignity was no doubt owing to the approaching month of May, or "month of Mary;" but also partly, as a good woman informed us in a whisper, because of the present severe affliction of bad weather under which the country was suffering. The prayers of Mary, besieged as her ear would be, in this position, night and day by the petitions of believers, would, it was [25] hoped, effect a mitigation of the evil. The image was of china, life size, highly coloured, with golden crown, pink cheeks, and blue robe, and was placed upon a pedestal about five feet high, from the sides of which sprung a large arch of white roses and gold tinsel, which completely encircled the Madonna. This pedestal was being covered by the devotees, who bowed the knee each time on passing the image, with coloured stuffs and white lace, and bedecked with many brass candlesticks and vases of artificial flowers. It struck me as a singular fact, that in a country so grandly prolific of beautiful flowers as Corsica, the artificial should be preferred to the real.

Continuing our walk through the curious, narrow, stony streets, where in one place we had to run the gauntlet of a large bonfire in a very small byeway, over which the Bastia urchins, with bare legs, leaped to an inspiring tune of their own chanting, we arrived at the bastion walls. They are high and picturesque, but not to be compared with those of Calvi or Bonifacio.

Here, also, we came upon a market with uncommonly dear oranges, and with gay stuffs ranged [26] upon open carts or stalls for peasant purchase.

The best looking end of the town is near the landing-stage. A fine quay stretches out for some distance, and there is a good harbour, generally floating one or two fine steamers from Africa or Marseilles. There is also, of course, a statue of Napoleon on the place in front of the quay, and here the soldiers, in their gay uniforms of blue and red, drill unceasingly, and daily parade the town twice to the oft-repeated tune of their particular local march. [27]

CHAPTER III.

THE GROTTO OF BRANDO.

Notwithstanding the cold wind and the uncertain weather, we could not leave Bastia without an expedition in the Cap Corse direction. Cap Corse is the northern peninsula of Corsica, stretching out into the Mediterranean for many miles, like a long tongue. At its extremity are fine rocks and one or two lighthouses, but these we were fated not to see.

We started from the hotel in good time, leaving behind No. 1, who preferred the quaintness of the Bastia architecture, and wished to sketch in the streets.

Our equipage was a little open carriage, drawn by a pair of lively chestnut ponies that went like the wind; and we were further escorted by "Bigemark"—a black and tan quadruped apparently belonging to the pointer breed, intelligent and affectionate, but not endowed with the fatal gift of [28] beauty, and possessed of barely a remnant either of ears or tail. Our first object was to see the Caves of Brando, wonderful grottos of limestone formation, in the hillside close by the seashore, about seven miles from Bastia.

The road to Brando was charming, following the shore the whole way, about a dozen yards above the sea level; the slope downwards being clothed with splendid cacti, and with groves of olive, orange, cherry, walnut, and fig trees, with here and there an ilex. Out of the forests, the two common trees of Corsica are the olive and the ilex; and beautifully they harmonize together, the rich shining green of the ilex contrasting effectively with the silver grey of the olive.

The forest trees consist chiefly of pines, firs, and beeches, varied by a few oaks and cedars; and the chestnut woods generally stand alone.

Bordering the slope, and amongst the olives, bloomed flowers of every description and colour; [29] whilst great grasses, pale pink asphodel, and giant golden spurge, grew like young trees among the rocks, and all along the roadside the weird prickly pear raised its ghostly arms in a huge hedge.

Beyond this, almost from beneath our feet, stretched far away the wide sweep of Mediterranean, sparkling with countless flashes, and bearing on its laughing bosom the islands of Capraya, Elba, and Monte Christo. Monte Christo was but a blue cone above the waters; and Capraya, though larger, was cloudy and mysterious; but Elba lay before us majestically grand in the dappled sunlight, precipitous walls of barren rock and smiling hillside standing out in a fine contrast.

On the other side of the road, and rising steeply up, were rocky hills, well clothed with the sweet-smelling macchie; whilst, between every rocky rift, showed glimpses of wilder mountains, the inland chain of Corsica, raising their grey heads from misty veils of morning.

Macchie, in Corsica, is a word that means much. It is, literally, scrub or undergrowth; but it is, practically, one of the most perfect garments ever woven by nature. It may be thick or thin, but is generally composed of a dense mass of shrubs, from two to four feet high, massed over and carpeted under by the richest and most luxuriant flowers. [30]

The pink and the white cystus, the common weed of Corsica, which covers miles of country with its red or snow-white bushes on their sturdy growth, is the usual foundation of the macchie; but mingled with it are a score of other low growing plants, of various and often aromatic scents.

Here, by the Bastia road, where the hills sloped gently up from the road, the macchie grew closely; but where the grey and green and red rocks rose more steeply, the plants could only hang in the crevices overhead—here a cystus, and there a purple thistle, with the little crimson cyclamen peeping out of every cranny, and the bright lizards darting across the sunny stones.

Very beautiful was this first view of the Corsican rocks, and of the wide sea panorama of historic islands, each telling in silent grandeur its own history of adventure, heroism, or the stern freaks of fortune. The very name of Monte Christo seemed to launch one into dim dreams of wild peril and desperate attempt; whilst the dark cliffs of Elba frowned in a stern harmony to their tale of the despotic emperor, whose heart for a time beat in impotent resistance against its prison walls. [31]

What a satire it seemed, to place that proud, all-conquering Corsican on an island from whose heights he could plainly see the rugged mountains of his native land—almost smell the sweet odours of the macchie-covered hills, wafted across his childhood's sea, from her to him!

At last, in a blue bay where little breakers dashed merrily, the red ponies were suddenly reined up. Bigemark came to the carriage door to offer his congratulations, and our taciturn coachman informed us we were at Brando. At the same time he obligingly pointed out to us, up the side of the steep hill, a stony watercourse, down which ran a lively little stream, and which, he told us, was the "path" to the grotto. [32]

Up this we accordingly went, with one hand keeping a desperate clutch on our straw hats (which evinced a strong disposition to obey the invitation of the sirocco, and fly away for a nearer view of Capraya), and, with the other, rescuing what garments we could from the running stream.

About half-way up the hill we were met by an aged but lively crone, who with another woman escorted us to the caves, informing us, as we supposed (for it was quite impossible to understand her toothless jumble of bad French and Italian patois), that she was the custodian of the place. The grottos belong to a private family, of the name of Ferdinandi, who have made the winding staircases, and whose name, on the stone slab fixed in the rock outside, is appended to the intimation that this their work is devoted to the enjoyment of all lovers of beauty.

Leading us by the hand, and laughing much at our evident want of comprehension of all the interesting facts with which she was beguiling the short way, our cavern crone opened a little wooden door in the face of the cliff, and ushered us straight into a Gothic-roofed hall of limestone, the reception room in this winding gallery of nature's building. Here we were told (by gesture) to remain until our guides returned. We accordingly sat down on a block of limestone, which constituted the one chair in this chilly, half-stuffy hall, semi-darkness revealing the grey white walls and roof, and the rude staircase up which had gone our two companions to light up the many hanging lamps necessary to illuminate the caves. [33]

In about ten minutes they returned, and we then proceeded up the same staircase, cut roughly out of the rock, into the heart of the cliff. Overhead hung countless glittering stalactites, whilst on each side the most fantastic walls enclosed us, the dim rays of the oil lamps throwing open tracery and arched roof into weirdest shadows and gleams of sparry radiance.

Here and there the path was broken, and in some places we had to bow humbly beneath the drooping arch; sometimes up, and sometimes down, we went on in this airy labyrinth for about ten minutes before we turned and came back by another path. The limestone formations probably extend much further into the cliff; but the winding pathway goes no further, and one can only be thankful that Corsican energy has effected so much. The forms of some of the stalagmites were most curious, rising like Alpine ranges, with an infinity of Matterhorns, above many a little hollowed nook, or like the carved screen behind some marble altar; some so delicate in tracery and so transparent that a light, held behind them, lit them up like finely veined cream-coloured glass; whilst the stalactites overhead were countless and most graceful, often passing below their stalagmitic brethren and falling between them in a rich confusion of spiral carving. [34]

What a glare it seemed when we emerged again from fairyland, out among the arbutus and the foxgloves on the green hillside, overlooking the dazzling sea!

The old woman was merrier than ever after her short incarceration in Mother Earth, and held out

her capacious apron to receive our fees; sending after us many good wishes, which I have no doubt were as sincere as her witticisms were pungent, but which unfortunately were quite lost upon us. [35]

The stipulated sum to see the caves of Brando is a franc and a half each person. It seems a good deal at first; but the visitors are no doubt few, and the expense of so many lights rather heavy.

In a minute or two more, we and the red ponies and Bigemark were off again, trotting on to the marina, or little sea hamlet of Sisco. A mile or two past Brando, we came in sight of Erbalunga, a most picturesque little village lying on a low tongue of land right out into the Mediterranean, a Genoese round tower at its furthest end, standing on black rocks washed incessantly by the breaking waves.

Towards one o'clock we reached our baiting place, a seashore village which appeared to consist of one house, namely, the dirty and unpretentious inn before which we stopped. Since leaving Brando, the road had become sterner, the rocks barer, and the flowers more scanty; the green groves disappearing from the waterside, and being replaced by great blocks of granite and porphyry. [36]

Feeling a little doubtful as regarded lunch, we entered the inn door, and picking our way across the very dirty floor of the outer room, in which were assembled some half dozen or so of peasant men and women, with the usual accompaniment of dogs and guns, we were shown by the host into an inner apartment, and supplied with two rickety chairs.

The floor of this apartment was not much cleaner than the other, and a bedstead lately in use filled one end of it. But a capital smell of cooking came from the kitchen on the other side, and through the grimy little window gleamed the bluest sweep of sea and sky. After some conversation with our host, a hairy, black bearded man of polite and sociable proclivities, smoking a short pipe, we discovered that the culinary resources of the establishment consisted of an omelette. But, sniffing again incredulously, and stating our conviction that something better was secreted in the little kitchen, after some hesitation, a soup tureen, containing the most savoury smelling soup, was brought to us. [37]

"Look here, mesdames," said the landlord confidentially, "I have two more ladies upstairs, lodging here; young ladies, whose home is in the Cap, and this is their soup. But, if you will not take too much, you shall have some. The ladies have also my best room, or you would not have had to put up with this poor apartment."

Whilst making his polite speeches, and they were many, our host constantly half raised his fur cap from his bushy hair; but he continued to smoke his short black pipe.

Whilst we were eating our soup, he drew a chair up to the table, and continued the conversation.

"You are Continentales, ladies, are you not? Are you Frenchwomen?"

"No, monsieur, we are English," we replied, feeling gently flattered by the compliment to the purity of our French accent.

It was not until some time later that I discovered that the Corsican lower orders, although often speaking the French tongue tolerably fluently, yet were not very correct judges of the French accent. And I confess my vanity received a shock when a young Corsican gentleman at Corte, who had travelled a good deal and lived some time in Paris, remarked, almost before I had opened my mouth, "You are English, I perceive, mademoiselle? One discovers that at once by your accent!" [38]

This gentleman was very agreeable, and gave me some interesting information about his country; but, from his opening speech, I could have told *him*, however good his accent, that *he* was not a Frenchman.

"Ah!" said the landlord, thoughtfully, "English, to be sure. They travel a great deal, for they are all rich, as rich as possible."

"No," said I; "some of them are very poor." Whereat our black friend laughed incredulously.

It is simply impossible to convince any uneducated Corsican that England is not a nation composed exclusively of millionaires. He thinks every English person has his pocket full of gold. [39]

England, although well known to them all by name, is to them a sort of Ultima Thule; and the mere fact of a journey taken from such a distance for purposes of pleasure, seems to them conclusive upon the point. "How can you say you are not wealthy when you have come all this way to amuse yourselves?" was frequently said to us in a tone of conviction.

This being the popular notion, it is much to the credit of the people, and a proof of the national simplicity and honesty, that imposition and overcharging to strangers is almost unknown.

A little stir outside now attracted the attention of the landlord, and he left us to finish our lunch alone. This appeared to me a favourable opportunity for depriving the Cap Corse young ladies of a little more of their good soup, and I was just going to help myself to a second basinful when the old woman who had spread the table for us, and who no doubt had suspected my felonious intentions, entered from the kitchen and abruptly bore off the tureen upstairs. [40]

So I had to content myself with munching some sour bread, which my companion was already

sharing with a happy family gathered around, consisting of three cats, a dog, two pigeons, and a hen. They did not seem to share our objections to the bread which we found difficult to swallow, even when soaked in the good red wine upon the table.

The peninsula of Cap Corse is celebrated for its red and white wines, which even in the sixteenth century, we are told by the native historian Fillipini, were exported to the Continent and much thought of.

In some particulars, this northern district of Cap Corse bears a stamp of its own, apart from the customary Corsican character. It is one of the most fertile districts in the island. Oranges and lemons, and the fruit called the cédrat, which is neither orange nor lemon, but something between the two, and is much preserved, grow here luxuriantly; whilst vineyards flourish in every direction. [41]

The valleys all along the coast, and especially the Vale of Luri, are green and cultivated; and the population is thicker and more well-to-do than in the other parts of the island. The land certainly is rich and peculiarly friendly to the growth of vines, but the secret perhaps lies in the superior energy of the Cap Corse people.

For several centuries they have manifested an industry truly unpatriotic, and a corresponding neglect of warlike pursuits. Among the gentler inhabitants of this district it was, too, that Christianity found its first converts on the island, from them gradually spreading to the sterner tribes southward; and tradition asserts that St. Paul, amongst his many perils by sea, braved the dangers of this rocky coast, and landed somewhere on Cap Corse as its first missionary.

Sisco also, Gregorovius tells us, possesses a marine church dedicated to St. Catherine, and containing some very remarkable relics, such as the rod with which Moses smote the Red Sea, almonds from the garden of Eden, and even a piece of the lump of earth from which Adam was modelled! [42]

I saw no church in or near Sisco during my short stay there; but, had I then been aware of the reputed possession of these treasures, I should certainly have made some efforts to discover its whereabouts.

We were still struggling with the sour bread when the landlord re-entered. He had rather a triumphant smile upon his countenance, as he remarked quietly, "You cannot go back to Bastia; you must stay here. Your carriage is all broken to pieces."

"That is unfortunate," said we; "but we could not stop here, quand même; we could walk back to Bastia, it is not ten miles." And, leaving the happy family, we walked outside to see the truth of the assertion.

A little crowd of about a dozen people, constituting, I fancy, all the population of the village of Sisco, had gathered round the inn, watching the course of events with a sort of phlegmatic interest.

Our carriage was gone from its original position in the middle of the road, and stood by the wall of the inn yard, with one red pony standing quietly beside it, and the other enjoying a canter on his own account about a quarter of a mile off, and rapidly becoming a speck in the distance. [43]

As we came up, our driver advanced to us, with the pole and part of the carriage in his hand, saying curtly, with the first smile we had yet seen upon his countenance, "The carriage is broken."

To use a slang expression, we both felt a little "floored." "Yes," we replied to this incontrovertible fact; "but don't you think you had better catch the pony?"

Jehu acquiesced silently, and proceeded in a leisurely manner up the road, where, assisted by another man, he managed to capture the recalcitrant pony in an incredibly short space of time.

"Well," we inquired when he returned; "and how are we to continue our journey?"

"You cannot."

"Won't the carriage hold together?"

"Mais non!"

"And how are we to get back to Bastia?" [44]

"Oh, I will mend it up enough for that."

It was impossible to be angry with such a piece of placid indifference as this man, however much one might wish it; one might as well have been angry with a sack of wheat.

So we left him, humming softly to himself, to mend up the carriage as best he could, whilst we walked on towards the Cap for a two or three hours' stroll.

The sun now lay hot upon the shadeless road, which began to mount gently, keeping, however, close above the seashore, and always bastioned on its other side by rocky walls, which after a while gave place to massive lordly hills, green and steep, more than one surmounted by ruined tower or long deserted cloister, braving in solitary grandeur the eastern gales that sweep each crag-topped eminence.

It was a beautiful walk; only a little bit marred by the unpleasant attentions of two men in a mule cart. They passed once, stopping the conveyance to offer us a seat, which we declined; and afterwards shouting and calling after us from a wayside inn, where they had stopped. [45]

On returning homeward, we were not overpleased to see our persecutors again coming after us in their blue blouses and black wide-awakes.

Apparently their journey had been no further than to the inn; and it was probably not the first inn they had visited, for they were more pressing and less agreeable than ever. One man went so far as to jump down from his seat, insisting upon the advantages of a drive in the cart; and it was only by walking on rapidly, with the damping remark that we did not understand a word they said (which, as they spoke a harsh Italian patois, was nearly true), that we at length managed to get rid of them. This, I must remark, was the sole occasion on which any one of us experienced any rudeness or unpleasantness from the behaviour of any grown up Corsican man or woman. One could scarcely say as much for many more frequented countries, after incessant travelling for several weeks in their loneliest and wildest regions. [46]

On nearing Sisco, we met the carriage, driver, and ponies coming slowly towards us.

"See," said the coachman, with a gay, placid smile, "am I not a good workman?" And he pointed to the pole and broken carriage, pieced together by his bits of string. He really seemed to think the breakage altogether quite a clever affair.

"How did the accident originally happen?" we inquired.

"The ponies ran up against the wall whilst I was out of sight for a moment," was the careless reply.

The man was evidently not a fool, but his comfortable phlegm surpassed anything I ever saw, out of Corsica.

On the road home, we passed another round tower standing lonely by the roadside overlooking the sea, and No. 3 got out to sketch it. It was—like all the Genoese towers which strew the country, standing erect on every high cliff and commanding hill—perfectly round and not very lofty, but of immense thickness, and but little ruined. [47]

Apparently, our coachman had not profited much by his morning's lesson; for, whilst we sat by the roadside, he found it more to his taste to come and look over our shoulders than to remain by his carriage. The ponies were anxious to get home, and would not stand. They had already taken the empty carriage, with no guard save Bigemark, half across the road, when I pointed out the fact to Jehu.

"Oh," said he, composedly, "they will stand."

"But," said No. 2, "they are *not* standing; they are moving now."

Again he smiled silently.

"Is it your carriage?" I demanded of the imperturbable man.

"Mais non!"

"Whose, then?"

"M. Stauffe, sans doute."

"Poor M. Stauffe! I am sorry for him. His carriages must come expensive."

Jehu gave a momentary stare, and then took the hint, and departed to his ponies.

No town could look more lovely than did Bastia as we returned homewards. Framed in by a foreground of noble cacti and of green hills on one side, and blue sea on the other, the shipping stood out against a crimson sky, and the white houses lay in the soft evening light against a range of pink and blue and purple mountains. [48]

The wind had moderated, and the Mediterranean, as we entered the town and passed along the broad quay, lay like a shining sapphire against the dark mole; but the calm was delusive, for at night again the sirocco resumed its sway, and a few hours later a vivid thunderstorm was rolling over the angry sea.

Not much beyond Sisco lies Pino, a village on the western shore, surrounded by gardens, vineyards, and the residences of some of the wealthiest of the islanders. Not far from it is the celebrated tower of Seneca, a round tower standing in stern solitude on the summit of a pointed rock rising from amongst the mountains and overlooking two seas. We were very sorry not to see this tower, although it is very doubtful whether it deserves its name, and whether the Roman philosopher, during his eight years' exile in the uncongenial land of Corsica, did really frequent these rocky wilds in preference to the neighbouring towns of Mariana or Aleria. Corsican savagery and Corsican character were unpalatable and incomprehensible to the courtly, selfish stoic, and his comments upon his hosts are little flattering. He calls them liars, robbers, revengeful, and irreligious, and will not even admit the natural beauties of this "rude island," "desolate in situation, scanty in products, and unhealthy in climate." [49]

But the unhappy position of poor Seneca may well explain his ill-temper. He might write long-

winded letters of consolation to his mother, inculcating the beauty of resignation and of a calm indifference to earthly surroundings; but I have no doubt the sour bread and stony roads tried the equanimity of the polished Roman just as much as they do that of the fastidious traveller nowadays, who moreover comes, unlike Seneca, by his own will and for his own pleasure. [50]

CHAPTER IV.

TO ISOLA ROSSA.

Our first long expedition in the island was what may be called the north-western tour, embracing the best part of a circle, and comprising St. Florent, Ile Rousse and Calvi; thence on to Corte.

This tour I think is a good one to begin with, as it is on the whole less interesting and beautiful than the others. After the first day's drive, it does not abound so very much in beauties, and it does abound to a remarkable degree, even for Corsica, in dirt.

Yet, although not so wildly beautiful as some of our expeditions, there was much that was exceedingly picturesque and curious; and Calvi, above all, is a town worth going far to see.

There is only one way of travelling in Corsica, for those who wish to see anything of the country and obtain any enjoyment from their travels; and that is, in a private, hired carriage, which—driver, horses, and carriage—may be had at a reasonable rate per day. [51]

From Bastia we started in style, with a roomy carriage and three horses, for which luxurious equipage we paid thirty francs a day; but charges are higher here than at Ajaccio, and, in our other rounds, we obtained an equally good carriage and two horses, with a very superior coachman, for twenty francs a day.

This is the usual charge all over the island, and includes the keep of both driver and horses; but half the return journey is expected to be paid, as well as a douceur of about two francs a day to the man.

In this case, the excuse was the hilly roads and our heavy luggage, necessitating a third horse; but I think our inexperience was the real cause of the difference. It is as well to fix the bargain beforehand, and also to make some inquiries regarding the man to whom you entrust your precious lives and limbs for several days, as, on these roads, a tipsy or inefficient driver would be no joke. For the comfort of timid travellers I may, however, as well remark, that every Corsican seems born to handle the reins, as a South Sea Islander to swim; and, although very furious drivers, they are remarkably safe ones. Also, that their undoubtedly thirsty habits interfere wonderfully little with their duties. [52]

For instance, the drowsiness which is prone to take possession of many Corsican drivers after the midday halt and thenceforth, and which causes them to nod ominously on the box, has no effect apparently upon a sort of sixth sense, which wakes them up by instinct just in time for a sharp turn, a steep descent, or a bad bit of road.

This Bastia coachman of ours—a big, rough, bullet-headed fellow—was not the most sober of mankind; but, although probably the worse for drink every evening when off duty, he took care not to overstep the nodding stage when in its discharge.

More than once, at the approach of some nasty corner or sudden precipice, the point of an umbrella was levelled at the small of his back; but it never had cause to culminate in a prod, for, precisely at the necessary moment, the furry cap adorning the unkempt head, raised itself, and the brown hands tightened their hold upon the loose reins. [53]

The best course, however, is to forget both bad road and sleepy driver in the glorious prospect that seldom is wanting in Corsica; for a system of nervous watchfulness is not conducive to comfort or enjoyment.

It was not an auspicious day on which we started on our tour. After an early breakfast, we left the Hotel de France at eight o'clock in pouring rain, and began mounting the steep ascent to the Col Teghine.

Steep, indeed, was the hill, and very long; and the position of the third horse was no sinecure. Fortune, however, favours the brave; and before an hour was over, the sun came peeping forth through many a dark rift, blue clouds rose up and filled the gaps, and the sunlight glanced sparkling on dewy flower and crystal-covered olive grove. Thenceforth, the day was fine, and showed to advantage one of the most beautiful drives that can well be imagined. [54]

Steep rose the green hills above and below us, with the blue sea at every turn stretching wide before us, and bringing out into clearer prominence its three islands, whilst the opposite shore of Tuscany lay a soft blue line on the horizon. On the lower slope, groups of olive, orange, and lemon trees—the two latter in full fruit—and the sun shining gaily on the many golden balls; above us, banks of cystus, shining arbutus and Mediterranean heath, with foaming cascades pouring down from the rocky hillsides, and rose-coloured cyclamen and golden broom bending lovingly above their banks.

