

PICTURESQUE SICILY

BY

WILLIAM AGNEW PATON

AUTHOR OF

"DOWN THE ISLANDS: A VOYAGE TO THE CARIBBEES" ETC.



"Multa mihi videntur esse de Sicilia
dignitate, vetustate, utilitate dicenda."

CICERO

"Italy without Sicily leaves no image
in the soul—Sicily is the key to all."

GOTHE

ILLUSTRATED



NEW YORK AND LONDON

HARPER & BROTHERS PUBLISHERS

1898

PIANA DEI GRECI

A Mysterious Hill Town—Spectral Trees—Parco—"La Scala Santa"—A Dreary Ride through a Lone Land—An Albanian Colony—Greek Churches—Picturesque Costumes—Curious Customs—Weddings "to Order."

WE had heard much of a mysterious town situated far up in the mountains, about sixteen miles from Palermo, Piana dei Greci by name, and we had been told that the best day to visit it—in fact, the only time when we could see it at its best—was on Sunday or a feast-day, when the people dressed themselves in the costumes of their Albanian forefathers and attended services where they worshipped according to the rites of the Greek Orthodox Church.

We consulted with our faithful vetturino, and, while he carefully refrained from prophesying fine weather for our proposed excursion, he ingeniously suggested that it was possible we might wait a fortnight, a month—until spring, for that matter—without finding a day when the weather would be perfectly to our liking.

"Why delay?" he asked. "It cannot storm worse than it did when the Americans made their trip to Sulunto, and I Signori enjoyed that adventure."

We were obliged to confess that the trip in question

had not been without its attractions; moreover, we had seen his horses, and did not doubt that the three sturdy beasts could make the little journey of thirty-six miles if the start were made in the early morning. As for the vetturino himself, he would be proud to drive the Americans anywhere, be the day fair or foul. The strangers must not think of leaving Sicily without seeing Piana dei Greci.

The strangers