Bastia, looked down upon from this road, had a very picturesque appearance. It seemed the only bit of life on the wide, desolate-looking plain which stretched away into dim distance to the south, bordered on one side by the sea, and on the other by the inland range of hills, and enclosing an arm of the sea called the Lake of Bigulia. [55]

There is said to have been a Roman settlement and several large towns in this region long ago; but now, all along the extensive plain, the eye can only make out one small village, and it has a pale, deserted look, as if unloved by nature or by man.

And not without reason. From Bastia downwards, almost to the southernmost extremity of the island, this eastern coast is flat, marshy, and malarious.

A man of forty is an old man in this fatal district. Even the natives fly from it, leaving its shores barren and uncultivated; and the poor Italian labourer, who, more industrious than his Corsican neighbour, comes over the sea in spring to till the soil, creeps up each night into the mountains, to avoid sleeping in the deadly air.

When at length we reached the summit of the Col Teghine, the view was magnificent. We were on a narrow ridge 1735 feet high—on one side looking down upon the eastern coast; on the other, upon scattered mountains of every strange form, and a vast panorama of western sea and coast. The large gulf of San Fiorenzo lay before us, indescribably blue; and, into it, stretched out arm [56] after arm of wildest red and purple rocks, glowing far, far below in the cloudless atmosphere. Anything more beautiful than those far-away vivid rock ranges beneath our feet, it would be impossible to conceive; and as for a moment, with our hands full of lovely flowers, we paused on the lonely sky-surrounded pass, and threw ourselves down on the rich maquis, a little lark rose from beside us, in the still mountain hush, and gave voice to nature's meaning. In another moment we began the long descent to St. Florent, surrounded by wild and rugged mountains, the sea always beneath us, the steep road winding along the flanks of barer and less verdant hills, the maquis more abundant, and the flowers rarer than on the other side.

For an hour or more we galloped down, passing a picturesque high towered church, and finally going over a flat plain by the winding shores of the lake-like gulf of St. Florent. Then, with a sudden turn, into a narrow unsavoury little street, where our carriage could scarcely pass, and up to the door of a very uninviting inn, whose interior, however, proved superior to its exterior. [57]

Inns and innkeepers in Corsica may be most correctly described as uninviting. Whatever flourish of trumpets you make on arriving, and however rare an event may be the advent of a carriage of any description, the proprietors never appear to welcome you; and you are expected to toil panting upstairs, all your baggage in your arms, before meeting with any assistance. And this very often in a place where the excitement of a foreigner's coming has been sufficient to rouse the entire population, and send a score or two of shrieking children at your heels.

The hall and staircase of this particular inn were remarkably still and deserted; and being then unused to Corsican eccentricities, we felt doubtful, after one or two silent flights, whether the stone staircase led to anything more promising than empty chambers. But at length, a long, low *salle-a-manger* burst upon us round a corner; and here, with the assistance of a nice dog, and in company with a party of remarkably lively Germans lately deposited by the diligence, we [58] managed to get through some rather sheepy mutton cutlets, good cheese, cakes, and wine, for the modest sum of fifteen pence a-piece. We were likewise offered a dish of raw ham; but this, although included gratis in the bill of fare, we declined politely.

St. Florent is a small and rather dirty village, placed in most picturesque fashion by the edge of the sea. Some of the houses are built upon a narrow ridge of black rocks running out into the sea, and have both back and front washed by the waves and sprinkled by the surf on stormy days.

It has a nice little quay, along which were several good coasting vessels at anchor.

From the inn, whose base was at the water's edge, was a lovely view, spreading across bright blue sea, and over the houses on their rocky ledge to the rosy tinted range of hills behind.

We were to rest here two hours, and determined to take a sketch. But, being about noon, the sun was blazing down upon the unsheltered white road and on the hard brown rocks in an unpleasant [59] manner. So Nos. 2 and 3 crept up a perpendicular bit of cliff, on to a narrow, steep ledge, where there was a foot or two of shade; and here, with the cliff overhanging their perch, and the wonderful water, malachite and purple in its lights and shadows, beneath them, indulged in happy contemplation and artistic effort.

But, alas! solitude and silent reflection are not possible to the English traveller in Corsica; and although the boys of St. Florent were a most superior lot, kind and gentlemanly, they very soon invaded our retreat—creeping along to us on hands and knees (for our ledge necessitated this lowly position), and offering for sale some pretty shells, freshly gathered from their sea bed. For the modest sum of three soldi, or three halfpence, I invested in half a dozen of these. But my St. Florent shells never reached England.

Happening to look up from my sketch a few minutes later, I found that the little heap beside me had all dispersed, and walked themselves over the side of the cliff; whilst one particular beauty, [60] that I had put in my pocket, having taken a little longer to free himself from his embarrassing situation, was yet in sight, making the best of his hermit-crab way back to mother sea. The small salesman evidently did not belong to the anti-vivisection society, for, seeing my discomfiture, he

borrowed a hairpin with much solemnity, and catching the poor crab in mid career, began to pick him out, raising his large brown eyes to us in silent affliction when our humanitarian principles forced us to stop this proceeding.

On returning towards the shore, we found a small crowd of kindly intentioned women and boys gathered on the rocks beneath, to assist us in our perilous descent. Notwithstanding this little obstruction, however, we managed to alight safely, and rejoin No. 1, who, from her baking seat below, had been regarding our amphibious proceedings with some anxiety.

Directly after leaving San Fiorenzo, we began to ascend, the town behind us lying on its little peninsula among the wide blue waters like a crystal, and backed by hills glowing vividly in the hot noonday sun. [61]

In an hour or two we reached the summit of the Col Cerchio, where the scene changed, the hills beside the road opened out, and revealed to us a fine panorama of inland mountains and villages.

The road to Ile Rousse lies nearly all the way through barren rocky hills, varied occasionally by greener cones. A wonderful, weird-looking mountain of red granite, called Monte Temorro, keeps always in sight, sometimes at one side and sometimes at the other of the winding road, but its precipitous bare head never lost. This mountain, in its bleakness, reminds me strongly of the pictures of Quarantana in Palestine.

The rocks grew wilder as at length we reached more level ground, and here there were some attempts at agriculture, refreshing after so much barren scenery.

Jogging along on muleback, we met a man and a woman, both seated on the same beast. It is only round Bastia that the Corsican women affect continental fashions and the side-saddle; everywhere else in the island the women ride cavalier style, and side-saddles are unknown. The two were driving before them a large flock of native sheep, black and white. Corsican sheep are simply lovely. They have long, soft, silky hair, instead of wool, upon their bodies, and their faces are full of expression, with large, pathetic brown eyes. [62]

The road now wound again right over the edge of the sea, and the clear green waves dashed against the brown rocks beneath us, and rolled in transparent curls upon the sandy shore for many a mile, watering with spray the rich shrubs that clothed the cliff to the very water's edge.

Here, on many a lonely hill overlooking the wide waste of waters, stood a massive, round Genoese watch-tower—half-ruined memorial of a cruel sway now passed, but which for centuries crushed out happiness and prosperity, although not resistance, from the heroic little island.

It was between six and seven when we reached Ile Rousse; but long before this, the picturesque promontory from which it takes its name was visible, standing far out into the bay, blood-red against a sunset sky. [63]

The town, neat and tidy, lies at the water's edge, backed by the white snow-cones of Monte Pedro; but the rocks themselves are distinct, and are connected with it by a straggling little quay and long wooden bridge. They are composed of a long rough tongue of red sandstone, torn and rent into every picturesque shape, and running out into the sea for about a quarter of a mile. On the furthest rock rose a solemn watch-tower; on the nearer one, some grey old ruins.

The sun was just setting as we walked over the wooden bridge and climbed upon a high point. The rocks gleamed a fiery red where they caught the last rays, but ghostly black shadows filled their crevices below; and the old watch-tower looked grandly out towards the French coast, painted against an orange sky.

The road leading up from the quay was shaded by an avenue of trees, and was evidently the favourite evening stroll of the Ile Rousse upper ten. A great number of the inhabitants were here, and we were much edified by the polite manner with which one and all raised their hats to us, wishing us "bon soir," one nice-looking Italian sailor, however, varying the salute by offering it in English—we, of course, responding in like manner, greatly to his delight. [64]

The bump of manly courtesy is evidently well developed in Ile Rousse; for, coming up the street, pursued by a horde of excited children, shouting "Inglesé!" the tribe were reprimanded and even caught and pommelled by one or two of the smoking idlers at the street corners.

We often experienced courtesy of this sort amongst the Corsican men, who were far too kind and too well-bred to enjoy seeing us mobbed and annoyed by their progeny; but unfortunately, as a rule, their remonstrances proceeded no further than words, and for a verbal remonstrance the juvenile Corsican cares but little.

These Corsican children were a curious study. In some few places, notably Corte and Propriano, the children were unboundedly impudent; in some few others again, quiet little country villages, they had the modesty and simplicity to be expected in sweet Auburn; but these were exceptions. [65]

They are, generally speaking, utterly fearless, but highly intelligent, eager to follow and criticize your every step, and to demand an answer to every question possible regarding your person and your nationality; but quite open to friendliness.

To those who are neither afraid of them nor angry with them, the pursuing horde will generally, after a few moments, show both civility and politeness. The age of chivalry in Corsica comes early. At thirteen, or even younger, a Corsican boy becomes a courteous young gentleman; and

we soon learnt to feel at ease regarding our tormentors if we saw any approaching to that civilizing period of life.

The inn at Ile Rousse was not uncomfortable, and in appearance was vastly superior to many to which we went later on. We hoped and believed it was the abode of cleanliness; but, alas! hopes and appearances are delusive. The food, however, was excellent. [66]

On our return from our twilight walk, we found our little table d'hôte dinner awaiting us, consisting of good soup, boiled beef, excellent duck, salad, cheese, "gateaux de Corse," and dessert. There were other diners in the general salle; but in consideration of our sex and our gentility, our dinner was brought to us in a smaller detached room.

The diners, however, soon cleared away; and when we entered the salle-a-manger to write our letters, we found the young landlady and her sister quite ready for a chat.

This was our first introduction to an almost invariable custom in small Corsican inns. The reserved Briton who would decline the after-dinner chat with his host or hostess, would be considered here a very churlish individual.

Our landlady, we found, was quite a historical character, being no other than the young woman of the "rose," named in Mr. Lear's book on Corsica. She was not quite so young now as then, it being eleven years since that episode; but she was still blooming, and as gay and talkative as a tame parrot; and whenever she laughed, (and that was not seldom or gently,) she shook the long plait of black hair that hung down her back until it danced again. [67]

First presenting us each with a handsome bouquet of flowers "out of the garden," she and her sister drew their chairs up to the table, and leaning their elbows upon it, prepared for an hour's good gossip. Every one of our nation who had ever visited Ile Rousse was described to us minutely, with the inquiry as to whether we knew him; and the visitor's book, with its laudatory remarks and poetical effusions, shown us, with the urgent entreaty that we would translate those of them that were written in English.

This we did, refusing, however, when we were requested to indite a poem on our own account therein.

This was a sore disappointment to the "lady of the rose," who declared emphatically of No. 1 that she had "la physiognomie poetique!" but who recovered herself the next moment, and begged that we would, on our way upstairs, peep at any rate into the beautiful best bedroom, which she generally gave to her English guests, and which we should have had, had we sent a telegram beforehand to say we were coming, but which unfortunately was now occupied by a Corsican messieur. [68]

So much occupied was it, that it was not until we were fairly in the show apartment, that we discovered that the occupant was already in bed, sleeping the sleep of the just!

We were not aware then, what we learnt later on, how necessary a thing it is in Corsica to telegraph one's coming beforehand. It insures a good dinner; and, at any rate, a room swept out to a certain degree.

You pay a penny a word for telegraphic messages, and there is scarcely a village in the country without its office. Without a telegram, you may arrive to find no rooms, or, what is almost as bad, to be placed in rooms out of which the *family* have kindly turned for your accommodation. We soon learnt by experience to have a perfect horror of these "family rooms." [69]

The accumulated garments of the family lie about in all directions, your jug and basin are even more lilliputian than elsewhere, your bed quilt is grimy (they do not often supply you with blankets in Corsica), and the apartment appears, from its fugginess, never to have known the luxury of open windows.

A gun also occasionally peeps at you from a corner, and a pistol from the mantle-piece; and the family run in at all hours for their blacking brushes, their best boots, or a bottle of *vin ordinaire* on the top of the household chest: but these are small matters.

Very beautiful looked the sea, lapping against the walls of the houses, and scattering spray over the red rocks, at 6 a.m. next morning; but in an hour it had clouded over, and sea and sky and rocks were all leaden grey in a lowering thunderstorm. At nine o'clock, however, it cleared up a little, and we started for Calvi, passing through green meadows and cultivated land to the summit of a mountain, and down again to the village of Algajola by the sea shore. Loving maquis clothed the limestone hills as we ascended again, looking beyond the grey crags, covered with soft green moss or scarlet leeks, to the village and ancient castle of Lumio. Long before we reached them, the snow mountains were raising white heads over the green hills before us; and as we paused on the summit of the second pass, the full view of the magnificent bay of Calvi burst upon us, sweeping out as far as the eye could reach, and glowing in the midday sun. [70]

Figs, lemons, and prickly pear bordered our road as we descended through rocky hills to the long narrow level tract preceding Calvi; and, all the way, the wide blue sea beckoned on one side to the solemn range of snowy Alps upon the other.

It is impossible to describe the exceeding picturesqueness of the town and citadel as you approach from this road. Calvi lies upon a peninsula of high ground jutting out into the sea, and [71]

consists of two distinct towns—the lower, at the water's edge; and the upper, which comprises the citadel, built upon the hill.

The citadel, with the exception of Bonifacio, is the strongest in the island. Its bastion walls are of an immense height, gleaming white against the blue sky, and their thickness and impregnability are equal to their height. Nine or ten times have these bastion walls been assailed by foes of every nation, including the English, wearing out the very heart of the foe by their stern resistance, and often finally foiling his most determined efforts.

Planted upon inaccessible rocks commanding the sea, and formed by the very nature of its position for defence, the Genoese at an early date (about the fourteenth century) fortified it thus strongly; and although sometimes losing it for a while, yet managed to keep it in their hands for long centuries. Bonifacio and Calvi, both to a certain degree colonized by Genoese families, and filled with Genoese soldiers, were for many years the main, and often the only, cords by which this cruel and tyrannical government held on to unfortunate Corsica. [72]

In the year 1735, a romantic little incident occurred upon this coast. It was towards the conclusion of one of the innumerable Corsican struggles against Genoese despotism, when, in the hopeless but undying cause of liberty, the blood of the islanders had been shed with an unwearied devotion and unassisted heroism that at last moved the heart of the practical but freedom-loving Briton to a sudden burst of sympathetic feeling. It would be a pity to tell the story in any other words but those of Gregorovius.

"Their embarrassments had become almost insupportable, when, one day, two strange vessels came to anchor in the Gulf of Isola Rossa (Ile Rousse), and began to discharge a heavy cargo of victuals and warlike stores—gifts for the Corsicans from unknown and mysterious donors. The captains of the vessels scorned all remuneration, and only asked the favour of some Corsican wine in which to drink the brave nation's welfare. They then put out to sea again, amid the blessings of the multitude who had assembled on the shore to see their foreign benefactors. [73]

"This little token of foreign sympathy fairly intoxicated the poor Corsicans. Their joy was indescribable: they rang the bells in all the villages; they said to one another that Divine Providence, and the Blessed Virgin, had sent their rescuing angels to the unhappy island, and their hopes grew lively that some foreign power would at length bestow its protection on Corsica.... Generous Englishmen had equipped these two ships...." [74]

CHAPTER V.

THE CURÉ OF CALVI.

Driving through an irregular little street with overhanging houses, our coachman suddenly stopped before a dirty stone staircase. This, he informed us, was the entrance to our hotel. We were suspicious; and the event proved how just were our suspicions.

It seemed incredible that a large town like Calvi should furnish no better inn than this wretched looking one; besides which, we had been distinctly advised to go to a certain Madame Puoggi in the Haute Ville, and this was the Basse Ville.

But it was impossible to move our stolid coachman. This was the best, the only inn in Calvi: he had never heard of Madame Puoggi: there was no inn in the upper town at all. Alas! we afterwards discovered that this degenerate Corsican lied in this, as in other matters; and that [75] fate and his obstinacy had led us to the third best inn in the town! But, unable ourselves to discover the mysterious Madame Puoggi, we were forced to submit to destiny.

The sun was shining hotly upon white (or what had been white) pavement, when we descended from the carriage, and the scene was one of the gayest and most pictorial I ever looked upon.

A narrow, uneven street, houses with tumbledown balconies and broken stone staircases, opening out before us to a wide white quay with the gleaming sea alongside, and a row of vessels like Arab dhows at anchor, drying their long drooping sails in the sun.

Behind these, the grand old citadel, white and fierce, looking down with the pride of five centuries upon quay and town, and sea and hill; and from the opposite coast, as far as the eye could reach northward, a chain of receding blue mountains.

Most of the vessels had come from the African coast, bringing a motley array of foreign sailors. [76]

As our carriage drew up, three ghostly beings, draped in white sheeting from head to foot, with nought but black beard and shining black eyes emerging, stood motionless, a yard or two off, silently watching our unbelieving footsteps as we entered the inn. Calvi is full of these stately Arabs. Every corner you turn, you find one or two sitting squatting in the sun in their white sheets, still as statues, but silently following you with eyes full of a contemptuous astonishment.

After a hasty lunch in a room overhanging the emerald sea, and where a balcony looked straight into its depths—a room with the most perfect view ever framed by nature, but greatly marred by man's neglect of drainage—we went out to explore the citadel.

Passing along the gay quay, and ascending a steep slope of stones and rubbish between the houses, we found ourselves on the hill from whence sprung the bastion walls, surrounded by sea on every side save one.

It made one almost giddy to stand at the base of these great sloping walls, and look up their lofty face; and one felt no surprise at the numerous shocks they had defied. Then, by a steep narrow ascent, cut in the rock and protected by stony walls, we mounted into the heart of the citadel, and the haute ville within. This haute ville, enclosed by the fortifications, is the original old town; the basse ville below being of much later date. [77]

The houses inside the citadel were all of stone, and although close together, in narrow, winding stony streets, up which no vehicle could possibly go, were built with some attempt at regularity, and were not so dirty looking as those in the lower town. There being absolutely nothing but stone in the haute ville, the streets were comparatively free from dust, and the high wind that swept over this lofty perch sent a sweet refreshing air through the walled-in causeways.

The church stood in the main street, in the centre of the citadel. Repairs were going on inside, and we strolled in, being soon joined by the curé, a man about thirty, with a thin pale face and a sweet smile. Gentle goodness was written on the features of this man; and very shy was he before three strange Englishwomen, and altogether nervous of his French idioms, but with a Corsican enthusiasm in his wild dark eyes. The church, he told us, was built in 1100, but partially destroyed by fire (coming, of course, from an enemy's bombshell!) about two hundred years ago, as an inscription cut upon the outside steps testified. He showed us the old font of black and white and red Corsican marble, belonging to the fifteenth century, of which age also was the marble altar. A strange old bas-relief in the chancel wall was much older than this, and had been only lately found and uncovered. "Calvi," said the curé, with his dark eyes glowing, "has been bombarded eight or ten times, but she has never succumbed. The church is as strong as the rest of her fortifications, and has resisted many a siege. She has never been taken, 'si ce n'était pas par les Anglais.'" He showed us a large, badly executed statue of our Lord, placed within a most curious and beautiful old frame, composed of separate small squares of oil-paintings on sacred subjects. [78] [79]

"See," he said, "there used to be a life-size picture of the Saviour inside that frame, and it was very ancient and beautiful. It hung upon that wall opposite, under the western window; but the English, in bombarding our citadel, sent a ball clean through the wall and shot away the picture. So we removed it here behind the altar, and placed this statue within the frame."

"Ah!" said No. 1, "that was Nelson's doing."

"Yes," said the curé, with one of his shy bright smiles, "it was your great naval commander, Nelson. But, although he took Calvi, and destroyed the picture, he left an eye behind him!"

And this was true enough.

"But," said No. 3, "you Corsicans like the English, do you not? They have often been friendly to you."

"Yes," he replied; "the English are a free nation, and they can feel for those who fight for liberty."

We were quite sorry to say good-bye to our new friend, as we left him standing on the steps of his grand old church, the wind lifting his black hair, and a farewell smile lighting up the refined, visionary face, as he crossed himself with a thin brown hand. [80]

Leaving the church, we wandered amongst the mazes of the little streets, which seemed strangely deserted in the midday sun; feeling glad at length to leave the strong glare of the citadel, and descend to the sea and lower town.

In doing so we missed our way among the many loopholed stone passages, and No. 1, fired by a desire to rouse one of those impassive white statues and hear his voice, stopped short before an Arab crouched upon a step, demanding of him our whereabouts.

The white bundle with the swarthy face, however, treated us with the contempt due to our temerity, never even taking the trouble to raise his black eyes, but keeping his stolid gaze fixed upon the sea before him.

I began to think these doubled-up men could not move, so motionless were they; and felt quite relieved when, later on in the evening, I saw them striding, positively running—turbans unloosed, white robes flapping, and shoes and stockings showing—up and down the streets, buying provisions preparatory to a start. [81]

The shore of the bay surrounding Calvi is wide and smooth, with a fine sand and pretty shells, including a vast number of the mauve-coloured *Donax*. The morning mists were clearing away, and it was very pleasant to lie here, as we did, basking in the sun, watching snow peak after snow peak, behind the blue hills opposite, slowly unveil itself and stand out in a lovely white glow. The snow looked so close and so cool, bowing over the hot sands, and throwing shadows on to the sea beneath.

Coming home across the sandhills, which separate the shore from the level road, we came upon the most perfect and beautiful flowers I ever saw. They were a species of low growing cactus, only rising a few inches from the ground, the blossoms of a most brilliant rose colour. They had [82]

the appearance of chrysanthemums, and were about three or four inches across, covering the sandhills for yards with an unbroken sheet of vivid crimson.

Returning to the inn, we found our dinner awaiting us, as well as three native "gentlemen," who were anxious to commence operations at their table, but could not do so until our advent.

These were the three avocats who, we had been previously informed, unfortunately occupied the three best bedrooms. These individuals we necessarily looked upon as our natural enemies; and our prejudice against them was not mitigated by the terrific noise made by them and the pretty waitress together.

She was a fat, untidy, golden-haired blonde; one of the prettiest women I ever saw in or out of Corsica, but gifted with the strongest faculty for banging about earthenware and metal utensils that could well be imagined.

This was the spoilt child of the house, adopted, we were informed, by the dark young hostess because of her superior education, which enabled her to talk French to the guests. And talk French she did, unceasingly—to the male guests, at any rate; standing with arms akimbo against [83]
the wall, chaffing Messieurs les avocats to our utter neglect, and making such a babel, between crockery flung about and shrieking repartee, that we felt strongly inclined to throw a plate at her touzled golden head.

Dinner, however, was achieved at last; and on re-entering our rooms, what a sight met us!

The sun had just set, and twilight was creeping on, but the whole of the near range of hills opposite lay bathed in a crimson glow that was almost blood red, and was reflected in the clear waters below. The glow remained for about five minutes, and then gradually faded away into the soft grey of evening. Never in my life did I see anything more beautiful or vivid than that sunset glow at Calvi.

Nos. 2 and 3 soon found that no retirement was to be had in their chamber. The low open window looked out upon a balcony, which led up by steps direct from the main street of the town. [84]

The window-sill was just of a convenient height for the populace to lean their elbows upon, which they accordingly did, in large numbers. We could only shut out our visitors by closing both windows and inside shutters; and we preferred the populace.

At last came a swarthy black-browed Italian, introduced by the pretty waitress, whose noisy admirers had departed with their cigars down the street, and who therefore had nothing better to do than to gossip with us. He was a sailor, and his hands were full of pretty trinkets of coral and lava, picked up by himself.

His Italian patois was peculiar, and the waitress acted interpreter, whilst we bargained for his wares. He was a queer looking man, as black and dirty as soot and absence of soap and water could make him, with a passionate, cut-throat looking face, that broke out occasionally into childlike smiles.

The bargains being completed to every one's satisfaction, No. 1, who alone of us three could make herself understood by our dark friend, plunged him suddenly into a condition of hopeless [85]
confusion and swarthy blushes by requesting of him a song.

"Oh, madame, I cannot sing!"

"What! an Italian sailor not sing?"

"No, no; indeed, madame, I cannot."

"What, not this?" and madame hummed a gay boating song.

If our friend did not sing the song, it was clear that he knew the words of it well, for on hearing them he became greatly excited, seizing both madame's hands in his and pressing them affectionately.

Some weeks later, when at Ajaccio, Nos. 2 and 3, strangely enough, again lighted upon our sailor friend. He was standing at the hotel door with a companion, armed with fresh corals and some lovely feathery seaweed. He seemed delighted to see us again, inquiring effusively after No. 1, and informing us that he had worked his way on foot from Calvi.

By the time our sailor had departed, it was growing dark. But our visitors were not over. The door opened, and in trooped four or five people, carrying with them the "canapie" which was to be devoted to our use for the night, and proceeding leisurely, amidst much gossip, to make the [86]
bed.

We understood and tolerated the presence of the master of the house over this ceremony; but I was a little puzzled by the comfortable deportment of a tidily dressed young man, who came in with the rest, examined the shells upon the dressing-table, and entered into easy conversation with us.

I inquired of giddy golden-head who he was.

"Oh," she said, carelessly, "he is a friend of ours; mate of a vessel in the harbour."

I made no response to this, for I began to feel my ignorance regarding manners and customs in

Corsica.

The next morning, the usual rain was pouring down in bucketsful overhead; but very thankful were we, after a sleepless night, an early breakfast, and a dear bill, to depart from Hotel Colombani, with its indescribable dirt and smells, its exquisite views, and its loud waitress. [87]

CHAPTER VI.

THE HAUTE BALAGNE.

The road from Calvi to Belgodere, usually the third day's journey from Bastia, mounts nearly the whole way, Calvi being on the sea level, and the village of Belgodere high up amongst the hills. It passes along one of the most famous routes in Corsica, that which runs through the mountains overlooking the Haute and Basse Balagne.

The Balagne shares with Cap Corse the reputation of being the richest and best cultivated district in Corsica, and consists of a splendid valley, apparently from three to seven miles wide, filled with rich grain fields and vineyards, and scattered with fruit trees. Oranges, cherries, and figs lined the road, and crept down towards the valley, varied by thick groves of olives. As the road ascended more and more, the view across the valley becomes more extensive and magnificent, until at length the most splendid panorama of mountain ranges, of snow Alps, and of peeps of blue sea, lies before the traveller. [88]

Both Mr. Lear and Miss Campbell speak of this Balagne country as one of the most beautiful conceivable, and its views as unparalleled; but, unfortunately for us, we passed the first half of it in a downpour that veiled everything a dozen yards off with a thick white curtain. The second half was seen imperfectly, yet grandly, as the sun broke out in gleams, parting the mists in eccentric mood; showing here a mountain, there a bit of sea, and further on a line of sparkling valley.

For several miles we had to return upon our yesterday's road, but at Lumio branched off. The castle was wrapped in a grey cloak this morning; and long before we could see them, we heard the numerous swollen cascades rushing down the hillside in front of us, then dashing below in a leaping waterfall as we passed over the stone bridge.

The drenching rain had now continued three hours, making a temporary bath of the bottom of our carriage, and dripping in a melancholy sequence of drops through the rather ancient hood above our heads. [89]

Stopping at the half-way house, to bait the horses, we found they were better off than we, for that absolutely nothing was procurable for lunch but sour bread and uneatable goat's cheese.

Both mind and body were beginning to feel thoroughly damped, when a sudden lifting of the clouds, and ray of blessed sunshine, revived our hopes and restored our equanimity. We left off feeding the handsome, timid retriever, who, sitting half-drowned in the middle of the river course which we called our road, was gratefully accepting bits of brown dusty bread, and began to look about us. All around the olives were trembling with the rain, looking more purely silver than ever with the dewdrops hanging on their grey foliage, and beneath our feet stretched the rich, winding valley, filled with rolling banks of vapour.

Scattered thickly over the valley were the houses of the proprietors; and a village nestled in every available mountain cranny, and on many a hill top. [90]

Speloncato especially, a village on the summit of a very high conical hill, is most picturesque, and followed us all the way to Belgodere, the road winding round it.

The sun had a magical effect, not only in lifting the thick curtain that hung before nature's fine panorama, but in drying the broad level road. The roads throughout Corsica, with very few exceptions, are first rate. They are kept smooth and in good repair, and are often soft as park drives. Many of them were constructed by the First Napoleon, and are perhaps his best legacy to his native land.

In an hour the water course had almost dried up, and the steep ascent became less dragging to the tired horses.

A lovely snow mountain rose suddenly up from the very road-side, and a cold wind blew between the crevices of the hills upon us.

Belgodere is a large, picturesquely placed village of twelve hundred inhabitants, rising up the side of a sugar loaf hill, backed by ranges of mountains, and looking over lower hills in front to the Mediterranean below. [91]

The tiny village inn was more unpretentious than any we had yet seen. The doorway was about equal to that of a labourer's cottage in England, and the little broken wooden staircase up which we went was dark and dirty. The bedrooms, however, were a pleasing disappointment. There were only two in the house, prepared for the reception of guests; but they were spotlessly clean, and, as we afterwards found, very comfortable.

The man and his wife, as usual accompanied by all the family, (in this case only consisting of an octogenarian father, one or two small children, and four cats,) escorted us to our rooms, and apologized for the fact that we could not have the third room, as it was occupied by "les vers." This explanation rather tickling my curiosity, and being anxious to know whether "les vers" could, by any possibility, desert their room for ours, which I felt undesirable, I presently peeped into the third apartment, and found it a mass of sleepy silk-worms, hard at work absorbing cabbage [92] leaves. In this part of the country, a great many silk-worms are kept, and they are more lucrative than occasional guests. This was not the only occasion on which we found them filling one of the best bedrooms, to our exclusion.

After depositing our wraps, we went out, and were conjured to mount the "Rocher" on the very top of the hill; where, as our landlady informed us, all "les Anglais" went to see the view of the Balagne.

The opinion of society, as expressed in the inn, being too much for us, we accordingly climbed over stony ruts, and up a steep stone staircase to the Rocher, in a tearing wind, and escorted by twenty or thirty excited children. There we found the view, as we had expected, precisely the same as that we had seen on our drive hither.

We accordingly returned to our six o'clock dinner, when we were informed that we must not open the windows of the little sitting-room, as the silk-worms did not like it, and it might give them cold!

The dinner was, as usual, very good, consisting of soup, a very excellent little Mediterranean fish, [93] called sahl, haricot beans, and fowl, finishing with the national dish of broccia. Broccia, or "brasch," as some of the country people call it, is a pudding made of the pressed curds of goat's milk. You get it almost every day for breakfast, lunch, or dinner, in the inland parts of the island, and it is excellent, mixed either with a little lemon, or a sauce of brandy and sugar. It is a trifle insipid by itself.

After dinner, the cats all paid us a visit, and then the dear old octogenarian came in and had a chat, showing us an Italian sort of *British Workman*, profusely illustrated, which he seemed to consider an untold treasure, and which he said had been given him two years ago, by a "gentille jeune Anglaise." [94]

CHAPTER VII.

THE COUNTRY OF SERAFINO AND MASSONI.

The next morning, at half-past seven, we left pretty Belgodere among its wild hills, saying good-bye to the simple-hearted proprietors of the clean little rooms, to the courteous old octogenarian, and to the four cats.

All night long the nightingales had been shouting, from under a clear sky, through our open windows; but the clouds began to lower as we started, and a showery day ensued.

For several hours we continued mounting towards the Col Colombano, the cultivated Basse Balagne lying at our feet, and the noblest views of sea and mountain constantly before us. Belgodere was at no mean elevation; and, as we mounted higher and still higher amongst the [95] "everlasting hills," ranges of mountains of every colour lay, one behind the other, before us—red, blue and purple—some veiled in half mists, and some shining with a far-away sunlight,—separated from us by miles of grey atmosphere.

Over our heads and under our feet, great white masses of cloud were constantly passing hurriedly, often wrapping us in a fine rain, and hiding from us, for a few moments, everything but their own chilly grey curtain.

At the summit of the Col the sun broke out for a few minutes, and lit up a most magnificent view. It seemed as if we could go no higher. Everything lay beneath us, to the very edge of the distant soft horizon, and the hush of Nature in her solitude and her solemnity fell gently over sea and land and sky.

Not a sound was to be heard among those lonely hills; and yet the silence was eloquent, as is always such a summer silence up in the heights.

"For when the eloquent is mute,
Silence itself is eloquent.
It is the dam upon the river, [96]
Whereon the waters press for ever,
By their own fulness pent."[1]

The road at the Col split into two; and, taking the inland one, we began at once to descend rapidly, leaving behind us the magnificent views and the blue sky, and turning into monotonous

green hills, sloping down to a river bordered by willows, and a colourless sky, whose leaden clouds were discharging themselves with a quiet persistence that denoted their "staying" properties.

Our mid-day halt was at Ponte alle Lecchia, where the river, widening out and dashing in white foam, throws itself over boulders of bright green porphyry under a handsome bridge. Ponte alle Lecchia is an inconsiderable village, but it is the junction between the Bastia and Calvi roads, and every diligence stops here on the road from Bastia to Corte. The little inn, before which we stopped, was wretched and filthy, and they had absolutely nothing in the house but bread and sardines, for which they charged us a high price. I say "nothing," for I mean nothing eatable by [97] civilized people. We were, as usual, offered bacon and cheese; but, as the first was raw, and the second could have been smelt a quarter of a mile off, these we declined.

We made, however, a good fire of blazing sticks on the open hearth, and, surrounded by the curious eyes of all the inmates of the inn, guests or otherwise, dried our soaked garments.

The hills between Belgodere and Ponte alle Lecchia were the home of the celebrated bandit Serafino.

Serafino was a man of war, as is every bandit; but he appears to have been of gentlemanly manners. His death occurred about thirty years ago, and many stories are preserved of his courtesy to women, and his protection of the poor. The Corsican bandit, as a rule, never robs: he is supported, either by the produce of his flocks, which he brings in by night to his native village, or by the voluntary contributions of his relations. [98]

But, on one occasion, when Serafino found it absolutely necessary that he should possess himself of a pair of new boots, he demanded them with so much courtesy from a solitary officer of gendarmerie, not fully armed, that that individual must have felt the loss of his property almost compensated for by the genteel politeness of the robber. Serafino never permitted the poor to be molested, and it is related of him that he one day pursued and slew with his own hand a thief, who, under the false cover of his dreaded name, had deprived a peasant of his wallet,—restoring his possessions to the poor traveller.

Serafino, although a bandit pursued incessantly by the law, did not find sufficient excitement in his skirmishes with the French gendarmes, and kept up a lively vendetta on his own account with a fellow-bandit named Massoni.

On one of these occasions on which the brother bandits chanced to meet each other in the lonely maquis, Massoni's shot took effect, and deprived his enemy thenceforth of one of his fingers. [99]

About the year 1850, Serafino met with the almost invariable end of the bandit. He was shot dead by the soldiers whilst lying asleep in his cave, having been betrayed by some villagers.

With all other bandits, he was hunted from hill to hill like a wild beast by the gendarmes, who showed no mercy and gave no quarter to the men who would have scorned to receive it, and whose whole life was spent in outwitting and murdering them and their companions.

Wonderfully brave, and even noble hearted, were many of these Corsican bandits; and it seems sad that apparently a mere chance of life should throw splendid qualities, an indomitable energy, and dauntless courage, into the cause of murder and vagabondism.

Massoni, the enemy of Serafino, roamed about the same fastnesses, and originally belonged to a Balagna family.

He was by birth a gentleman, and brave as a lion; but the unhappy vendetta had driven him from his home, believing himself a righteous avenger, but pursued by the gendarmes as a murderer. [100]

For many years he lived amongst the mountains of La Haute Balagne, in company with his brother and another bandit called Arrighi, keeping the French police at bay, and in their frequent contests killing numbers of their pursuers.

The trio were supported by their relations, and were surrounded by friendly shepherds. But treachery, incited by a rough action, overtook them at last.

Massoni was one day visited by a friend from his own village in Balagna, who came to ask his advice and assistance regarding the revenge to be taken on a man of position who had insulted his family. Massoni, wishing to treat his guest hospitably, requested a lamb from a friendly shepherd. His request was not refused, but Massoni took offence at the leanness of the gift. "It is for a guest; I must have a fat one," said he; and without further ceremony he chose out his lamb, and, shooting it down, carried it off in his arms.

The shepherd had neither the power nor the daring to resist the bandit, or openly resent his [101] rudeness, but he determined to pay him out for what he had done.

Soon after the departure of Massoni he left his rocky cabin among the hills, and, descending to the gendarmerie, offered to betray the hiding-place of the bandits.

Cautiously, and in great numbers, the gendarmes mounted the steep hill, until at length the shepherd paused before an almost inaccessible cave, the mouth of which was entirely hidden by the maquis. Arrighi and Massoni's brother were within, asleep; but Massoni himself kept watch at the entrance.

He had not heard the soldiers creeping noiselessly up the rocky paths, and now he was surrounded, some above, and some below. Nothing was audible, until one of the soldiers, to find out if the men were really there, threw a stone from above into the thick bushes at the cave's mouth.

Massoni sprang out to see the danger, firing off his pistol to awaken his companions, who started up from their sleep as he fell upon the cavern floor, pierced by the balls of the soldiers. [102]

And now Massoni's brother leapt out among the rocks, bounding like a wild goat from point to point, until one of the many shots fired at him took effect, and he fell dead upon the hill-side.

Arrighi, however, remained within, and when, at length, after much hesitation, some of the gendarmes dared to enter the cave where lay hid the dreaded bandit, he was nowhere to be found.

All night was the silent watch kept; but when, early in the morning, some of the soldiers moved off to a neighbouring spring for water, two shots, fired suddenly from the mysterious cavern, struck through the heart two of their number; and the party who went to fetch in their dead bodies lost another man from the same fatal gun.

It was of no use to fire madly into the rocky cavern, the prisoner remained uninjured and undiscoverable.

After waiting another day or two, and vainly endeavouring to smoke their enemy out of his concealment, an engineer with other officials were sent for from Corte, and it was arranged that the cave should be blown up by gunpowder. The desperate man inside, for whose death, just though it certainly was, it seemed pitiful to think that the assistance of so many of his fellow-creatures should be required, overheard the proposal, and resolved at last to take flight. [103]

He waited, however, for night, when, under cover of the darkness, he escaped from his hiding-place. He had already got away to some distance when a ball hit him in the leg; but, with the despair of the hunted animal, he struggled on, leaving a bloody trail upon the ground as he passed.

When morning dawned, the gendarmes found the outlaw, who for years had been their terror and the object of their pursuit, lying faint and exhausted among the rocks. Yet, even then, they feared to approach too near the dying brave, and creeping up cautiously, they fired upon him whilst yet he was unconscious of their approach, and in another moment Arrighi lay upon the slope of Monte Rotondo, a dead man.

The next day the bodies of six men—three bandits and three soldiers—were carried in a sad procession down the hill-side to the plain below, and the French Government was rid of three of the most celebrated and intrepid of Corsican bandits. [104] [105]

CHAPTER VIII.

SOME MORE ABOUT BANDITS.

Some of the Corsican bandits have been, not only objects of admiration, but of love, to their fellow-countrymen in general, who willingly contributed to their support. Even if their first adoption of lawless life were not due to their dislike of a foreign government—for long not quite palatable to the free wild people of the interior—yet their after-life consisted of a series of skirmishes against, and contests with, a police towards whom the majority of the islanders owed some grudge or other. One of the most celebrated of these men, and one who became, in the eyes of his own people, a hero of romance, was a bandit of the name of Teodoro, who lived at the commencement of the present century.

Teodoro became a bandit, not from any private quarrel, or from fear of the consequences of any deed of violence, but to escape joining the ranks of the French soldiery, by whom he had been somewhat roughly seized and enrolled amongst their number. [106]

The young Corsican had no objection to a warlike occupation, but he did not choose to lose his liberty, nor had he any wish to fight for the masters of his country.

So he escaped to the mountains, by his daring spirit and love of adventure becoming at once the terror of his enemies and the darling of his countrymen.

He called himself King of the Mountains, and imposed taxes upon the villagers around to keep up his state; but they were grudged by few, for the king was handsome, fascinating, and generous. His life was full of wild, bloody, and romantic incidents; but meanness was never connected with his name. He was a staunch friend, and even a forgiving foe. His companions, besides his queen, were an uncle named Angellone, and another bandit called Brusco.

Brusco and Teodoro were bound together by the ties of a tender friendship, but this friendship was the cause of secret jealousy to Angellone. One day a quarrel took place in Teodoro's absence, and the elder man murdered his nephew's friend, then escaping to the maquins. [107]

Teodoro, heart-broken at the loss of Brusco, swore a furious oath to avenge him at the hands of his murderer. According to ancient fashion, he began to let his beard grow, as a solemn witness to this oath.

But not for long. The murderer could not long escape his pursuing hand, and ere long the King of the Mountains re-appeared with a smooth chin.

Teodoro shared the usual fate of the outlaw. He was betrayed, whilst lying ill in his mountain home, to the gendarmes, who showed little mercy to the dying man. Sick though he was, however, he fought even then to the death, and laid two of his assailants low, before his arms fell motionless and his proud spirit succumbed to the last of his foes.

It is reported that, after his death, some of the villagers came up the hill-side, and, under the influence of love or fear to the memory of the famous bandit, offered the contributions due to the King of the Mountains towards the support of his queen and her infant child. [108]

Probably of a different stamp was a young brigand whose execution at Bastia, in the summer of 1852, is so pitifully described by Gregorovius in his book on Corsica, himself being an eye-witness of part of the scene.

He was but three and twenty, beautiful of face, strong as a lion, and brave and fierce as a wild beast; but the accusation against him was that he had murdered ten men out of "caprice"!

What an extraordinary madness must that have been which incited this poor young Corsican, probably from no reason but the insensate lust of blood, for no purposes of robbery or even adequate anger, to murder his fellow-men!

The very unnaturalness of the phenomenon arouses pity from those whose bringing-up makes such a wild-beast madness incomprehensible to them. One wonders in what atmosphere poor Bracciamozzo had been reared—whether he had been brought up in the bandit's cave, accustomed to sights of brutal ferocity and the indulgence of every fierce passion, and growing up to find his hand against every man. [109]

This was the probable commencement of a life which, at three and twenty, was to end stained by so much crime. That the young brigand was all bad, it is impossible to believe, reading Gregorovius' account.

Death was no terrible stranger to him; he had been accustomed to its pale face from boyhood, and he was not likely to flinch even before its more horrible appearance on the public scaffold.

With his one arm bound behind his back (for he had lost the other in a fight with the gendarmes), he walked to his death firmly and quietly. There was no vulgar air of braggadocio about him, no attempt to excite any momentary popular sympathy by dramatic means. He died unflinchingly, not as a hero, but as a penitent, acknowledging his black deeds. "I pray God and the world for forgiveness," said the young murderer, with native brevity, on the scaffold, "for I acknowledge that I have done much evil." [110]

I will not here stop to speak of the Bella Coschia brothers, the last two bandits whose wild deeds have made them famous in Corsica. They are yet alive, and not much beyond middle age; but their history belongs to another part of the island, where I heard much of them.

I must close this chapter with a dirge, or *vocero*, roughly translated from the Corsican patois, and which was improvised at the funeral of a bandit called Canino, some years ago.

These voceri are one of the peculiarities of Corsica. Until quite lately, it was constantly the custom, at the funeral of any great or popular person, or, indeed, over the coffin of any man, woman, or child whose death was due to accident, murder, or any sudden and terrible circumstance, for the nearest of kin (usually the sister or mother of the dead person) to break out into some impromptu song of lamentation, couched in rude but often stirring verse. [111]

These mournful dirges were striking in their rugged but earnest simplicity; and fortunately some of them have been preserved and printed at Ajaccio.

The custom of singing the vocero, like most other ancient and romantic customs, is now, however, slowly but surely dying out in the island.

VOCERO OVER THE DEAD BODY OF CANINO, A BANDIT.

BY HIS SISTER.

Now shall my voice re-echo
  Loud as the thunder roars,
Where San Pietro nestles,
  Or Vizzavona soars;
By which to many a distant land
Gallona bears her witness grand.

In Luco Nazza see a crowd
  Met together for the chase:
Bandits[2] and soldiers all as one—
  A right accursèd race:
With bloody hands but yesterday
They started all upon their way. [112]

In the valley's deepest gorges
  Might be heard the roaring wind,
From Ghisoni bringing evil—
  Terror, in its wake behind—
In its hollow notes proclaiming
Coming treachery and wailing.

At the horn's shrill sounding gathered,
  Wolves and lambs together showed:
Marched alongside in their union,
  Quickly up the rocky road,
Till upon the pass they stood,
Where they shed thy heart's life blood.

When I heard the loud lamenting
  I threw wide the lattice pane,
Asking, "What has happened? tell me?"
  "'Tis your brother—he is slain!
Captured in his mountain lair,
He was foully slaughtered there!"

Now thy skill can spare thee nothing—
  Of what use thy bravery?
What thy dagger or thy pistol
  Now can do for thee?
What avail thy charm to wear,
Or to hug thy secret prayer?[3]

At the sight of all thy gashes,
  Anguished grows my wailing.
Wherefore comes no answer from thee?
  Is thy courage failing?
Cani, thy sister's heart grows strange
And all my nature seems to change. [113]

In the neighbourhood of Nazza
  A blackthorn I will grow,
To show that of our race no longer
  Any shall come or go:
Because at last, not two or three,
But five opponents worsted thee!

Oh, for thy shoulders broad!
  Oh, thine activity!
Like to a stalwart, budding branch—
  None could compare to thee.
Save for thy memory alone,
My weary life could not drag on.

Beneath the flowering chestnut-tree,
  There will I take my rest,
Because that there, O much beloved,
  They pierced thy bleeding breast.
Now will I drop my woman's garb,
  Take gun and pistol in my hand,
The tarzitta will buckle on,
  And gird the weapon band.
Cani, a sister's heart will know
How to wreak vengeance on thy foe!

IN MORTE DI CANINO, BANDITO,

VOCERO DELLA SORELLA.

(*Dialetto della pieve di Ghisoni.*)

Eo buria che la me' voci
Fusse tamant'e lu tonu,
Chi passasse per la foci
Di San Petru e Vizzavonu;
Per chi soni in ogni locu
La gran prova di Gallonu. [114]

Quandu intesi li brioni,
M'affaccai a lu purteddu
Dimandai: chi nova c'eni?—
Hanu tombu u to frateddu:
L'hanu presu in du la serra;
N'hanu fattu lu maceddu.

Nun ti valse lu curaggiu,
Nun ti valse la schiuppetta,
Nun ti valse lu pugnali,
Nun ti valse la tarzetta;
Nun ti valse ingermatura,
Nè razione binadetta.

A guardà le to ferite
Mi s'accresci lu dulori.
Perchè più nun mi rispondi?
Forse ti manca lu cori?
O Canì, cor di suredda,
Hai cambiatu di culori.

A lu paese di Nazza
Eo ci vogliu pianta un prunu,
Perchè di la nostra razza
Un ci passi più nisunu:
Perchè un funu duji nè treni,
Ma cinque omini contr'unu.

Tutti a lu Lucu de Nazza
Tutti s'eranu aduniti
Cun quella barbara zazza
Li sullati e li banditi:
Cu a tempesta d'eri mani
Tutt'insemme so partiti.

In fondi di lu rionu
Si sentia rugghia la ventu, [115]

Chi purtava da Ghisoni
Lu malori e lu spaventu:
Si vidia chi per aria
Bèra accidiu e tradimentu.

Somo subitu partiti
Tutti i lupi cull'agneddi,
E merchiavanu aduniti
A lu son di cialambeddi.
Quandu junsenu a la serra
Ti taglionu i garganeddi.

Lu me' largu di spallera!
Lu me' minutu di vita!
Cume teni, nun ci n'era;
Parii una mazza fiurita.
Solu u pinzeru di teni
Or sustene la me' vita.

A lu pe' di stu pullonu
Ci ogliu piantà lu m'è lettu;
Parchì qui, u me' frateddonu,
Ti tironu a mezzu pettu.
Bogliu leche lu buneddu,
Bogliu armà schioppu e stilettu.

Bogliu cinghie la carchera,
Bogliu cinghie la tarzetta:
O Canì, cor di suredda,
Bogliu fà la to bindetta.

CHAPTER IX.

CORTE AND ITS HOTEL.

From Ponte alle Lecchia the road follows the course of the foaming river Vecchio for a long way, along a wide valley, where the green hills circling round are somewhat monotonous for a time, but presently turn into handsome grey and white limestone cliffs, hanging in one place in wild and curious peaks above the passing carriage.

After the large village of Cabouralino, the scenery becomes tamer again, the ground more cultivated, flocks of black and white silky haired goats with silvery bells passing us constantly.

The road, too, was here alive with men riding mules, and leading after them by a cord a string of other mules with packs on their backs. It was a matter of difficulty to pass some of these mules, who were not accustomed to "carriage company," and who backed towards the precipice [117] occasionally, kicking wildly, to the discomfiture of their owners.

This part of the country was the scene of the battle of Ponte Nuovo, in 1769, the last battle fought for Corsican independence; and the date from which Corsica became a French province. It has a touching interest for this reason, and on account of its being a witness to the last vain effort of Paoli in his country's cause.

But now we were leaving the river, with its foaming waters and its bloody memories, over which the fine thoughtful face of Pasquale Paoli seemed to cast a humanizing influence, and were ascending the mountains under a blue sky.

Vast quantities of handsome hellebore, with large ball-like clumps of flowers, and of a species of pale green spurge (its flowers like a number of yellow caterpillars attached to the stem), grew by the roadside; ilex-trees scattered themselves up and down rocks of every form and height, above and below the road, and the mountains all round us became more and more covered with snow. [118] Here and there were placed villages in lofty and commanding situations; one especially, named Suaria, which was perched just above us on a conical green hill rising from the road-side. The village was partially hidden by firs and ilexes crowning this pretty eminence; but the high four-storied campanile of Suaria Church stood out, white and imposing, above their sheltering branches. Very cold and frosty was the wind, notwithstanding the brilliant sun, as we reached the summit of the pass; but the view of mountain scenery spread out beneath us was magnificent.

And now we began our descent through many a tree-covered hill, towards Corte, its high, red-tiled houses visible miles before we reached it. Corte, the central inland town of Corsica, is, after Bastia and Ajaccio, the largest town in the island, and has a position unequalled for wild beauty.

It lies in the very heart of the wildest mountains of Corsica, surrounded on every side by their gaunt and precipitous flanks. Monte Rotondo, one of the highest of the inland chain, raises its [119] snow-crowned head to look over the solemn blue-grey hills immediately behind Corte; and two broad foaming rivers dash down the gully beside the town, and unite, after passing under their handsome stone bridges, in the narrow valley just beneath.

Corte is itself at no mean height above the sea level; and, at the time of our first visit, was exceedingly cold, with a sharp north wind rushing through the town from the numerous mountain ravines.

The citadel, which of itself is not much, is built, with extraordinarily picturesque effect, upon the summit of a precipitous hill, rising from the midst of the town; up whose sides run a few houses, until the overhanging rocks force them to give place to the prickly pear. The main streets in Corte are wide, and paved with rough stone, with enormously high, factory-like houses, of seven or even eight stories, on each side. The houses are remarkably hideous, even for Corsica; built of dirty white stone, and red roofed, without any eaves, the windows irregular and poor, and the [120] open doorways (into large buildings) often showing dirty and poverty-stricken interiors.

Very steep side streets, impassable for carriages, and sometimes giving place to a series of stone steps, lead up into the higher parts of the town, and towards the citadel and church.

Fine elm-trees make a nice avenue all up the main road, at the end of which are the two respectable hotels of Corte, Hotels Pierracci and Paoli, so precisely opposite that the rival guests can look into each other's windows.

If it were not for its dirt, and its ugly houses, the beauty of Corte would be almost unrivalled in European scenery. How one sighs in Corsica for the lovely grey cottages with broad eaves, and for the stately art-decorated mansions with graceful towers, of beauty-loving Italy!

No such thing is to be seen here. I doubt if, from one end of Corsica to the other, there is one building with any pretensions to real architectural beauty.

Art has never been much cultivated in the island. A people who for centuries have lived in a [121] condition of incessant warfare and personal insecurity have but little time or inclination to indulge in the peaceful pursuits of their more luxurious neighbours; and Corsican architecture partakes of the Corsican character, being stern, rugged, and primitive. Many a village, nestled in some exquisite situation among snow-capped hills and orange groves, we found perfectly ruined, in an artistic point of view, by its ugly dwellings.

The churches are the only redeeming feature in Corsican architecture. Their campaniles, or bell-towers, are generally lofty and picturesque, divided into several stories, and standing apart from the body of the church.

Hotel Pierracci, which had been recommended to us, we found a fair hotel in many respects, but intensely national in its peculiarities. The despotic Briton, coming straight from club luxuries and obsequious attentions, would feel himself decidedly out of place there, and not a little miserable. [122]

It is a large hotel, with two handsome dining-rooms, and spacious, well-furnished bedrooms; and although the broad stone staircase is somewhat odoriferous and the passages not over clean, yet the rooms are comfortable and perfectly above suspicion.

But, for the whole of this large establishment, generally well filled with a constantly changing series of guests, there appeared to be only one terribly overworked young waiter, and an elderly maid of all work, (exclusive of the kitchen department).

The result was, that even if you had that un-Corsican luxury of a bell in your room, which was not often, its repeated calls were unheeded; and you had speedily to learn and put in practice that great law of uncivilized regions, "If you want anything done, do it yourself."

As, however, every domestic was in a gasping hurry, and the big landlady—a mixture of sudden irascibility and occasional benevolence—was apt to regard your wants as puerile, and, Corsican fashion, to tell you so loudly to your face—a foray in dressing-gown and slippers to the kitchen, [123] after hot water, or cleaned boots, or any other necessity of man and woman, was apt to end in ignominy and the trial of English tempers. The crockery and cutlery of Hotel Pierracci also run notably short.

It was a current joke amongst the English visitors, that the one coffee-pot of the establishment not only supplied all the numerous breakfast-tables of the different guests, but also did duty on occasions for shaving and toilette water. And this fact I can believe; for one morning, having by persistent obstinacy triumphed over the difficulties of obtaining a little hot water for dressing purposes, my tin jug was fetched away almost immediately afterwards, and I was astonished to see it reappearing on the breakfast table ten minutes later in its habitual guise of coffee-pot.

At breakfast this same coffee-pot was the cause of continual contention between the worried little waiter and ourselves. When it pleased him to give us our breakfast, he used to run in, fill our cups hastily, and whisk out again with his precious pot; and no entreaties or commands would persuade him to leave that invaluable and useful little metal jug behind him, or even to return [124] with it and refill our cups. I think there was a bond of sympathy between that waiter and his coffee-pot, both so terribly overworked.

The food at Hotel Pierracci was good, but rather scarce, and it was difficult to make a dinner off the microscopic scraps which adorned the dishes during the eight courses of the table d'hôte. We noticed this particularly on our road home again, when perhaps our long stay in mountain air and the fine Corsican climate had increased our correct English appetites to a country voracity. But, on the whole, for Corsica, Hotel Pierracci may be considered a very comfortable hotel; and, excepting that at Sartene, which is also a good one, has the reputation of being almost the only large and handsome hotel out of Ajaccio.

Hotel Paoli, we were told afterwards by some French acquaintances, was clean and well ordered, with good rooms and very moderate charges; but we did not go inside the place. [125]

CHAPTER X.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH STREET URCHINS.

Corte has one terrible drawback—nay, two: its extreme dirt and its impudent children.

I have heard it said that the position of the town gives it the advantage of being both a good summer and winter residence, the climate being never too hot or too cold.

It may never be too hot, but it must undoubtedly be a very cold place in winter, from its elevation among the numerous snow mountains that surround it. This, of course, is a matter of taste. But I should doubt extremely its being in any degree healthy in summer.

I heard vague rumours of malaria whilst we were there; and I should not doubt the existence of fever in the hot weather.

I have been in a good many German, Italian, and Corsican towns; but not one of them can vie [126] with Corte in uncleanliness. Corte, I should think, would carry off the palm in filthy pavements, and putrid odours, from any town in Europe.

It was only the beginning of June when we visited it for the second time, and yet there were certain streets, and those not insignificant ones, where it was absolutely necessary to hold one's nose and run.

As there were waste rubbish places in many of these parts, which were nothing at all but open drains, and receptacles for everything horrid that could be thrown upon them from the windows and balconies of the houses around, the objectionable odours were neither astonishing nor unaccountable.

As regards the children of Corte, they are no small drawback to the delights of the place.

The inhabitants are altogether a rough, uncivil set, far less courteous than the generality of Corsicans, and have had an evil reputation amongst strangers for many years.

It is not conducive to the enjoyment of beautiful scenery or a quiet stroll, to be surrounded down [127]
the street, and followed far into the country by a mocking, shouting horde of dancing dervishes, not content with roaring out "Inglesé! Inglesé!" with unceasing energy, but making occasional clutches at your dress or umbrella, and stopping up the public way.

The ingenious youth of Corte has one especial diversion, retained for the delectation of the stranger. This consists in holding a stout piece of cord across the road, barring the path, with the shouted intimation, "No pennies, no passage!" or, in their own words, "Sou, sou, Inglese!"

English pride naturally determines that its owner will die sooner than bestow the required penny on these little pests; but this righteous wrath sometimes entails unpleasant results. An acquaintance of ours, then at Corte, had, a few weeks before, been nearly mobbed by the elder part of the community when he attempted to cut the rope and offered to thrash the children. We ourselves came in for an unpleasant encounter, that might have ended awkwardly. We were [128]
taking a walk across the valley of the Tavignano, where it rushes, boiling and foaming in splendid cascades over its green and grey boulders, past the city, before joining the equally picturesque river Restonico.

It was Sunday evening; and, unfortunately, we had chosen a time when all the juvenile populace were out of school, and on the look-out for a little innocent amusement.

I have noticed that a demoniac phase often comes over naughty children on a Sunday evening. Be that as it may, a troop of about twenty, chiefly boys, pursued us unrelentingly far outside the precincts of the town, shouting their war-cry of "Sou, Inglese!" and running round and round till we could neither see the views, nor hear ourselves speak.

A rope which they stretched across the road for the customary pastime fortunately broke, and we passed on through the gap; but the broken remains, held by two youthful fiends, served as an instrument of torture wherewith to wind us up and hopelessly confuse our footsteps. Human [129]
endurance could bear no more; and, after one or two stern warnings, No. 3, whose wrath had been gradually gathering, suddenly saw her opportunity, and, darting upon two small tormentors before they could escape, she brought down her umbrella upon their degenerate backs with as much force as nature had supplied to her.

Instantly, the attitude of these juvenile Corsicans changed. They had been disporting themselves before: now they prepared for serious warfare. There was a moment's pause; and then a volley of sharp stones came after us.

We walked on quickly, but the charge increased instead of decreasing, one striking No. 2 on the head, and another No. 3 on the heel, but fortunately without inflicting any serious damage.

But flint stones from off a roadside are not pleasing weapons; and things might have ended badly for us, but for a sudden diversion.

From a cottage by the roadside just before us, dashed out three big boys, all over the humanizing [130]
age of thirteen; and, undertaking our defence without a word, they made a sudden onslaught upon our pursuers, and in two minutes had put them all to flight.

We were really relieved, and thanked the knights-errant warmly. Two of them, boys of about fourteen or fifteen, had pipes in their mouths; and one of them, a young man a year or two older, remarked sagely, that it was always thus with visitors: "Les enfants de Corte étaient terriblement méchants."

Having bade adieu to our gallant defenders, we were walking on, and had almost forgotten them, when the noise of a terrific struggling and scuffling behind us again attracted our attention.

Our friends had got a boy of about eleven between them, and were dragging him along by the arms by main force.

The boy was resisting with all his power, and was being dragged along almost double, his bare feet scraping the ground in a vain effort not to move, whilst he sobbed and shouted in a passion of rage and terror very unbecoming in one of his heroic race. He was a ragged, dirty, pretty [131]
urchin, with large brown eyes, and a wicked face that prophesied for him bigger scrapes some day than stone-throwing.

The two boys who had him in custody brought the unfortunate imp to our astonished feet, and rested there; still gripping him fast, and demanding our good pleasure concerning his chastisement.

"Tenez, mademoiselle," said the third, holding up a big pointed stone, "voilà la pierre qu'il a jetée!" Circumstantial evidence with a vengeance; the culprit confronted with the instrument of

his iniquity!

Perhaps we were weak; but we forgave that terror-stricken boy (who, I verily believe, expected some vendetta-like vengeance at our hands), and he was allowed to slink off with an admonition from us to "do so no more."

Coming back, these same big boys again overtook us; and, quietly remarking that they would see us safe home, they escorted us to the door of our hotel with much polite conversation, and then made off, raising their caps. [132]

These boys were in the lower ranks of life, although decently dressed; but it would have been an insult to offer them any recompense. Their action proceeded from chivalry "pur et simple," and they had no notion of any reward.

Weeks afterwards, when two of us returned to Corte, a smiling face suddenly attracted our attention in the streets one day, and we recognized one of our boyish defenders. Of course we greeted him, and he lifted his cap, remarking, "I have seen *you* for the last half hour." [133]

CHAPTER XI.

MANNERS AND CUSTOMS AT CORTE.

A good deal of historical interest is attached to Corte. From the earliest times it has been the seat of the national government, and the centre of the more important popular demonstrations. The old town and citadel have undergone more sieges and been worn by more numerous assaults than even Calvi or Bonifacio.

Here Paoli lived, and, from his modest home, regulated the government of his country; and here was the home of the patriot Gaffori.

An anecdote is told in connection with the latter which is truly Corsican in its Spartan-like heroism.

It was in 1746, during one of the ceaseless conflicts with Genoa, and Gaffori was storming the city. He had already made much progress, and the Genoese commander was beginning to tremble for the fate of his fort. Suddenly the Corsican firing ceased, and every gun was silent, whilst the islanders gazed horror-struck on the walls. Upon them was bound the young son of Gaffori, who had been taken prisoner, and whom the Genoese general had commanded to be placed there in order to deter the successful storming party, or as a mark for his father's guns. [134]

Gaffori paused a moment; but only a moment. In another minute he gave the order, and the assault continued.

But the heroic father had his reward. The breach was made, Corte fell, and Gaffori's son was rescued unhurt from his perilous situation.

Corte abounds in pointer dogs. Paoli had his six canine friends, who kept house with him at Corte; but tradition tells not whether they, too, were pointers or no.

The men of Corte struck me as being a finer race physically than any other in the island. They are tall and well-made, with upright figures. [135]

Corsicans, in face and figure, are more akin to the English than the Italians: there is none of the soft roundness of the Italian about them; they are bony, manly, and muscular.

But the Cortéans appeared to me to excel even their other compatriots in idleness. As one of themselves said, "The young men of Corte do nothing but walk the streets from morning till night, and all they have to occupy them is to think of evil."

The Corsican women, however, at Corte as elsewhere, are essentially domestic and retiring. Flaunting and finery have not yet become the fashion among these simple-hearted daughters of Eve; and as long as their lords require it of them, they will probably remain the same light-hearted, energetic, hard-working family supporters that they now are.

To them may be applied, with great accuracy, the old rhyme:—

"Good wives, like city clocks, should be
Exact with regularity;
Yet not, like city clocks so loud,
Be heard by all the vulgar crowd.

[136]

"Good wives to snails should be akin,
Always their houses keep within,—
Yet not to carry (fashion's hacks)
All they possess upon their backs."

The only occasion on which the women of Corsica appear to have an outing is on Sunday morning, after early Mass, when, in their neat attire of black and white, they sometimes take a quiet turn up and down the main street or place.

A funeral, too, may bring them out. On passing through Olmeto some weeks afterwards, we met half a dozen women coming down the road together, dressed rather more gaily than usual; and our driver immediately remarked, "There must be a funeral in Olmeto, or the women would not be out."

"But," we asked, "do they not put on mourning for the occasion?"

"Oh no; only the relatives do that."

"But," we said, "there are so many people always dressed in black in Corsica; how is that?"

"Well, people only go into mourning for a very near relation; but the first time they wear it for three or four years, and the second time, unless they are young children, for the rest of their life." [137]

This accounts for the number of sombre female figures one sees in this island, the black handkerchief which is worn over the head rendering them peculiarly funereal-looking; and explains why you never meet an elderly woman in any other attire.

But the group of women we met were evidently only acquaintances or distant relations of the dead, for their costume was more than usually lively, one or two of them wearing a blue or orange head-gear and other unaccustomed bits of finery. The ceremony appeared to them, no doubt, in the light of an agreeable dissipation, as it did to a certain poor Welshwoman of my acquaintance, who remarked, cheerfully, that "Mother had a' been quite gay lately; she'd a' been to three funerals last week!"

The church at Corte is in the higher part of the town, surrounded by narrow streets and houses that have lain in ruins ever since the last bombardment of the town. It is not a pretentious building, either within or without. [138]

Poor paintings and gaudy images of saints bedecked every side altar, and a highly coloured Madonna stood in a niche on either side of the principal altar, where the tall candles shed artificial sunlight on beautiful but badly arranged flowers.

The service was mumbled through by an old priest, less to our edification than apparently to that of the reverent crowd of women worshippers who filled the building.

Scarcely a man was to be seen in church. Their Sunday duties appeared to consist in squatting in rows just outside the porch, smoking their pipes, and watching the entrance of their better halves.

In Corsica the men are not church-goers. Coming from North Italy, where the congregations are composed more of men than of women, one cannot fail to be struck by this fact.

Fillipini remarks of his countrymen that they are a religious community. He would scarcely say so now. French influence and French scepticism are already making themselves felt among the Corsican men; and the priesthood on the island does not appear sufficiently strong, as a body, [139] intellectually or morally, to preserve their fading influence. But the men in Corte, although they may not care to go to church, yet are sufficiently orthodox to join in a good procession on St. Joseph's Day.

It was about five o'clock in the evening, when the sound of distant chanting and the hum of many voices drew us to the window.

There we saw, coming up the road under the elm trees, a troop of about sixty or seventy men and women, carrying banners and dressed in uniform.

First came the women, of whom there were not altogether more than about a dozen.

They were dressed in a pretty costume of bright blue skirt, white head kerchief, and round white cape, trimmed with blue, and they carried in their midst a banner "with a strange device," that we could not make out.

Then came men, in white shirts and trowsers, with white head-gear something between a cap and a turban, and green capes. [140]

Then more men, with white attire and crimson capes. These capes evidently differed according to the relative wealth of the wearer, for some were of crimson silk edged with gold, and some of simple calico. These carried a large crucifix.

Finally came a troop with rich purple capes. These were carrying, with some difficulty, an immense statue of St. Joseph, gilt all over, and surrounded by a gold frame. Four of the men bore the image on stout poles, whilst a fifth held it straight in the centre.

This troop was evidently the "picked lot" of the procession, for they chanted, as they walked, an extraordinary dirge-like chant, and were accompanied by a few priests in black cassocks, likewise singing.

I have seldom seen anything much more picturesque than that gay procession, as it wound with its banners under the shady avenue, and up the hill-side towards the little church, now lost, now

seen, between the narrow crooked streets, the weird chant dying and rising by turns on the quiet evening air. [141]

Everything solemn, however, has its travesty, I imagine, and children always reproduce in their games what has most impressed them.

So, an hour or two later, when the twilight was falling, and the faithful were mostly in church, there came the parody of the afternoon's procession.

Hearing a prodigious drumming, and the shouts of children, I looked out and saw a collection of about twenty or thirty of the ragged barefoot urchins of Corte, promenading the street in solemn procession, shouting a song that I fear was profane, at the top of their voices, drumming energetically with an old spoon upon a broken brass can that they had evidently picked up from the roadside, and following the lead of a bold-faced, pretty boy, who bore aloft the seedy remains of a large wooden cross, which had apparently been previously used in church decoration, as it still showed the remnants of withered moss and evergreens. [142]

CHAPTER XII.

SAN ROCCO BY THE RESTONICO.

The environs of Corte abound in lovely walks. Surrounded as it is by mountain, ravine, and river, this is no wonder. Certainly, one not easily rivalled, is to be found in the valley of the Restonico, one of the two rivers which rush seething and boiling just below the town.

We strolled into this beautiful vale quite by accident, after hastily skirting the streets, to avoid those "horrid boys." The road, which was rough but broad, wound for miles through a narrow gorge, bordered on both sides by the wildest and steepest walls of rock, at the bottom of which swirled, in mingled white foam and malachite green, over a boulder-strewn bed, the busy Restonico.

The rocks upon the opposite side especially were inaccessibly steep, and appeared about five hundred feet high; but were in places clothed by rich herbage, and, here and there, wherever their straight sides sloped a little, covered by thick groves of chestnut trees. [143]

The road itself was shaded in parts by the great crags that hung overhead, and in parts by avenues of chestnuts; while many a gurgling little stream rushed down the hill-side and ran merrily across our path. In front, filling up the end of the gorge, sometimes hidden by massive rocks or sudden luxuriance of foliage, rose the stately white head of Monte Rotondo.

Looking back, the town of Corte rose from amongst its coronal of hills with beautiful effect, the long cross-topped church spire pointing faintly into the bright blue sky, and the white citadel on its strange precipitous eminence, peering, as it seemed, into heaven itself.

It was one of the hottest days we had felt in Corsica, and, beautiful though the walk was, it was almost pain to hurry, umbrella in hand, from one shady spot to another. If ever snakes would stand upon their tips and dance in the sun together, as our driver once informed us he had seen them do, it would have been to-day! The lizards on the glaring walls seemed countless; and, wherever the glare was intensest, there the little green husband and brown wife basked together in loving enjoyment. [144]

Very thankful were we at last to sit down on some large boulders beside the rushing waters, where a grove of thickly growing chestnuts threw a grateful shade around. The river here had thrown up quite a little shore of gravel, now partially grassed over with soft green turf; and the chestnut pods of last summer almost covered the ground at our feet.

At a short distance from us, stood, on a little grassy plain, beneath a blighted tree trunk, a tiny chapel, about six feet high and two feet wide, containing a golden image of the Madonna.

It had the appearance of a doll's house, and somehow looked out of place beside that wide, wild, tumultuous river. This was about two miles out of Corte; but, considerably nearer the town, is a much more singular chapel. [145]

Chapel, perhaps, is scarcely the word for it, since it is only a species of box, or square hole, formed by nature or blasting, in a large block of solid rock by the roadside. The hole is about three feet square and deep, and is glassed over in front. Inside this strange little tabernacle is a highly coloured, well-modelled figure of a man, with one of his trouser-legs turned up to show a remarkably life-like wound on the knee, to which he draws the attention of the passer-by with a pathetic countenance. A dog, looking rather ashamed of himself, stands beside the pilgrim and completes the group.

This individual is, we are informed, San Rocco of rather obscure memory, and beneath the tabernacle is the following inscription, cut into the rock:—"Fermati, Passegioro, e prega intanto se vuoi l'assistanza di San Rocco."

The little white oratory fixed in the huge glaring rock, with the tiny stone steps beside it, and the

Restonico roaring beneath it, would have been a picturesque sight to English eyes, had it not been that the figure within reminded one irresistibly and most unpleasantly of our late tormentors, the Italian beggars, with their officiously displayed surgical horrors. [146]

According to Baring-Gould, in his "Lives of the Saints," San Rocco, or Saint Roch, was a rather mythical personage. All that is authentic about him is that he was a Frenchman, a native of Montpellier, who went on a pilgrimage to Rome, and, on his return, not being recognized, was taken up as a spy, and died miserably in the common gaol. He was of good family and some means (which he forsook for the sake of his pilgrimage), and died about the year A.D. 1350. Legend adds, that whilst in Italy, where the plague at this time was raging, he miraculously cured thousands by making over them the sign of the cross, until himself attacked; when, creeping into a miserable hovel, he was supplied by a friendly dog with necessary food. An angel subsequently touched him upon the thigh, from which place the plague boil rose and burst. When dying in the [147] Montpellier prison, St. Roch prayed that all invoking him should be henceforth delivered from the plague; and an angel appeared with the written promise that his patronage should prove the perfect cure of all suffering from this scourge.

In several of representations St. Roch an angel is seen beside him, touching his thigh, and the dog also sometimes carries a loaf in his mouth.

It was just beginning to cool a little when we were forced to turn homewards. Monte Rotondo was growing grander and nearer, the path was more lovely, and the chestnut woods thick and shady; but all these charms, alas! had to give way to the claims of the six o'clock table d'hôte at Hotel Pierracci. The return walk was delicious, and the fashionable hour of promenade had evidently just commenced; for we began to meet family groups taking their evening stroll together up the hitherto deserted gorge. Just where a lofty cypress, stem and solitary, lifted up its dark, pointed head high into the deep blue sky, to mark the presence of a tiny cemetery upon [148] the steep hill-side above us, the sun suddenly fell behind Corte's framework of hills, and we re-entered the baking streets in early shadow.

At the doorway of the hotel a very tall sentry stood at arms; for we had the honour of housing a general beneath our roof.

This general was a very grand person. At dinner-time his rank and dignity obliged him to have a table to himself, where he sat eating his chicken and salad in solitary grandeur and profound silence. I was really sorry for the poor general; for he was young and good-looking, and seemed intended by nature and his own inclinations (as evinced by sundry half-wistful glances towards the large table, where we, the common herd, dined in unpretending sociability), for a more agreeable and gregarious lot than the one forced upon him by the claims of his exalted position.

It was very thrilling, however, to see our *militaire* receive his letters in the morning. The sentry entered, musket on shoulder, clanking through the salle à manger (for I am ashamed to say this [149] military grandee had not a private sitting-room, or did not use it); grounded arms, saluted, presented the epistles from the extreme length of a very stiff arm, and then stood motionless at attention, an inanimate blue and red human poker.

Tremendously hot though the day had been, the evening was exceedingly chilly, and we at last requested the morbid waiter to light us a fire.

"What! cold?" he asked, incredulously.

"Yes," said I, apologetically, "I am afraid we are."

"Dear me, how strange it is! There are you cold, and I quite warm. Women are queer!"

"Well," said I, meekly, feeling quite relieved that this was all the scolding I was to receive; "you see, you work hard, and we are sitting still; that makes the difference."

"Si, si," said the little gloomy man, as he blew at the wooden logs with good-natured assiduity; "but you women are always chilly. We men are stronger, that is it." And he gave a final puff and [150] positively smiled.

We soon learnt that, in Corsica, the word "lady" was an unknown quantity. Whenever, solicitous of our dignity, we used it in speaking of ourselves or companions, we were generally corrected by the natives, and the word "woman" substituted. "The reason why I cannot tell;" for I fancy Corsicans are above any petty democratic pride of equality; and they usually behave towards our sex with a kind courtesy that is the evident offshoot of the old national virtues of a brave and hospitable race. [151]

CHAPTER XIII.

A THIRTEEN HOURS' DRIVE.

At Corte we bade adieu to our not too fascinating Bastia coachman; and the journey to Ajaccio we performed by diligence.

The diligences that run between Corte and Ajaccio are not numerous, nor very convenient. Only one, going every other day, has a good banquette. The daily diligence, which is a poor stuffy little concern, goes, by way of a Hibernianism, at ten o'clock every night; and all the journey is performed in the dark.

As we, however, came to see the country, we waited for the "diligence de la Concurrence," as the best diligence is called, and engaged the three banquette seats. And very good ones they were, high up behind the coachman's box, and completely open, save for a hood which could be raised [152] or lowered at will. From this place we saw the country well, and the seat was roomy enough for three not very corpulent people.

It is a matter of some difficulty to discover the facts about the Ajaccio diligences. The hotels are in league with one or another of them, and the result is a profound ignorance concerning any but the favoured vehicle, which is not conducive to the comfort of the traveller.

For instance, Madame Pierracci unfortunately favoured the stuffy and banquetteless diligence; she therefore swore by all her household gods that no other was in existence, and that by no possibility could we go at any other time, or by any other conveyance than the night diligence. She even denied the existence of any private vehicles whatever, that would hold our luggage, or more than two persons.

It was only after going out ourselves to make inquiries, that we found that a man of the name of Laurenz would supply a private omnibus to Ajaccio and back for sixty francs; and that M. Dionyse's "diligence de la Concurrence," of which the office was only a few doors from the hotel, [153] ran every other morning to the capital. This is the best diligence in Corsica; and, for the modest sum of eleven francs, you may travel the twelve hours in the banquette, behind very fair horses.

We started about six a.m., changing horses five times, and reaching Ajaccio at seven in the evening; but the journey is not generally so long.

It was an exquisite day, and the sun, even so early in the morning, was "deliciously baking," said No. 3, "decidedly oppressive," said No. 1.

We departed in style, with our coachman on one side of the box and our conductor on the other, with five horses, and an energetic little black dog perched on the roof of the carriage, who evidently believed himself the guardian of the whole concern, and at the approach of every stranger ran, frantically barking, backwards and forwards, along his elevated platform, to the imminent risk of his neck. Once, indeed, the small beast overbalanced himself, and was only [154] saved by alighting on the conductor's shoulder, where he was quickly transferred to No. 2's knee, and his acquaintance cultivated.

During the whole journey the conductor remains the same, but the coachman changes with each relay of horses. The conductor was a big, fine man, with a good head, and remarkably well-informed. As, however, he thought it necessary to descend and refresh himself ("with a little water," as he remarked innocently) at every village we passed, his conversation became less interesting and his company rather less agreeable towards the middle of the day; and we were not sorry when he found it necessary to retire to the summit of the diligence, and the terrier's company, for an hour or two of snoring repose. Both he and the coachman were armed with an enormously long whip, some five or six yards in length; and with these they simultaneously slashed at the poor horses whenever we came to any steep hill. This duty was, however, sometimes undertaken by a juvenile amateur of thirteen or fourteen, whose business and [155] pleasure it was to run along by the side of the panting horses, cracking the long whip furiously against their steaming flanks, and encouraging them with every conceivable Corsican epithet of abuse and entreaty.

The road to Vivario, where was the mid-day halt, was for some time a continual ascent among beautiful views of snow-streaked ranges on both sides.

Further on, we passed through an avenue of chestnuts, not yet, however, in leaf, the great boles standing by the roadside among picturesque green and grey moss-covered boulders of limestone, from between which darted sparkling little streams and many waterfalls.

When we again passed over this ground in June, the place was a soft fairyland of beauty, the bright green chestnuts bending lovingly over the great stones, and throwing dappled light and shade over the uneven turf.

Monte Rotondo had accompanied us part of the way from Corte, but, at the large village of Serraggio, Monte D'Oro's great white flanks started out in dazzling brilliancy, and continued for [156] the rest of the way to take its place.

Serraggio is beautifully situated; but it is not a tempting-looking village. The houses are tumble-down and dirty, and the pigs appear to walk amicably in and out of the houses.

From Serraggio to Vivario, passing by Ponte Vecchio, the route is perfectly lovely. It winds through the gorge of the Vecchio, the river foaming at the bottom, and wildest rocky hills, varied by snow mountains, rising up on either side. The peaks that stood over us were of the most eccentric shapes, pointing like grey and brown battlements up into the unclouded sky, and flowers of every description blossomed beside our path. The Mediterranean heath, especially, with its delicate little bell-shaped flowers and strong, sweet scent, grew luxuriantly by the roadside, generally in height from six to ten feet.

Ponte Vecchio is exquisitely beautiful. At a winding turn in the road the tall one-arched bridge spans the boiling river and boulder-strewn gorge, surrounded by every eccentricity of rocky hill and pine-scattered snow mountain. [157]

It was evidently considered rather a show place, for the driver pulled up his vehicle, and we all descended to take a good look. Perhaps, too, he was not averse to resting his horses before the final climb to Vivario, for he gave a ready assent to the proposal of Nos. 2 and 3, that they should finish the distance on foot.

"How far is it?" we asked.

"About two kilomètres, mademoiselle."

We had heard of the Corsican inability to reckon distances; but, unfortunately, at the moment forgot it. So we set off, after a few minutes' rest above the lovely gorge, in an easy stroll after the now distanced diligence, nothing suspecting, and prepared to enjoy our mile and a half walk.

The views were exquisite,—snow mountains rising before us on every side; but the ascent was uncommonly steep, and our pace insensibly slackened.

Only as the sun, after half an hour's retirement, came out in noonday force did we recollect that we had left our umbrellas in the diligence. [158]

We began to boil as we toiled up the steep hill, with our pocket handkerchiefs under our hats, and the mocking diligence, ever decreasing, yet ever in sight, winding up the endless glare of white road above and beyond us. And still no village to be seen!

Presently we were overtaken by some native workmen going up the road with their tools. They increased their pace to come up with us, and then walked beside us conversing.

"How far is it to Vivario from here?" we asked, thinking surely we must be near our goal.

"About five kilomètres, mademoiselle," was the answer we received, to our mortification; almost immediately followed by the usual question, "Are you Frenchwomen?"

"Is it often as hot as this at this time of the year?" we inquired, as we trudged on despairingly.

"This hot? It is not hot now; this is only spring," was the unsympathetic reply.

We walked on so fast that we distanced our companions, who seemed astonished at the energy of Englishwomen, and stopped to remark upon it to some friendly road-menders a little further on. It was certainly six or seven kilomètres before, with faces like boiled lobsters, and much tried equanimity, we reached the promised land of Vivario, and, passing through a stable-yard of odoriferous propensities, ascended a little steep wooden staircase, or outside ladder, and entered the cool sitting-room of the village inn. [159]

The Vivario inn is really superior. The people are civil and obliging, the bedrooms are beautifully clean, the little sitting-room is nicely furnished, and there is an air of comfort and refinement about the household arrangements not often to be found elsewhere in Corsica. It possesses also a really charmingly furnished private sitting-room, full of rugs, pictures, easy-chairs, and other luxuries, as a rule unknown to Corsica, where any one in search of lovely scenery and healthy mountain air might well spend a week or two with great pleasure.

When we arrived, lunch was ready. We were a snug little party of four ladies and two gentlemen, the strangers being French; and we improved our acquaintance with each other rapidly as we satisfied our hungry appetites and discussed our sweetbreads, duck, broccia, and dessert. [160]

It was a short acquaintance, however; for on reaching Ajaccio our foreign friends went to the Hôtel de France, whilst we went to Hôtel Germania, and we saw no more of each other.

After a good rest and refreshment, we started anew, with fresh horses, for the Foce Pass.

The people of Vivario had all assembled to see us off, and two priests walked up and down amongst their flock, pretending to read, but in reality as much interested in the strangers as the smallest of the crowd. As the diligence rolled off with a "Hué, yoop!" from the driver, we nodded good-bye to the friendly looking assembly, and a number of hats were immediately taken off, the men wishing us "salut" or "bonjour." Only the two priests declined to take any notice of us, and retired to a low wall a few yards off, where, sheltered, as they fancied, by their shady wideawakes, they peered at us curiously out of the corners of their eyes. [161]

It was a terrible mount up to the top of the Foce Pass, and, long before we reached it, the five poor horses were exhausted with pulling, and driver and conductor with beating. Amateur flagellants were at a premium, as we toiled painfully up the smooth road, steep as the side of a house, with greenhouse shrubs bordering it, fir-trees on the hills above, and snow mountains overhanging them.

In two or three hour's we reached the forest of Vizzavona, and continued to pass right through it. The forests of Corsica are almost the *specialité* of the country.

Wide and trackless, whole mountains are covered by these splendid forests, in many of which the sound of the hatchet has never been heard, nor the foot of man passed, but where the birds, the snakes, and the insects live and die unmolested. The trees which compose them are often

magnificent, and consist of larches, pines, firs, beeches, and chestnuts, with a mixture of other kinds. [162]

The Larriccio pine, which sometimes attains a height of two hundred feet, almost without branches, but with a thick leafy tuft at the summit of the long straight stem, is a peculiar beauty of Corsica, and, I believe, almost unknown elsewhere.

The chief forests in the island are those of Sorba and Vizzavona in the centre, Aitone and Valdoniello in the north, and Cagna and Bavella in the south. Cagna and Valdoniello are the largest, stretching over miles of hill and dale, and fighting with the snow for the rocky ledges on the mountain crests.

Vizzavona, Valdoniello, and Bavella are almost equally beautiful, and Sorba not much behind them; but perhaps the views on each side of the Bocca di Bavella, or Bavella Pass, are the finest in Corsica.

Half of the forest of Vizzavona consists of beeches, and the other half of pines; but there are also a good many chestnuts, which were not yet in leaf.

Red and brown branches mixed with the soft young green of the beeches, and the darker hue of the pines, as we mounted the steep ascent under a thick avenue; through which, on the descending side, came glimpses of the dazzling snow of Monte Rotondo, rising up from beneath us to a giddy height in the cloudy sky. [163]

Countless bags of caterpillars hung from every tree, and from the branches above our heads. These bags were some of them a foot long, and had the appearance of white muslin. It seemed as if it was Christmas Day in the forest, and a quantity of nomad cooks had hung out their pudding bags upon the boughs. After a while, snow patches began to show, and, when at last we reached the summit, thick snow lay all around us.

A young Corsican who sat on the box before us was friendly and communicative, and, a little while before reaching the pass, pointed out to us a queer little isolated fort, standing on a lonely hill-top just above the forest; which, as he informed us, with a twinkle of his eye, was built to defend the pass "from the English invader."

Stone shanties, with log or pebble roofs, stood here and there along the steep roadside—mere hovels, built for the accommodation of the road-menders, or *cantonniers*; and, except the little grey fort on its exposed hill, were the only signs of human life, past or present, in the lonely forest. [164]

We paused for a few minutes on the top of the pass to let the horses regain their breath, to look to the harness for the long steep descent, and probably also for the conductor to refresh himself with another dose of "water" at the miserable little inn on the plateau.

The two leaders also were loosed from the traces, and, with a parting flick at their hind quarters, were sent cantering down the road in front of us. Meanwhile, we got down from our perch, and tasted Corsican snow for the first time.

The col, or Bocca, was bare of trees; and we looked down upon magnificent views. These cols are nearly always denuded of vegetation, even when surrounded on every side by rich forests. Exposed to the winds from every quarter, they rise out of their green nest, grey and bleak, like a bald head surrounded by a thick monastic fringe. [165]

On one side of us lay the forest through which we had passed; on the other lay a chain of blue inland hills and valleys, and the chestnut region of Bocognano. Indigo clouds, fringed and angry, hung above, and everything was toned down to the same deep stormy blue, as the thunder growled heavily beneath us.

The snow lies exceedingly thick upon the Foce Pass in winter, and only three weeks before our arrival some fellow-countrymen of ours had experienced the difficulty of crossing the island between Corte and Ajaccio. The diligence had broken down, and they had been compelled to walk nine miles through heavy snow to the nearest halting-place; and this in the month of March. Yet it gave one almost a shudder to leave the cold, clear bracing air of the col, with its sunny sky and snowy hills, for the blue-black growling inferno at our feet. But it had to be done, and we little guessed with what celerity.

No sooner were the passengers reseated, and the driver and conductor each in his place, than both the long whips began to play furiously, the horses were put into a gallop, and down we went, flying over the steep winding road like the wind, the men shouting madly, the carriage swaying from side to side, and the rocks and trees passing us as in a dream. [166]

Every corner turned was a miracle of skill on the part of the clever horses, and, as we hung mid-air over the precipice, balanced like Mahomet's coffin twixt earth and heaven, we one and all mentally breathed our last prayer, and thought of the obituary columns of the *Times* or *Galignani*.

The pace grew more fast and furious, and the fun more boisterous than ever when we sighted a porcine happy family on the road before us, and enjoyed the sport of a chase.

Certainly those pigs ran as never could run British or civilized pigs. The family consisted of a stout mamma, three little ones, and a handsome large papa, one of the "hogs of the country," with a good deal of the wild boar about him, being of a bright orange colour, with high, stiff,

black bristles up his back. The chase was kept up for a mile or two, with wonderful spirit on the part of the exhausted pigs, and amid a chorus of laughter from drivers and passengers, until at length a little roughness in the side of the road allowed the panting, squeaking victims to escape down the precipitous slope. [167]

Chasing the two leaders seemed tame work after this; and No. 3 ventured to put in a word for the general safety of the public.

"Have the goodness," she said with dignity, touching the arm of the conductor, and casually moving her other hand towards the region of her pocket, "to go a little slower. This pace is unsafe."

The conductor looked at her with a grin of good-humoured contempt. "Oh," said he briefly, and as if it settled the point, "les femmes ont toujours peur!"

"I am not afraid," she responded (I fear not very truthfully), "but I possess only one neck, and I do not wish to break it!"

"Well, I have only one neck too!"

"Ah! but yours is evidently of less value to you than mine, or you would not risk it so lightly." [168]

A shrug, and a mutter concerning the relative value of heads, male and female, was heard indistinctly; but the exordium was not without its effect, and, rather to our astonishment, the conductor allowed his whip to be influenced by the words of woman. For the next few miles, we were allowed to run down the mountain side at a less breakneck pace, and could enjoy the splendid grey snow-crowned rocks that rose up from the other side of the gorge beneath us, and the chestnut-covered walls towering above our heads, with less fear that every look would be our last, finally reaching the village of Bocognano in safety about four o'clock.

Our fears were not unjustifiable.

When, some weeks later, we returned up this Foce Pass to Corte in our own private carriage, I noticed one of the many black wooden crosses by the roadside about half-way up the pass; and, by chance, asked our driver if he knew its story.

"Oh yes," said he; "that is where the prefect was killed a year ago."

"How did that happen?" we asked. [169]

"Coming down the pass, something broke in the harness, and of course the diligence went over the precipice. The coachman (who is a friend of mine, and told me about it) jumped off somehow and saved himself—he drives the same diligence now—but of course both horses and passengers were killed. There happened however, fortunately, to be only one passenger, the prefect of this part, and he was pitched on his head just here, and died on the spot."

Had *our* diligence upset, there would have been seven mortuary crosses to bedeck the mountain side. [170]

CHAPTER XIV.

A BANDIT VILLAGE.

Bocognano is, par excellence, the village of the bandits. It was formerly the home of the brothers Bella Coschia, the latest and most famous of the bandits of the present generation.

It is difficult to get at the truth regarding these two men, but there is little doubt that they have never had much to recommend them. Out of their own village they are generally admitted to have been regular ruffians; although, in Bocognano, they are declared to be most pleasing fellows.

There is a little shyness, however, in speaking of their errors, especially in this neighbourhood, which perhaps is not much to be wondered at, considering that sixty members of their family inhabit the village. The younger of the two brothers is only forty-two, and the elder one not more than fifty; but for some years these wild animals have shown signs of taming, and now lead a tolerably harmless and inoffensive life on the mountain side, where, by tacit consent, so long as they thus keep out of the way, they remain unmolested by the gendarmes. [171]

A dark ravine on the blue flank of Monte D'Oro, a few miles above and beyond Bocognano, was pointed out to us as the almost inaccessible home of the two bandits.

Their native village receives from them the milk of their mountain goats, and supplies them with the necessaries of life.

By day, the men remain in their rocky stronghold; but at night they constantly descend the ravine and visit their friends and relations at Bocognano.

Night and day are the same to these wild, lawless climbers, who leap down the precipitous crags which separate their cavern dwelling from the village, with fearless security, in the darkest night.

A gentleman we afterwards met, who had been introduced, by special favour, to their stronghold, and appeared to have relished his call much, described them as well-educated men. They could [172] both, he said, speak and read either French or Italian; and he had seen a letter written by one of them in the most idiomatic French. The younger brother, he asserted, became a bandit because of the conscription; preferring a roving and lawless life, and amateur skirmishes on his own account with the gendarmerie, to a forced service in the French army.

The Bella Coschias, however, were not of any particular rank amongst their fellow-villagers, although their name, like that of so many Corsicans, is one well known and a good one in Italy.

A driver whom we employed later on, and who was much more trustworthy than our French friend, afterwards told us more of the bandit brothers. On one occasion, one of them had made his way for some reason to Ajaccio, and our coachman drove him back by night in a close carriage to Bocognano—some twenty miles.

This was several years ago, when the man was undoubtedly a *mauvais sujet*, murdering and evil- [173] doing in every direction, simply for the gratification of his own bad passions; and yet neither our driver, a remarkably superior, unprejudiced man, nor his master, a well-to-do coach owner, dreamt of doing otherwise than protecting the bandit from the French government.

It will be some time yet before law is recognized in Corsica, or the natives learn to give up, into its hands, their right of judgment regarding private feuds and local offenders.

After all, the excuse for this condition of things lies in the mal-administration of justice under which poor Corsica groaned for centuries, and which forced public opinion to take the law into its own hands, and regard the procedure of the courts as only a source of foreign oppression and complicated misfortune. The same cause probably has to answer for the vendetta, for so many years the curse of Corsica, and the disgrace of a noble people.

The vendetta has been the internal disease of the island, breaking out again and again, and often sapping the strength and destroying the harmony of the different members of the community. [174]

It was the natural result of a hopelessly corrupt legislature among a warlike people of strong passions and revengeful propensities; and as such, must not be judged too hardly.

It is an incontrovertible fact that the law of the vendetta was, in its first action, not only allowed, but enforced, among the early Jews by the Mosaic dispensation.

The Corsicans (if we put aside the humanizing effect of Christianity) have had greater reason and excuse for their practice of private retribution than ever had the Jews; for the Jews had a court of unassailable purity presided over by the delegate of the Deity Himself, whilst the poor Corsican could hope for no verdict unbought by gold, or uninfluenced by party spirit, and could bring down no judgment on the head of assassin or robber, save that meted out by the wrathful strength of his own right hand. But a custom which began not unreasonably, and with so much excuse, [175] spread until it became a monstrous horror in the land.

Men were not content with the pursuit and death of the murderer or the robber only—his whole family became their lawful prey; and, in return, every member of that family sought to shed the blood of their pursuers.

Children, before they were born, were doomed to the same unrelenting life of savage hate and bloodshed; and boys of tender years were brought by the mothers that bare them, before the bloody corpse of their father, and made to swear, with baby lips, undying vengeance and murderous retribution, so soon as their hands should be strong enough to grasp a gun, and their skill sufficient to point it home to the heart of the foe.

Thus the hand of every man was against his neighbour; and this not for serious causes only. Soon, the vendetta between different families began to arise from the most trivial causes. A man spoke slightingly of another man's friend or relative, or, maybe, his dog—a dispute occurred as to a date, a measurement, the opinions of a third. A hot word was spoken: out came the ready [176] dagger, or the ever-loaded gun or pistol,—a human heart ceased beating, and a murderer fled to the maquis on the mountain side, or the caverns on the lonely rocks, and became thenceforth a pariah, issuing only to commit fresh murders, supported secretly by his relations, but never more known to the world at large; until at length a retributive bullet laid him low, or his hiding place was betrayed, and he miserably slain by the military police of his country.

This hydra-headed monster had grown to such an extent, that between the years 1770 and 1800, when the vendetta was at its height, some 7000 murders occurred, all on its account; and only the strenuous measures of the French government succeeded in checking the evil.

It was made penal for a man to carry a gun or any other weapon, except under certain restrictions, and in certain cases. This law continued in force for a few years, and worked so well that the number of violent deaths decreased almost to *nil*. But the law has been rescinded the last [177] few years, and now again you see every man with his loaded gun. And the number of murders, although nothing like what it was in former times, yet has increased again greatly.

This inland region is specially the region of arms. You rarely meet a peasant without a gun strapped behind his shoulder, and a pistol or two in his vest; and our driver informed me that they are always carried loaded.

"With what?" I asked.

"With bullets, of course."

"To kill game?" asked I (knowing, however, that this was not the place for large game).

"Pour se defendre," said he, with a queer look.

"That means—to shoot one another as soon as a quarrel occurs?"

He shrugged his shoulders silently, and smiled assent.

In the vendetta one touch of barbarity is spared—the women and children are unassailed. [178]

But instances where women have taken the law into their own hands, and shot a faithless lover, or even a family foe, are not unusual; and of course, they are constantly the provoking cause of many a masculine vendetta.

As a rule, these female murderers are leniently judged. One young woman, well known to our driver, had, a short time before, openly shot her lover through the heart with a pistol, but had only been condemned to six months' imprisonment; while another, for a similar offence, but probably rather less of provocation, had received sentence of a year's incarceration. Capital punishment is abolished in Corsica, and imprisonment for life substituted. It is doubtful whether this latter penalty, to the free islander, is not a more dreaded calamity than even the loss of life.

But the fierce and revengeful nature which has fostered the vendetta is combined with many noble qualities. The Corsican is, and always has been, honest, hospitable, and truthful; and he would scorn to take advantage of a lonely stranger. There is something essentially manly about [179] these people; and the base and petty vices of more so-called refined countries are unknown to them. There is an immense difference between them and the people of the neighbouring island of Sardinia, or that of Sicily.

The Corsicans have a thorough and well-merited contempt for the natives of Sardinia. "They are nothing, those Sardes, but a race of robbers, assassins, and liars," said a man to me with emphasis at Bonifacio.

Bonifacio is the nearest Corsican town to Sardinia, and looks across some narrow straits towards the Italian island with no friendly feelings.

From what we heard of Sardinia, travelling is neither safe nor agreeable there. It is not a particularly interesting country save for its antiquarian remains, being far flatter and less full of natural beauties than Corsica; and, although it boasts a railway, it is as far behind its neighbour in civilization and in the character of its inhabitants, as in the facilities it affords to travellers.

The inns are, I believe, worse, and dirtier than in Corsica; the roads are not so good, and [180] brigands abound; whilst there is little in the character of Sardinian scenery to compensate for the domestic discomfort.

The people are reported sly, and as possessing little of the honesty and courtesy common in Corsica; on the contrary, they regard travellers as their lawful prey. The railway trains are occasionally fired at and pillaged by brigands, and highway robbers still infest the country.

This was never the case in Corsica. For centuries the people have prided themselves upon their honesty, and a murder for greed of gold is unknown. The traveller's purse and his person are safe, amongst the wildest and roughest of the inhabitants. Quarrelling over money interests is unusual; and a vendetta is said to have been rarely, if ever, caused by a dispute over such matters.

The killing and slaying amongst the people has been barbarous enough, Heaven knows; but it has rarely owed its origin to any lower motive than a mistaken or exaggerated idea of honour, or, at the worst, a love of lawless freedom and adventure. [181]

The difference between the Corsican bandit and the Sardinian or Sicilian brigand is the difference of races far apart from each other as the poles. Notwithstanding their contiguity, the two islands have rarely had anything to do with each other for many centuries, and the wild white breakers that roll, nine months of the year, between the "Bouches de Bonifacio," separate two nationalities that have never known sympathy.

A Corsican bandit can occasionally be a much nearer neighbour than one suspects.

A gentleman at Bocognano told us that a bandit, about a year ago, had spent six months in a cave at the bottom of a garden close to Ajaccio. During this time, he was regularly supplied at night with food by one or two friends, at which time also he emerged from his hiding-place and walked abroad with caution; and, at the end of the six months, took his departure and escaped to the mountains near. The garden was close to the house, and the bandit, in his gloomy hole, must have listened almost daily to the voices of the children playing about, and watched the [182] householder and his wife as they strolled up and down.

It was only after the bird had flown that the owner was made aware of the strange visitor he had unconsciously harboured for so long in the vicinity of his home.

"Did it not give him a shudder to think of the man lying there close by, night and day?" I asked.

"Oh no," was the reply; "why should he fear? The bandit had no quarrel with *him*."

Walking through the lonely mountains, and in and out of the wild country rocks, one feels that one is in the natural country of the fierce outlaw; but in sunny, modern, cheery little Ajaccio, it is almost as difficult to realize the existence or the close proximity of the bandit as it would be in a Belgravian drawing-room.

For some time after leaving the dirty uninteresting-looking little village of Bocognano, the road continues very fine, descending constantly among magnificent mountain forms, heaped together in every direction, and passing under the grateful shade of young-leaved oaks and budding chestnuts. Miniature Geissbach falls dropped beside us, and long-haired goats, black, and brown, [183] and parti-coloured, with graceful heads and large shy eyes, bounded past in terror.

At a village boasting the queer name of Fiasco, we took up our last relay of horses, and our fifth coachman. He was a young fellow with a gentle, smiling face and courteous manner. His horses were, contrary to most of the diligence horses, in excellent condition. They had not a rough or a sore place upon them apparently, which was more than could be said for any of the others; and their driver neither required nor used his long whip, nor did he indulge in the various and inharmonious yells of the other four coachmen.

This young man was afterwards introduced to us by a fellow-driver as a nephew and great admirer of the two Bella Coschia bandits.

"He looks kind," said I.

"He is a 'brave homme,'" was the warm reply; "and would not injure a fly"—which, I have no doubt, was true.

The barbarous condition in which horses, and especially mules, are driven in Corsica, is much to [184] be deplored. It is a rare exception to meet with a mule without one or more sores upon its back or legs; and we sometimes saw them at work with an open wound the size of a saucer upon them. The flies in summer must be a terrible aggravation to the sufferings of these poor beasts.

As a rule, however, it is only the draught mules which are thus wounded; and the riding mules are generally whole and well-looking.

There is great excuse for the condition of the animals in the steep roads and the wretched pay received by their owners, the charettiers.

Forced to bring heavy loads of wood down mere mountain paths, dangerously steep and twisting, working often night and day for very insufficient pay, and often at risk of life and limb to themselves, these poor charettiers are constrained to overwork their mules, as they are themselves overworked, and have neither the power nor the inclination to spare them ill-usage. [185]

Yet, I do not think the Corsican is often a voluntarily cruel driver. I never, or rarely, saw one of these wood-carters beating or personally ill-treating his mules. But all over the island there is a tacit indifference to animal suffering.

I wish the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals would establish a branch for the service of mules and horses in Corsica. But they would probably find it hot work at first, as these are not a people who approve of interference in any quarter.

One lady, well known in Ajaccio, who took up a short time ago the cause of the poor mules, and made an effort to bring to justice one or two owners of ill-used animals, was rewarded by a small hornet's nest about her ears; and, I was told, had a note sent her anonymously "à l'Irlandais," in which she was informed that it was well for her she was of the weaker sex, or she might have suffered for her temerity!

As we approached the neighbourhood of Ajaccio, the mountains lowered their heads and soon [186] gave place to wooded hills; and, beyond this, to fine rocks. Then, as the sun sank slowly towards the horizon, the fading sunlight fell upon a foaming river following the road, on one side, and lit up the upper part of the rich shrub-covered cliff which overhung it on the other.

We were now almost on level land, and a broad plain lay before us, about six miles long, marshy and malarious, at the end of which was the wide-stretching Mediterranean, blue and still, with a white tongue of land reaching out, and dotted with little houses sparkling in the last rays of evening sunshine.

This bright little town, lying on its white arm far out into the lovely sea, was Ajaccio. Round it curved many a bay; and beyond it gleamed many a distant island, as we sped over the plain at an easy gallop, under young Bella Coschia's gentle rein.

Then came an English-looking lane or two, with grassy banks and overhanging trees; and then, a sudden turn on to what may be called the Esplanade of Ajaccio—a broad flat road, shaded by a grateful avenue of chestnuts and sycamores, winding along the shore of the bay, past the quay [187] and the statue of Napoleon, and up the hilly street of the gay little town.

No place could have looked fairer than did Ajaccio on our first view of it. Sea and sky were glowing crimson with sunset hues, the hills and promontories on the other side of the bay were a rich purple, while the houses shone bright and clean against the vivid background, their windows painted gold, and the streets shaded by fresh-leaved young trees.

The little town was all astir in the freshness and cool of a lovely spring evening; for it was just the time when, in Corsica, men, women, and children are all abroad in the streets.

Gay stalls of oranges and vegetables lined the ascent; bright red and blue uniforms mixed with blue blouses and brown velveteens; mule carts, with their jingling bells and scarlet trappings, ran up and down merrily; and men in their shirt sleeves (and every Corsican seems to wear a white shirt) sat before their open doors, smoking their pipes, with children and dogs playing round [188] them, and their wives, in white or coloured head-gear, standing near in gossip under the trees.

A few young ladies, got up in tight dresses and frizzed hair, likewise walked, in couples, or arm in arm with a dark-complexioned father, solemnly up and down; while whiskered Frenchmen sat in front of the little cafés under their awnings, and sailors of several nations rolled merrily along the streets, whistling or singing.

Then on through the main street of the town, out again upon the blue sea, the Place de Napoleon with its fine statues of the first Napoleon and his four brothers, past the Hôtel de France close by, and up the Cours de Grandval a little way, planted with its avenue of young chestnuts,—on to Hôtel Germania, lying against a wooded hill, the last house in the street, with front door open to welcome the traveller, and green shutters just being turned back from the shaded windows.

Oh, the delights of once more entering an establishment where the polished floors shone with [189] cleanliness, where the paper did not hang in foul strips from the walls, where indescribable odours did not greet one from every open window and up every staircase, and where the reptile and the insect knew no abiding-place! Oh, the revelling in tubs and cold water, the luxury of a bell with some one to answer it, and the charms of bread not sour, and butter that could be eaten!

Howsoever beautiful be nature, the most æsthetic mind is too much a slave to the vile body to know perfect mental enjoyment when living in constant dread of physical discomfort and disgust. Any one who has ever travelled out of the beaten track will understand the joy with which we took possession of our dainty little rooms at Ajaccio, after our week's roughing, and will excuse this rhapsody. [190]

CHAPTER XV.

THE TOWN OF AJACCIO.

English people are apt, at Ajaccio, to incur a good deal of public obloquy and well-merited contempt by their pronunciation of the name. In their Northern ignorance, they are accustomed to pronounce the two *c*'s soft; and find considerable difficulty in schooling their tongues to the popular sneeze-like intonation.

In this dilemma, I bethought me of a plan adopted by a fond and phonetic mother I had known years ago, to cure a failing common amongst those of tender years, viz., the adding of an agreeable but unnecessary *r* to those Christian names which terminate in a vowel, and by whom the following couplet was composed, to be repeated twenty times daily by her children—

"Give Anna-an apple, and Julia-a cake;
Send Maria-Eliza-afloat on the lake."

Acting on this precedent, I put my poetic muse to work, and, in an incredibly short space of time, [191] had composed this chaste and elegant refrain—

"Ajaccio! Ajaccio!
What name so very catchy, O!
Is there a town can match thee, O,
To turn adrift a scratch trio
Of English dames, Ajaccio?"

This verse I took, as a sort of mental pill, last thing before getting into bed, repeating the dose whenever I happened to wake in the night. At breakfast time, and whilst employed at my toilet, I continued the same process, mixing Ajaccio up with coffee and rolls; and, before noon, had the comfort of feeling that the disease was cured, and the national sneeze effectually imitated.

This trifling incident is only named for the benefit of any future English travellers afflicted with a like difficulty.

Ajaccio is one of the most delightful little towns possible for a residence. Both climate and population wear a sunny air that can hardly fail, one would think, to put even the proverbial [192] British grumbler into good spirits and a good temper.

The views on every side are smiling and lovely, without being oppressively grand. For everyday use such a landscape wears best, as, in domestic life, a cheerful comely woman is preferable to a magnificently attired belle.

Soft purple hills, a blue, gently heaving sea, and pretty white villas, nestling amongst groves of trees, are the sights of Ajaccio, all melting and glowing in the glory of the mid-day sun, or gathering, every half-hour, new lights and shadows, till the haze of evening.

The town itself is far cleaner than any other in Corsica; the streets are gay and busy, with a French liveliness; the inhabitants have a remarkable talent for smiling, and the tradespeople are the most civil in the world. Their politeness absolutely knows no bounds. They place the most unbounded confidence in strangers; and you may enter a shop without your purse and carry off an armful of purchases, to the entire satisfaction of the owner, who quite blushes on being told of your name and residence. [193]

It is apparently considered quite a favour to be allowed to show you the way, and the straw hats are pulled off with a polished smile worthy of Beau Brummel. One man, at a chemist's door, went so far as to thank us for having thus appealed to him!

Another, an optician, a sweet-looking old gentleman, in a grey slop and wide-awake, after having vainly searched for some time for an eye-glass to suit No. 3, was quite overcome when she apologized for the useless trouble given; and showed off the talents of his handsome black and white retriever, which, at his request, leaped upon a chair to kiss his master, with a paw placed on either shoulder.

The shops at Ajaccio are fairly good, and more modern in appearance than at Bastia; and certainly they deserve to be patronized, if it is only to learn good manners.

The climate of Ajaccio is lovely; very little rain falls there.

During our different visits to the town this highly rainy and unsatisfactory spring, only one day, I think, was really wet; and I noticed that the weather generally seemed brighter here than elsewhere. [194]

In winter it is charming. November, December, January, February, and March, vary exceedingly little in temperature, ranging from fifty-five to sixty-five degrees Fahrenheit, with an average of sixty-two degrees; but Miss Campbell declares January and February to be the most perfect months of the year in Ajaccio; and March is certainly far less windy, chilly, and dusty here than on the Riviera.

In April the temperature generally rises considerably, and towards the end of the month the winter visitors begin to leave in a body. It becomes then rather too relaxing, but is wonderfully free from mosquitoes and fevers, and other Southern plagues, up to the month of July; when, although not positively dangerous, like the towns on the eastern coast, it is decidedly not healthy for any Northern stranger who may be enough of a salamander to brave its tropical heat.

In July and August, even the natives, under their big umbrellas, dread the glaring sun; the upper classes all remove to their country houses or summer lodgings up among the hills, and the snakes and lizards hold high jinks on deserted road and furnace-like rock; whilst the scorpions, whose sting is death to man or beast, occasionally vary their amusements by appearing *within* the houses. [195]

Ajaccio is more and more becoming a winter resort for consumptive persons. The temperature is as mild as that of Mentone, and more equable. It is less expensive, equally comfortable, and equally beautiful in its surroundings.

The one drawback, of course, is the voyage; but good vessels run two or three times a week from Marseilles to Ajaccio direct, a voyage of sixteen hours; and this is decidedly the best and easiest route for invalids (unless exceptionally bad sailors), as they then avoid the smaller vessels, and the long cold land journey over the interior from Bastia.

The Hôtel Germania in Ajaccio is excellent, and leaves nothing to be desired. [196]

There are, as I have said, two hotels in the town; both large and good.

The Hôtel de France is decidedly cheaper, and, we were told, was comfortable, and well-managed by an exceedingly attentive landlord; but I fancy a few luxuries to be had at Hôtel Germania are not attainable there.

But the great attraction for invalids in Hôtel Germania is that it is the usual nucleus of the resident English.

The chaplain (here for the winter season) usually stays at this hotel; the house is warm, and airy, and spacious; the bedrooms are dainty and well furnished, and there is a cosy salle de lecture, or drawing-room, containing a good piano.

Tidy little maids, in muslin caps and aprons, attend upon the ladies' wants; the mistress is kind and attentive, and the food is said to be rather superior to that at the other hotel.

From ten to twelve francs a day is the usual price at the Hôtel Germania for "pension" in the season. This includes a nice room with sofa and writing-table; attendance, and three meals, including six o'clock table d'hôte. [197]

The hotel is out of the town, but within two minutes' walk of it; built against a green wooded hill, covered with prickly pear, and thickly populated by nightingales; and has a nice little garden of its own, rich in roses and scarlet geraniums.

Every winter a little English band of visitors, from twenty to forty in number, gathers here; and the society within the house is generally exceedingly pleasant and sociable.

Outside, there are lovely walks and drives; carriages can be hired at two francs the hour; and the pretty English church (in which, during the winter, service is held two or three times a week by the chaplain) is within a stone's throw.

For a botanist, there are ferns and flowers innumerable along the roads; and for a conchologist, there are plenty of pretty shells on the long range of sands.

The town itself has remarkably few smells for Corsica, and strangers can walk about without being followed and mobbed by juvenile savages. [198]

The Place du Marché, out of the principal street, and looking upon the open quay, is a pretty square. In the centre of it, gazing out upon the blue sea and the bluer hills, rises a large marble statue of the first Napoleon, surrounded by little fan palms and other shrubs, and by light fountain jets. The statue is not worth much, but its position and surroundings are well chosen; and the Ajaccio fountains, unlike those of Trafalgar Square, play constantly, not occasionally.

Place Buonaparte, a little further on, in the Cours Grandval, is very fine. It is just beyond the street and the town, and is a wide open space facing the sea, and in front of the tree-lined Boulevard.

A large and imposing group stands in its midst. Napoleon on horseback is the central figure; on each side of him stand two of his brothers, guarding, as it were, the four corners of the dais on which he is stationed. The figures are in bronze, and well-executed; and the group is most striking, seen from the Boulevard, standing out vividly, as it does, against the perfect blue of sea and sky. [199]

Behind the group are some remarkably hideous but useful drinking fountains; an oasis for the thirsty traveller in the midst of the white, dusty, unshadowed Place.

The cathedral (for Ajaccio is an ancient bishopric) is but a poor building. It is small, ornamented with a few pillars of grey Corsican marble, with local black marble round the principal altar, and another of a peculiar but not pretty tint, dappled yellow, decorating some of the side altars.

Two of these, both dedicated to the Virgin, were illuminated in a singular way. A slit was made in the roof, through which the light of a lamp streamed down upon the picture, shining upon the head of the Madonna, and gilding the sky behind her.

The images of the saints were peculiarly grotesque and out of taste in their adornments, and one wondered how any one, with the smallest sense of the ludicrous, could have allowed such absurdities to mar a religious spot.

A brightly coloured Madonna, with a very yellow face, placed upon a small pedestal, wore a huge wreath of white artificial flowers surmounting and almost concealing her most uninviting countenance, whilst another hung on her outstretched wrist, and innumerable glass beads and gaudy brass rings decked throat, and dress, and well-displayed fingers. [200]

But, further on, was a far more ridiculous figure on another pedestal. It was, I fancy, St. Nicodemus—an exceedingly black-browed personage, got up in a species of ball-costume, with a large white wreath decorating his thick black hair, and another, equally big, hung round his neck and falling below a heavy beard, whilst a long red-beaded rosary fell from his extended arm.

If the clergy of Ajaccio, however, have no sense of humour, they apparently understand the meaning of hard work; for I was struck by a written notice, affixed to one of the confessionals, which stated that a certain Abbé Simconi, one of the cathedral staff, attends daily here from 6 to 11 a.m., and from 1 to 6 p.m., for the purpose of hearing the confessions of his flock. After this, no one can say that the Corsican clerics are idle. [201]

CHAPTER XVI.

NAPOLEON'S HOUSE.

One of the first sights to be visited in Ajaccio is the house belonging to the Buonaparte family, and in which Napoleon was born. Every Corsican is, of course, proud to the backbone of the great national hero; and as Corte seems to breathe the presence of the wise, heroic, unselfish Paoli, so Ajaccio is full of the footmarks of the world-famed conqueror, the second son of Carlo Buonaparte, the Corsican solicitor.

The emperor, during his lifetime, did not perhaps do much for his country. He loved it, but the benefits he intended to confer upon it were, like many of our good deeds, from the time of Felix [202]

downwards, put off to a more convenient season; and those he effected consisted chiefly in the making of a few good roads in the island, and the raising to posts of honour of many of his more talented compatriots. His adoption of French nationality, and elevation to the imperial throne, smoothed the path of submission to his proud and independent countrymen, who delight to say now, with an excusable and harmless conceit, of their paternal government, "*We* have annexed France."

At one time it was proposed to rechristen Ajaccio after the name of the great emperor; but this was wisely given up, and the old title (supposed to be from an ancient hero called Ajazzo) was retained.

Turning out of a main street to the right of the sparkling Place du Marché, runs a narrow entry, opening upon a tiny square, formed by a garden and cottage on one side, and by a high, comfortable-looking, but unpretentious house on the other.

Place Letitzia (so called from Napoleon's mother) is the name of this little square, and the high, modern house was the home of Napoleon.

Going through a gate into a little garden, we knocked at the cottage door smothered in roses and creepers, and an aged crone, of dainty appearance and pleasant countenance, came out, key in hand. This old lady is the *concierge* of the house, and an old servant of the Buonaparte family. As she was toothless, and spoke a most extraordinary jumble of French and Italian, consisting chiefly of French words with an Italian termination, it was difficult to understand much that she said; but there was no mistaking her devotion to the family. [203]

She remembered Madame Mère well, whose death occurred so many years after that of her exiled son; and she spoke with enthusiasm of her present mistress, a princess of the Buonaparte family, and daughter of Prince Lucien, who lives in the upper storey of the house. "Ah!" she said, laughing and clasping her hands, "she is so sweet and so kind, my dear princess, and so pretty! If you could but see her! But she is now gone to Mass, unfortunately. She does not seem more than sixteen, she is so bright and young, although she is nearly sixty. Look at her portrait here." [204]

We did not see the princess, whose tame parrot kept calling from the upper regions. But we heard that her old servant's admiration of her amiability was not unmerited. This lady gave some pleasant *réunions* at her house last winter, at which some of the English, resident in Ajaccio, attended.

In some of the rooms were drawings by the late Prince Imperial, who, with his mother, some years ago, visited the home of the founder of their dynasty. The empress, then in the heyday of prosperity and glory, and little foreseeing the widowed exile so soon to come upon her, was yet deeply moved as she went through the deserted rooms, and shed tears of emotion.

Passing through the unpretentious doorway, we went up a stone staircase, three or four feet wide, until we reached the first storey. It consisted of a succession of six or seven rooms, all opening one into the other, and coming out finally at the other side of the little landing. The rooms were square and comfortable-looking, of a good size, most of them with chairs or armoires, or some articles of furniture left in them. Some of the tables and chests were very pretty, of marble, or inlaid with coloured woods. [205]

On the first storey was the "reception-room"—a long, low apartment, from which the chandeliers had been removed, but still hung round with numerous small mirrors, and prettily painted. In this room M. Buonaparte (who was a man of position, his family being considered the second in Ajaccio, and he himself being rather a noted local orator and politician) received a good deal of society, assisted by his beautiful and graceful wife, Letitia Ramolini.

The portraits of Madame Mère, taken in her youth, some of which were hanging on the walls of her house, show us the *spirituelle* beauty, with her dark, brilliant eyes, her sweet smile, and her bewitching features.

Few women have had a more romantic life. Married at the age of seventeen, to a husband who fell passionately in love with her before she was much more than a child, and whose rank was scarcely equal to her own, her devotion to him and to her children was only equalled by her remarkable spirit and her natural ambition. [206]

It is easy to see whence the first Napoleon gained his early childish aspirations after greatness.

The wife of a simple *avocat* in a small Mediterranean island, she lived to see four out of her five sons crowned as kings, and two of her daughters become princesses. But she lived, too, to see those kings dethroned and disgraced, to see the greatest of them dying slowly with a broken heart; and herself to close her eyes on a foreign shore, exiled and sad of heart, driven out from her own country, and repudiated by the very town in which her son was born. If ever any woman had cause to learn the sad meaning of the oft-repeated adage, "Sic transit gloria mundi," it was Madame Mère in her prolonged old age at Rome, where, though still surrounded by loving and admiring friends, the beautiful old lady must often have looked back with a sore heart to the cosy house at Ajaccio, in which, years ago, she and Carlo Buonaparte ruled over their numerous family of sons and daughters, little dreaming of slippery sceptres, or of the unsubstantial greatness of conquest. [207]

The reception-room windows opened out upon a paved and enclosed terrace, surrounded by flowers. Here Napoleon and his four brothers used often to play, peeping through the balustrade

upon the sunny street below; and here the old concierge picked us each a spray or two of scented geranium that was *said* to have been growing there ever since his time.

A little bedroom on this storey is shown as the one in which the great man was born, and here is still the small iron bedstead always used by madame.

This storey was kept for the use of Monsieur and Madame Buonaparte and their friends, and for the reception-rooms. The second storey, up another stone flight, was devoted to the children. Here we saw Napoleon's bedroom, with a broken chair or two, and a curious old inlaid brown [208]
wood chest, in which he kept his playthings and clothes. Leading out of it was the children's play-room, where the boy, always military in his tastes, made tiny cannon, and fought on the table mimic battles, which, out of the house, developed into assaults and sieges with his brothers or schoolfellows, of whom he was always the leader. Even as a child, Napoleon was the ruling spirit among his brothers; he was a second Joseph, to whose superior energy and genius the rest of his family intuitively bowed down.

All these rooms were airy, large, and pleasant-looking; and I felt that I had not sufficiently realized before, the comfortable position and ample means belonging to the Buonaparte family.

We came down the stone staircase, and out of the cool, shady rooms, with a strange new feeling of the *reality* of Moscow, of Waterloo, and of St. Helena; and, going across the sunny glare of the little garden opposite, acceded to the kind invitation of our old woman to visit the snug sitting-room.

This cottage and garden, in which she and her husband live, belongs to the Buonapartes, but is a [209]
gift to her for life.

Her little sitting-room, cosily furnished and full of flowers, is a perfect commentary on European history for the last century. Scarcely an inch of the four walls is left uncovered by photograph, engraving, or sketch: nearly all of historical interest.

Madame Mère and the first Napoleon commence the series of portraits—taken from life, nearly a hundred years ago, in their native land; many of the emperor's brothers and sisters are represented also; the present Princess Marianna, with other relatives; sketches of Napoleon's exploits, from the time he was "le petit corporal" until he became the dethroned emperor; and every possible episode in the life of Napoleon the Third, concluding with a large engraving of the Chislehurst exile lying upon his pillow, the crafty, ambitious face still and calm in the solemnity of death. Then came a likeness or two of Eugénie in her exquisite beauty, and a row of portraits of the Prince Imperial, developing from the somewhat plain, pugnacious-looking boy, to the [210]
intelligent, spirited, earnest face of the young soldier who fell among the Zulus but yesterday.

Leaving the old woman, with her smiling face and trembling limbs, standing in her sunny porch surrounded by flowers in the quiet little court, and emerging into the noisy street, we seemed to return, with an effort, from the romance of the old empire to the prose of modern life.

Another little property, formerly belonging to the Buonapartes, lies at the end of the Cours Grandval, beyond the hotel. Here is the "Grotte de Napoléon," a little natural arbour or open cave formed by granite boulders and shaded by ilex, where the boy Napoleon used to study his lessons, or arrange his mimic campaigns with his companions.

It was formerly in the midst of a sheltered garden, but a road now runs close beside it; and this publicity destroys much of its romance.

The road, a new, as it is a rough and steep one, ascends for several miles, showing a pretty bird's eye view of the town, and by degrees revealing a panorama of distant mountains in every [211]
direction, standing in purple and snowy circles round the greener, smaller hills.

It is a beautiful drive; and nothing can well be more refreshing than to wind slowly up the steep road, as we did on a breathlessly hot day, out of the quivering heat of Ajaccio, into the vast open hill scenery and gradually freshening atmosphere. Gardens, full of shady groves and tall fan palms, line the way, occasionally marred by the defective proportions of a family tomb.

Every road round Ajaccio, and, indeed, round any considerable Corsican town, is full of these family tombs, placed in private grounds beside the highway; sometimes, but rarely, picturesque in architecture and embosomed in shade; but, more generally, square and hideous, bearing, but for the iron cross on the roof, a greater resemblance to a bathing-machine than to aught else.

There appear to be few churchyards in Corsica. Cemeteries there are, often beautifully placed among cypress groves upon the hill-side; but the greater proportion of the well-to-do inhabitants [212]
prefer to bury their dead in their own grounds.

A little tomb or chapel is erected over the remains, generally large enough to hold eight or ten people; and here, once a year, on the anniversary of the death, the family meet to hear Mass performed.

This road, called "la route de Salario," from a fountain further on, bearing that name, was particularly unfortunate in the style and position of its numerous tombs.

The least unsightly were the poorest. It was touching, here and there in a little wayside garden, to see, half hidden amongst overgrowing herbage or creeping flowers, a simple stone cross rising out of the ground to mark where lay the remains of the poor man or his child, whose days had

been spent in the cottage close by, surrounded by that glorious amphitheatre of hills. [213]

CHAPTER XVII.

THE CHAPEL OF ST. ANTHONY.

There are not many excursions round Ajaccio; but the Chapelle de Saint Antoine, about seven miles off, is well worth a visit.

The road winds for five or six miles among green hills and through ilex avenues to the base of the slope, where you are obliged to dismount and continue the rest of the way on foot.

It is an exceedingly rutty and bad road, although tolerably flat, and we did well in providing ourselves with a little light open carriage, drawn by a pair of energetic ponies. In this vehicle we went jolting along, more often in the air than on the cushions, and getting decidedly more exercise than would be useful or agreeable to a winter invalid.

On the way we passed two pénitenciers, or prisons, for French male culprits. Our driver informed us, with what accuracy I am not certain, that only French prisoners are confined in Corsica, and that Corsican delinquents are sent to the Continent to work out their time. It was found that, with the facilities of the universal maquis, and the deeply rooted sympathies of their own countrymen and women, escape for these latter became too easy and too frequent in their own country. [214]

I fear, in that case, the poor Corsican has made a bad exchange. These Ajaccio pénitenciers have a very modified prison air, and are apparently much less stern in discipline than the Continental jails.

One of them was placed high up, some distance from the road, upon the summit of a steep hill, where the prisoners must enjoy the purest of airs and the most beautiful of views.

The other was close by the roadside. It was a large white building, with barred windows; but, in other respects, with little of a prison look about it. Only a low wall and open gates divided it from the high-road, and handsome trees shaded the surrounding courtyard. [215]

It being Sunday when we passed, few of the men were at work; and several were standing idly in the courtyard, with a strangely independent and comfortable air. A warder was certainly with them, but he had an unobtrusive manner, and appeared to be unarmed. The men were dressed in quiet brown suits, which, to a stranger's eye, had little of the convict cut; and, but for the evil expression on some of the dark faces that scowled at us over the wall, it would have been difficult to realize the fact that these were robbers and murderers.

Fresh from a visit to Portland, with its high stony walls, its enclosed and guarded outlets, and its separate small gangs, each with an athletic warder with ever-watchful eye and loaded gun, the contrast of this French-Corsican prison, with its open portals and happy-go-lucky air of nonchalance, struck me forcibly.

Soon after passing the pénitencier, the carriage, with a final jolt, stopped at the foot of the green slope, and we got out to pursue the narrow winding track, passing among macchie-covered sand-hills, and mounting steeply towards the rocks beyond. It was hot work, for there was no shade, and the sand burnt beneath our feet, and the rocks glowed before us; but the cystus gave out a refreshing scent, and at every turn the grey walls grew taller and more rugged and imposing, as the green mounds in front cleared away. [216]

About half-way to the chapel, we fell in with some *bergère* women, bringing supplies to their lords upon the mountain side, from the town of Ajaccio. There were three of them, and they were certainly as rough and wild, and unfeminine-looking as the wives of the bergers are usually reported to be.

They had flung down their bundles, and were lying on the banks of cystus, playing with a dirty pack of cards, with more merriment than refinement. They favoured us with a good deal of notice as we passed; and, when No. 1 addressed a good-natured greeting to them, notwithstanding their scanty knowledge of the French language, were not slow to respond, and to pursue us with much chaff. [217]

A few more turns brought us to the foot of the splendid rocks, and to the wide open plain, on which stands the little chapel of St. Anthony. The chapel itself is a queer little building, dirty and unpretending, the size of a small cottage, and possessing the odour of a pig-sty, with only one window and a wooden door.

Climbing on the step below this window and peering in, we saw a low, mean-looking room, with a few common wooden benches in it, and a small altar at the end, surmounted by an insignificant picture. An iron cross was placed on the west end of the little edifice, which otherwise might have been taken for a cow-shed.

Two or three hundred yards from the chapel, and just at the foot of the rocks, was a small cottage, uninviting and unclean-looking; but, saving for this, a grand solitude reigned over this

most wild and picturesque spot.

The plain, or rather valley (for high hills mount guard on either side), runs some distance out towards the sea, which beats angrily at the foot of the cliffs which abruptly break its course. [218]

The rocks facing the north are the grandest imaginable. Several hundred feet high, and composed of magnificent grey granite boulders, they rise, with jagged and serrated points, into the blue sky in two almost perpendicular ridges.

Maquis clings to the lower crags and fir-trees to the higher, and little paths, made by the sheep, and steep as ladders, wind confusingly in and out among hollowed and grotesque rocks.

Round about the cottage were two or three little gardens, fenced in with wattles to a height of six feet, to keep out the destructive goats, and giving the appearance of African kraals.

Nos. 1 and 3 were still sketching the little chapel, and No. 2 sitting upon a furze bush in silent reflection, when our card-playing friends reappeared round the corner of the sand-hills. Laying down their burdens on a knoll close beside the chapel, they proceeded to put their fingers in their mouths and give a series of shrill whistles, which echoed among the rocks. [219]

The call was soon answered from the heights, and presently, bounding down the steep hill-side, came three of the wildest and roughest human animals of the male species it is possible to picture.

There was little doubt about the purpose of their meeting, as men and women reclined upon the grassy bank, and set to, with hearty good will, at their *al fresco* repast, cracking noisy jokes, and retailing rapid gossip to each other.

They were rather a cut-throat looking party; and when, half an hour afterwards, No. 1, who had departed a little distance for another sketch, could not be found for some minutes, a horrid qualm, having reference to brigands, vendetta knives, and deep gorges, came over Nos. 2 and 3 with unpleasant force.

Notwithstanding the heat of the day, and the steepness of the paths, Nos. 2 and 3 determined to scale part of the rocky walls. An old man, seated in a little enclosure, like a spider in his web, and probably belonging to the cottage hard by, had apparently some insuperable objection to this [220] proceeding, and rather startled the weak nerves of No. 3, already a little upset, by shouting after the pair in an undistinguishable patois jargon, and following them for some little distance. Their legs were younger than his, however; and as he got worsted in the chase the equanimity of No. 3 was restored.

This part of the country is said to be a favourite resort of the bandits, special advantages being offered, in the inaccessible rocks and hollow caverns, to the hardy fugitive from the law.

Some of the boulders are so entirely hollowed out as to resemble an egg-shell or a woman's hood. They must have been filled formerly with a softer substance, which, by degrees, has been worn away by rain and frost, leaving the harder coating of granite, sometimes only an inch or two thick.

As we mounted slowly up the little rocky winding path, pushing our way through thick growing shrubs, and hid from each other at every turn, one felt that nothing could well be more [221] appropriate to the scene than the appearance, from behind any boulder, or at the entrance of any of these stony egg-shells, of a black-bearded, eagle-eyed man, gun in hand and pistol in belt. A bandit seemed the natural appendage of such surroundings; but he appeared not.

Nothing was to be seen except sky, and rock, and hill, as we gained the summit of the first ledge, and, wiping our fevered brows, sat down to rest; whilst far, far below, almost out of sight, fled and tumbled a little stream, gurgling away to the plain with a cool, inviting murmur; and from enormous distances echoed the wild calls of shepherd boys and men, far apart and far away among the rocks, sounding weird and unlike anything human across the stillness and the wide solitude.

Hurrying down again after a short rest, to see if No. 1 had, during our two hours' absence, fallen into a chasm or been kidnapped by bandits, we found her somewhat nervous at our lengthened stay, but otherwise uninjured, surrounded by a group of dark-eyed, wild-looking maidens and [222] children, whom she had arrested in their work of gathering sticks among the maquis, and was hastily transferring with skilful pencil to her sketch-book.

These barefooted, picturesque girls evidently came from some shepherd hut buried amongst the rocky wilds around. They were an amusing mixture of shyness and merriment. At first, pulling their white handkerchiefs well over their sunburnt faces, they turned away giggling, silently refusing to be pourtrayed, without however the least understanding what the process was; but presently, becoming bolder, they consented to turn their faces towards us and make some effort at standing still. They could not, of course, speak a word of French, and their patois was so strong that they could not even understand No. 1's grammatical Italian, nor make their answers comprehensible to her. When the portraits were finished and shown to them, being the first drawing they had ever seen, they could not for some time make out the meaning of the cabalistic marks; but, when at last it was explained to them that these were intended to represent [223] themselves, they laughed long and loudly.

But, what with bandit caves and shepherd maidens, time slipped away rapidly; and a glance at our watches suddenly showed us that it was now nearly five o'clock, dinner being at six; and we began a hasty retreat to the carriage, spurred on, over the sandy, rutty path, by the mundane reflection, that, unless we could do our seven miles in something like an hour, we stood a chance of going to bed supperless. [224]

CHAPTER XVIII.

LES ILES SANGUINAIRES.

Another pleasant excursion and drive from Ajaccio is to the Iles Sanguinaires, about nine miles' distance. A good bye-road has been made to this place, flat and sandy, and following the edge of the Mediterranean the whole way.

The islands lie to the south-west of the town, and probably owe their title to their dangerous position.

St. Nicodemus appears, for some reason (certainly not, one would think, from the natural timidity and vacillation of his character, so foreign to theirs), to be a favourite amongst the Corsicans; for here again, just outside the town, upon the sea-shore itself, we found a little tabernacle, about six feet high, erected to his memory. It was open in front, with a wire covering, and contained two [225] figures, one apparently representing a dead person, being supported on the knees of the other, probably intended for our Lord and the Saint.

For two or three miles outside Ajaccio, the road, on the land side, was bordered without intermission with a succession of little green enclosures, each containing a small square building placed in the centre. These are the tombs of all the principal families of Ajaccio. They differ in size and in shape, but all have an iron cross upon the roof, and almost all are ugly.

This was not the case everywhere. At Sartene I saw some pretty and picturesque tombs; but none here.

As we left the tombs behind us, steep hills began to rise from the road, some green with maquis, and some clothed in grey rocks, where however the asphodel and the universal cystus clung with a loving tenacity here and there.

The prickly pear, too, which loves the very edge of the sea, and abounds near Bastia and Ajaccio, grew in thick rough hedges along the roadside, covered with its little reddish pear-like fruit, [226] which was beginning to ripen. This fruit is much eaten by the poorer Corsicans, who say it is very pleasant. It is ripe about July; and as nearly every hill and sandy wayside near the coast is more or less covered with the uncouth-looking tropical plant, its fruit must be a great boon to the very poor, and to the passing wayfarer.

We reached the Iles Sanguinaires in a little more than an hour and a half; and, drawing up, the driver immediately turned the horses across the road, and flung himself, face downwards, upon the grass in the sun to sleep, whilst we wandered on to the promontory before us.

It is a high conical hill, joined to the mainland and road by only a narrow strip of land, and looks, at a little distance, like another island. On its summit is a Genoese round watch-tower, very little ruined. The entrance (if ever there was one to this tower) is now choked up by sand and soil and pebbles; and the one square window is about eight feet from the ground, so we could not peep inside; but the window showed us the massive proportions, more than a yard thick, which, in [227] company with so many others in the island, have stood on their stormy eminence facing two seas, and defying the attacks of winds and foul weathers as well as foes. The hill was almost covered with a beautiful, mauve-coloured, low-growing flower, something like an English stock, and of a star shape, with a white centre. Between the shrubs, too, and upon the grass and flowers, lay scattered hundreds of lovely echinæ, three or four inches in diameter, with spikes an inch long of a rich purple, crimson, or brown. They were all broken in half, and tenantless; but not otherwise injured by the violence of the wind which blew them up to this grassy height.

The islands, three principal ones, and some lesser, lay scattered out to sea beyond the hill; the nearest perhaps not more than a quarter of a mile off; and, between them and the mainland, ran a fierce current.

They were very picturesque, as they lay, one behind the other, each with its warning lighthouse perched on its rocky summit. The largest was several miles in length, and had soft green patches [228] mingling with the cold grey of its granite walls. But, even to-day, under a cloudless blue sky and calm still atmosphere, the white surf beat against the steep sides; and, as the sun sank lower towards the horizon, a blood-red hue crept over the rough, jagged island heads, which suggested another and more literal meaning for their appellation of the Bloody Islands. [229]

CHAPTER XIX.

JOURS DE FÊTE AT AJACCIO.

The 10th, 11th, and 12th of May were grand days at Ajaccio; regattas going on the first two days, and horse races on the third. For some days beforehand preparations were being made, triumphal arches put up, and posts hung with Chinese lanterns. For once, the Corsican natives seemed to wake up, and an unwonted number of men were to be seen, in their excitement standing upright, instead of lounging before their doors or lying asleep upon the quay.

Saturday, the first day of the regatta, was rather a failure, owing to the weather. It was a gloomy chilly day, raining a good deal in the morning.

In the afternoon, however, it cleared up partially, and we strolled out under a grey sky towards the harbour. The *Agincourt* lay in the offing, sent by the English Government as a compliment to the French; and also a large American vessel, as well as some handsome steamers. [230]

Leaving the crowd upon the quay, we climbed out upon the masses of great white stone, which just now constitute the remains of the pier. It shows the force of the waves, even here in this sheltered corner of the bay, that, a few months ago, during a sudden storm, these enormous masses were broken up and thrown one upon another by the furious waters, like wooden blocks heaped up by a child.

It was exciting work climbing upon these blocks, and looking down upon the bright emerald water and white surface rolling under our feet, or playing at catch-me-who-can with the advancing and retreating waves; but, as far as the regatta went, the scene was as dull and unenlivening as possible; and two or three sailing vessels appeared to represent the competitors. Half an hour of this was quite sufficient, and we returned to our hotel, feeling that foreign regattas were just as much a slow and stupid pastime as they usually are in England. [231]

The next day's proceedings, however, were much livelier.

We did not care to see more of the marine amusements, so, after morning church, spent the afternoon in a lovely drive, reserving the evening for dissipation.

At this time of the year the season is over, and the pretty little English church, raised during the last few years through the personal energy and generosity of a Scotch lady, is usually closed. This it had been for two or three Sundays before our arrival, since the chaplain had departed; but this Sunday we had the unusual good fortune of a choice between two services—one on board the *Agincourt*, to which the officers kindly invited us, and one in the little church itself.

With a strong desire to attend both at the same time, we finally decided on the church at our gates, feeling it a duty not to lessen the small congregation expected there, and perhaps a little comforted by the heavy swell that reigned in the bay, and which might possibly affect the deck of the *Agincourt*. [232]

So we made three of the little congregation of fifteen, where the chaplain of the winter before last (who happened to be on a visit) read prayers; and Dr. Prothero, queen's preacher (on board a yacht in the harbour), preached a beautiful sermon on the text, "Master, we have toiled all the night, and have taken nothing." We were not even devoid of music, owing to the kind offer of a young Englishman stopping at the hotel, whose harmonium strains we all followed to the best of our fifteen abilities.

Dinner was a very merry one in the hotel that evening. About eight of the *Agincourt* officers, accompanied by a noble colley dog, joined our small party, and added a good deal to our sociability. In honour of them we had quite a genteel spread, and generous allowance of nuts and oranges, some of which served to seduce the Ajaccio street gamins, peering curiously in at the open window, into a condition of excitement which resulted in the well-merited reproof of cold pig, administered unseen from an upper window—and in their consequent flight. [233]

The whole town was *en fête* to-night, and at eight o'clock we went out to see the fun. Fun it certainly was; the entire population out and enjoying itself noisily; but, apparently, no one rough or tipsy or disorderly.

Most of the principal buildings were illuminated; whilst the town presented quite a fairy-like appearance. Down all the principal streets, there was a continuous succession of large Chinese lanterns, hung from posts about eight feet high; and nothing could well have been prettier than this uninterrupted line of hundreds of golden balls, scarcely swaying in the still evening air.

The Hôtel de Ville, close by the quay, appeared to be the centre of excitement, and here a thousand or two of people, chiefly men, shouted and hurrahed, jostling each other good-humouredly, and without fear of pickpockets. [234]

It was pleasant for once to see the popular apathy in abeyance.

The light which streamed from the illuminations on the houses round lit up the large open square with its seething mass of humanity into picturesque groups, showing here a black velveteened Corsican with a white kerchiefed companion, there a French soldier in bright uniform, and, further on, two grinning, good-tempered British tars, as shiningly clean and as much at their ease

as they have a habit of looking all over the globe.

A little higher up, it fell, with a fainter radiance, upon Napoleon's grave features in the Place du Marché, turning the numerous fountain jets around him into rainbow arches of fairy-like tracery.

We had not been long on the quay before the shouting redoubled, and the crowd, falling back with some difficulty, made room for a procession to pass out from the Hôtel de Ville.

A tremendous tattoo was heard, and out came a band with a prodigious number of drums, every one of which was made to exert itself to the fullest extent of its parchment lungs. It was preceded [235] by a large flag, vociferously applauded, and which, doubtless, was the national flag, and followed by a troop of soldiers bearing aloft Chinese lanterns or flaming torches fastened upon poles.

Forming upon the Place outside, they started off on the tour of the town, followed by most of the populace; and the great square became deserted. For the next hour it was very pretty to see them, as, at some break in the streets or sudden turn, the golden lamps and torches came into sight in the distance, winding in and out, and moving slowly on, followed by the roll of drums and the shouting crowds.

Meanwhile, we strolled up and down the quay, close beside the edge of the water, waiting for the electric light which had been promised from the deck of the *Agincourt*, and which was our national quota contributed to the night's amusement. All afternoon the English nation had been "doing the civil" in honour of the occasion, which was said to be the first on which a British man- [236] of-war had appeared upon the Corsican coasts out of compliment, and not for *business*. Tribes of residents had visited the ship, and been introduced to the captain's cabin, where fraternity had been sworn between French and English, and sealed with champagne.

It was a beautiful evening for the electric light; calm and still, and so dark, that it was with some difficulty we managed to escape falling over the unprotected sides of the quay, and thus meeting a watery grave.

At first it burnt simply as a bright star upon the deck of the *Agincourt*; then, moving swiftly round, it turned a stream of light, clearer than day, upon the distant horizon, lighting up sailing boats upon the far-off line; then again, piercing the utter darkness to one side, it suddenly brought a fishing smack, at anchor in the harbour a furlong or so off, into closest contiguity, showing every rope upon its yards, every man on deck, in clearest detail.

Then, with mysterious, stealthy movement, flitting on, it turned abruptly towards the quay, and a shout of delight broke from the spectators, as the houses round shone in the glare of day, and the [237] faces of the crowd stood out for a few minutes in unnatural clearness.

There was something appallingly, horribly perfect about the management of the light; and one felt almost sorry for the foe whose little night manœuvres would be rendered entirely hopeless by such an invention.

The light played about for more than an hour, and then faded slowly away; and we returned to our hotel while still the crowds were shouting and amusing themselves, but with some of the hanging lanterns already beginning to take fire in the deserted Cours Grandval, and drop unnoticed on to the darkening pathway.

The nest day, Monday, this same Cours was to be the scene of another wild excitement.

The horse races are always held up this road, which is hard and not too good, and terminates in a steep hill.

Every evening, about six o'clock, for some weeks, the practising for these races had been going on; and consisted generally of four or five raw-boned horses with long striding paces, ridden by [238] rather ragged jockeys, sans saddle, and with reins held well up in the air.

This did not promise great things for the eventful day; but perhaps the races turned out better than appearances warranted.

We saw nothing of them; for, after a breakfast at 6 a.m., and a farewell to a dear canine friend called Chivey, we started off that very morning for a week's tour to the forest of Bavella. [239]

CHAPTER XX.

A RAW LUNCH.

It was a lovely sunny morning when we three, in high spirits, set out on our expedition to the forest of Bavella, and the south of the island.

Our open carriage was exceedingly comfortable, with a hood in case of bad weather; the bay horses went well, and the coachman appeared irreproachable.

There is no feeling in the world so exhilarating and delicious as that experienced in starting off on a Bohemian tour, without luggage, without responsibilities, unhampered by fear of railway

time-tables or the care of boxes, dawdling or hurrying at will, starting at what hour one pleases, and out all day in the fresh mountain air, with *al fresco* meals and a turf siesta. It is the gipsy's life, robbed of its discomforts, but not of its primitive ease and romance. [240]

As we rolled round the circular bay, and up the winding ascent on the further side, the water sparkled calmly in the glassy mist of morning sunshine, and the *Agincourt* lay with deserted deck, like a "painted ship upon a painted ocean."

But the road leading to the town was already all astir with country people coming in for the races; and, further on, higher up the hill, as the pretty white houses of Ajaccio on their spit of land grew less and less distinct against the blue Mediterranean, we met with more and more of these.

Men and women, all on muleback, and all seated astride—sometimes two men, or a woman and boy on one animal—the men with their gun behind their shoulder, and their red gourd slung by their side,—were driving strings of cows, horses, and foals before them, for the fair which was to be held that morning prior to the races.

All the men lifted their caps politely; but some of the animals objected strongly to us and our carriage, and could scarcely be got to pass us. [241]

We soon passed away from the sea-coast and the sea views, and entered the inland country, among green hills, and past a broad river, with blue and snow-streaked mountains rising up before us.

Presently approaching the village of Cauro or Cavro, where we changed horses, the mountain of Bastelica stood out in unrivalled grandeur of white cone above us; and as we slowly ascended the steep road in the exquisite freshness of morning, the birds sang loudly and continuously from the banks of white cystus which covered the lower parts of the wooded slopes lining the road.

Though so early, it was almost too hot to walk; and when we reached Cauro, the horses were in a bath of perspiration.

From Ajaccio to Cauro and Bastelica is a favourite excursion; but it is a very long and fatiguing one for one day, and Cauro does not look a tempting place for a night's rest.

As we left Cauro and continued our steep ascent, the mountains grew grander, and the trees increased. Maquis of the most delicious sort followed the roadside, and the air was laden with the strong scent of the tall Mediterranean heath, which fought with arbutus and cystus for the foremost place, whilst cyclamen, golden bloom, and hellebore clustered at their feet. [242]

Here we met some women whose costume astonished us considerably. Their white handkerchiefs were closely wrapped about their faces as well as heads, in Mohammedan fashion, covering up all their features, and leaving only the eyes visible. They appeared to be on their way to Ajaccio, and were driving a few cows before them; but it seemed more than probable that they would be suffocated with heat before they got there. On one other occasion, in the region of Bastia, we met with some more women dressed after the same uncomfortable fashion, but failed to discover its meaning.

Up on the summit of the Col, overlooking lovely views, was a most filthy, picturesque village. Queer little balconies surrounded half-ruined but inhabited houses, which were approached from the sloping hill-side by broken-down wooden bridges. [243]

Stalking about in front of one of them, was a dignified and majestic-looking goat, enormously large, as are many of the Corsican goats, and of a peculiar piebald—pure white up to the shoulders, and jet black over head and neck. He seemed to hold the porcine and canine companions (who, with him, had evidently the right of entry into most of the houses) in supreme contempt; and it was a marvel to me how he had preserved the cleanly whiteness of his long hair—for the small specimens of ragged humanity who sat upon the dung-heaps close by, or swarmed noisily after the carriage, were so encrusted with dirt as to leave their original colour a matter of speculation.

But we did not pause long in this unsavoury village. We were soon through its one little street, dashing down—through green hills, and by falling streams with trees overhead, with a succession of exquisite mountain ranges, one layer behind the other, lying before us—to the cleaner village of Grosseto.

From Grosseto to Bechisano—a hamlet of some size, where we were to make the mid-day halt—the views were most lovely. For miles we wound above a verdant gorge, grassy broken hills on either side, and grey moss-covered rocky cliffs rising immediately beneath us from the bed of a foaming boulder-strewn river, sometimes hidden by the bending trees which caressed its rapid stream. [244]

From the pretty stone bridge of two uneven arches which presently spanned this river, a beautiful view was obtained of winding waters, green tufted rocks and background of jagged blue mountain tops. Every turn was a richer study for an artist, and Nos. 1 and 3 lived in a constant frenzy of effort to secure a sketch, under the unfavourable conditions of a rapidly descending carriage, and two minutes of time allowed.

The irritation became a little less when once more we commenced ascending towards Bechisano;

but the sky was now growing heavy and ominous with dark blue clouds, and the shade cast over us by a great hill—covered from top to bottom with ilex-trees, some hoary and grey with age, but for the most part shining in their rich young green with golden shoots—was no longer welcome, but depressing and gloomy. [245]

Close to Bechisano, and exactly as we reached the summit of the Col San Georgio, the storm burst upon us. It had been raining more and more heavily for some time, when suddenly, without a previous rumble of any kind, came a vivid flash of lightning that blinded us, accompanied instantaneously by a crash of thunder like the firing of artillery.

After that storm, I never felt a moment's suspicion of Corsican horses.

We were creeping up the hill, the driver walking beside them; and although he put out his hand and silently clutched the reins, the jump they gave was almost imperceptible. As for him, he never turned a hair, but continued his silent reflective walk with the same equanimity, whilst the lightning flashed about him playfully, and spouts of rain poured down from his wide-awake hat.

The next hour was spent in a vain endeavour to keep out the driving sheets of rain which made all nature a blurred blot around us; and when we got out at Bechisano our feet were in a pool an inch or two deep, and our shawls made running streams over the floor of the dirty little inn. This inn was a wretched welcome, even for travellers so drowned and depressed as we were. There was a better one about half a mile further on, at the other end of the village; but, through some mistake, for which he afterwards deeply reproached himself, our driver halted here. [246]

The little broken glass door led into two very small rooms, one opening out of the other, both stone floored; with one or two apologies for chairs, and a greasy table in the first room. This apartment had no fireplace; so necessity forced us to take refuge in the inner one, where a few sticks burnt upon the hearth, and where the family of four or five men and women, a dog, and a due proportion of babies, were huddled together, but they politely endeavoured to make room for us and our steaming garments. It was difficult not to stumble over the smaller fry, as the tiny room appeared to have no window, and was only partially lit up by gleams from the wood fire. [247]

Logs, however, were piled up for our benefit; and as we made a feeble effort to dry our soaked feet, a cheerful maiden prepared our mid-day meal in the next room.

The floor of this room was in such a condition, that, when we entered and took our places beside the round table, we kept our eyes carefully turned heavenward, for fear of losing our appetites. We need not have feared, however, for there was nothing to eat.

Raw ham, with a steel fork sticking in it, was first offered to us; and when we declined that, then raw fish, and afterwards some third dish, likewise raw, of what nature I forget. We were hungry, and began to be desperate.

"Could nothing cooked be had?" inquired No. 3. "For the English do not eat their food uncooked."

The woman looked amazed and perplexed. "Mais non?" she asked, incredulously, as we pushed away the unpalatable dishes.

But our relief was great when it turned out that the inn boasted a small leg of mutton, which could at once be got ready for us. This was done by placing the meat upon a charred log, with a dish beneath, and dropping lard upon it. When roasted, it was more like a rabbit leg than a mutton leg, but was not bad, and, together with a very good omelette, soon disappeared, to the relief of our famine. [248]

There are but two things which it is safe to order for lunch in these third-rate Corsican inns, and which are invariably eatable and good—omelette and broccia.

One of the queerest anomalies in Corsica are the perfectly clean dinner napkins, with which you are invariably supplied in the poorest inns; and which contrast with the total absence of tea-spoons and saucers at breakfast, and the appearance of the dirty two-pronged forks at dinner.

The old man, to whom the establishment belonged, assisted at our lunch, and was delighted to air his French, which, like his daughter's, seemed to consist of a capacity of saying half a dozen words, and not understanding one.

Conversation, under these circumstances, with the most polite intentions, became somewhat embarrassing; and pleasing diversions were caused by the entrance of a blind man, led in to the fireside in the inner room, and the occasional onslaughts made by mine host upon the juvenile inquirers, who, regardless of the pouring rain, pressed their wet noses persistently against the panes of the glass door, to obtain a glimpse of the Inglese. [249]

They had their reward when, shortly afterwards, the carriage came round again, and we packed ourselves in, amid an admiring crowd.

It was still raining, but not so heavily, and there was no possibility of a recurrence of the pond beneath our feet, as our driver had bored three little holes in the flooring of the carriage to act as drainers.

From Bechisano to Propriano, a drive of about four hours, the road is one continual descent through steep rocky hills of picturesque form; some covered with shrubs, and some with trees, and often overhanging the road as it winds by the edge of the precipice. [250]

Not far from Bechisano we passed a great boulder, hanging over the road and supported by two or three tiny ones, reminding one of a huge cromlech. Near to it spread a many-tongued waterfall, spanned by a stone bridge, from under which it poured its heavy volume of water into the gorge beneath.

Ilex and great hedges of Mediterranean heath grew by the roadside; and, as we approached the large village of Olmeto, and the hills opened out a little, a superb panorama of mountains rose behind us.

Olmeto is a gloomy-looking village, perched half-way up the mountain side ascending from before Propriano.

It has something forbidding about its aspect, and gave one a shudder as one passed through. The houses are filthy, and many of them lie in untouched ruins, with here and there a half-broken balcony, and, much more rarely, an unbroken window; and the men who stand and slouch at the street corners have a dark, inhospitable, hang-dog look about them, which is no improvement upon the usual national expression, half contemptuous, half good-natured, of lethargic pride. [251]

Olmeto and the neighbouring village of Olio have both an exceedingly bad reputation.

The men out-Herod Herod in idleness, even for Corsicans; and nearly every man carries his gun and pistol, even to patrol the village street. Two or three murders occur every year in Olmeto alone; and the only wonder is that the number is not greater.

The vendetta is of course very strong at Olmeto; and altogether, it must be an uncomfortable place to live in.

No women at all were visible in the village, either on our passing through it on our way to Propriano or on our return some days later; the presumption being, that the weaker but wiser sex were, Corsican fashion, making up in some degree for the dangerous idleness of their lords by their own household industry.

Coming back to Ajaccio by this same route, our driver pointed out to me, near the Col San Georgio, about half-way between Bechisano and Olmeto, a little maquis-covered hill by the lonely roadside. [252]

There, he said, among the thick shrubs, about a year ago, a man concealed himself to lay wait for a passing gendarme.

This man's father had been a bandit, whom, in the performance of his duty, years ago, the gendarme had shot.

Upon the bandit's death, his son had taken to the hills, vowing vengeance upon his father's murderer.

For years he had waited patiently for his victim, until this day, when he knew he must pass by alone.

Shot after shot pursued the gendarme from his hidden foe, until at length one pierced his neck, and laid him stiff upon the grass, where his dead body was found some time afterwards by a passer-by.

Tombs were scattered along the roadside beyond Olmeto here and there; and an avenue of young trees was planted for some way down the descent. The mountains were magnificent; and before us rose a peculiar, high, conical hill, rearing itself abruptly from the gorge, surmounted by a crag which bore the most extraordinary likeness to a ruined castle. [253]

Peeps of blue sea shone out at our feet as we went lower and lower; and presently, turning a corner, the full wide sweep of the Gulf of Valinco, glittering in evening sunshine, opened out before us. Heavy white surf lined the red shore, and five or six good-sized charcoal vessels, trading to Italy, lay in the harbour.

Propriano gleamed white and pretty just above the sea, surrounded by its many little bays, as we dashed down the hill-side, through green country lanes, lined by wide hedges of brilliant purple vetch and ponderous prickly pear. Then, reaching the plain, we wound round the boggy, sandy shore, and mounted into the little narrow street of Propriano, full of shouting children and grunting pigs, up to the door of the Hôtel de France.

Very grand was the title of our inn, but not so grand its exterior, nor the dirty little staircase and ground floor. The upper storey, however, showed us a clean, airy, cheerful salle à manger, into which opened three little bedrooms of inviting appearance, and apparently irreproachable cleanliness. The muslin window curtains were crisp and new, the floors were swept, and the blankets, as well as the sheets, bore inspection. The washing basins, too, were much beyond the usual regulation size of a soup plate. [254]

Whilst the good and cheap dinner was preparing, Nos. 2 and 3 took a turn up the little town, and scrambled out upon the sea-shore.

A lovely blood-red sunset showed off to advantage the purple range of hills opposite, with the Genoese tower at their furthest point, and cast deep shadows over the Col San Georgio, with its sparkling snow neighbours, and Olmeto lying on its flanks in sullen twilight. But it was impossible to enjoy any view with a pursuing crowd of yelling, mocking children at one's heels; and the usual

scourge cut short our walk. [255]

CHAPTER XXI.

BERGERS AND GAMINS.

The next morning was showery, but not devoid of sun; and, leaving No. 1 to rest in the hotel, Nos. 2 and 3 set out early for a country walk.

Our first object was to escape our juvenile foes; our second to get upon the sea-shore, which, we had heard, was covered with beautiful shells. We managed (it being school time, and so a portion of the little savages out of the way) to effect the first; but the second was not so easy of attainment as it sounded.

Everywhere, except just beneath the town, the shore was surrounded by a ridge of sand-hills, divided from the sea by broad, boggy plains.

The rain that had fallen the last few days made us sink in over the tops of our boots when we attempted to cross these bogs. So, for some distance, we continued skirting the sand-hills, and following a little path, which presently led to a small running stream. [256]

As we were preparing to make our leap over this, a voice suddenly arrested us.

"What! You don't know the country—you? You two women must not go alone among the hills!"

Looking up, we saw a young woman standing in the stream before us, arms akimbo, and contemplating us with disapproving curiosity. Her face was brown and pretty, with the brightest of coal-black eyes and white teeth; her petticoats were pinned up above her knees, and, with her shapely arms covered with soapsuds, and her brown legs planted firmly in the rapid stream, she presented an artistic appearance well worthy of the brush of a Faed or a Nicol. Thee was something audacious and determined, and yet straight-forward, about the young woman's address and appearance, which impressed us both. [257]

"Why not?" we asked.

"But why!" she retorted, peremptorily. "Do you know the country, then? But of course you do not. Any one can see that you are strangers!"

"Yes," we admitted, "we are strangers. But what then?"

"Ah, well! If you knew the country, you two would not dream of going about like this by yourselves."

"But why not?" we persisted, vaguely impressed by our companion's manner. "Every one is good to us in Corsica. What will harm us? What is there to frighten us?"

The young woman spread out her hands in amazement at our obstinacy. "What? Well"—with a shrug—"des chiens, et des bergers!"

Later on, we learnt to regard this threat of *bergers* in somewhat the same light as the Saracen babies did that of Richard Cœur de Lion, according to tradition; but at present we had scarcely imbibed that morbid and not very well-founded dread, and the response of our black-eyed friend did not inspire the terror she seemed to expect in our breasts. [258]

For a moment or two we debated, and then, thanking the young woman for her kindly meant advice, we sprang over the stream and passed on, leaving her standing staring after us with all her black eyes, her hands still clasping her supple waist. We had no reason to repent our resolution, as we wandered amongst the sand-hills, winding down a little overgrown path which seemed to lead to a further bay.

Anything like the flowers which, for a mile or so of our way, covered the hillocks around us, I never saw or dreamt of before.

People talk of the beauties of rock and mountain scenery in Corsica, and the wild grandeur of its wide forests; but, to my mind, the distinguishing beauty of Corsica lies in its flowers.

Switzerland and Italy boast their rocks and mountains, and colder lands their forests; but neither Switzerland nor Italy, nor, I believe, any other country in Europe, can attempt to rival the flowers of Corsica in richness of colouring and luxuriance of growth. [259]

Here, as we worked our way through interlacing shrubs, on each side of us stretched a sea of blossoms, completely hiding from sight both stalks and green leaves. Sheets of pink and white cystus, brilliant purple vetch everywhere scrambling over them, scarlet, crimson, and pink poppies, blue borage, Michaelmas daisies, cyclamen, and what in England we call the garden sweet-pea, together with a host of other gorgeous floral dainties, massed and tangled themselves together in a blaze of beauty.

We had walked about three miles when a muddy bog brought us to a sudden stop. The bay still

lay some distance from us, and we now saw that a tolerably wide river ran across the plain between it and us; so we turned back, sadder and wiser, baulked once more, but with our hands full of lovely flowers.

Not a creature did we see on this dangerous route, except one very ragged boy who was tearing madly after a herd of cows on the boggy plain beneath; but here and there, in the distance, were wretched-looking stone or mud hovels, belonging, no doubt, to the dreaded bergers of whom we had been warned. These shepherds, scattered all over the country, among the hills and lonely pastures, are, according to all accounts, a very rough lot. [260]

They live almost like wild beasts, and appear to be half savage.

Their miserable hovels are generally without window or chimney, and utterly destitute of furniture, even sometimes of any approach to a bed, or any cooking utensil.

Their clothes are in rags, and their food consists chiefly of the milk, cheese, and mutton they obtain from their flocks, with the addition of sour bread. Their wives are as wild and uncivilized as themselves; they know little or nothing of religion, and their children grow up utterly ignorant and uneducated.

I never heard of their robbing strangers; but their rough lawlessness makes the more civilized village women afraid to go amongst them.

Returning to the village, we determined to brave one of the boggy plains; and, creeping along by the side of a hillock, managed at last to reach the sea-shore without much damage. The rocks, scattered about the little bay on which we entered, completely sheltered us from the village, and looked picturesquely black with the clear white foam dashing over them in the occasional gleams of a stormy sun. Regardless of the great blue-black curtain darkening the hills before us and spreading over half the sky, we flung ourselves, face downwards, upon the sands, and commenced an energetic search for shells. [261]

The shore here was simply covered with them; some small, some large, but all of them lovely; especially the large Venus' ear, or *Haliotis Tuberculata*, with bright mother-of-pearl lining.

A brilliant flash and loud thunder-clap roused us from our interesting occupation; and, together with heavy rain, put an end to the shell-gathering of No. 3, who fled ignominiously homewards, leaving No. 2 still reclining in dignified persistency, regardless of storm and rain, under the lowering sky. It is a very great mistake to wear a billycock hat and a light-coloured ulster in Corsica. They were the cause of much persecution to poor No. 3. [262]

When she reached the hotel, she was dripping from head to foot, and a lively thunder-storm was raging; but this was not cause sufficient to depress the energy of the infant islander, who (now, alas! let forth from school), with many a hoot and yell of triumph, pursued both her and No. 2—who arrived in the same condition ten minutes later—not only to the door of the hotel, but half-way up the stone staircase.

I never felt safe on these occasions until I had entered into my bedroom and locked the door; as the bolder part of the troop sometimes came to the very door of the sitting-room upstairs: and I always felt an affinity with the poor fox pursued by his yelping pack of tormentors.

At length, emerging heated and indignant from my retirement, "Why," asked I, of the broad, good-humoured landlady, who, with Italian head-gear and voluble tongue, had just come upstairs, dispersing the juveniles on her way—"Why are your Corsican children such fiends, and how do they ever manage to grow up into such respectable, civil men and women?" [263]

"Ah, mademoiselle," said she, "you must forgive them; they are very rude; but, voilà, they take you for men! At least, they say you are women dressed up in men's clothes. I heard them calling it out on the stairs," she continued. "One says, 'The tall one is a man!' and the other says, 'They are both men. Don't you see they have both men's hats, and men's cloaks, and black pantaloons?'"

Alas for English fashions of 1879! Ulsters, wideawakes, and tight black dresses suited the spring climate of Corsica uncommonly well; but not equally well the tastes of the inhabitants.

FOOTNOTES

[1] "Poems written in Barracks."

[2] Personal enemies of Canino, who betrayed him to the soldiers.

[3] A little prayer enveloping some relic, and worn as a charm about the person.

END OF VOL. I.

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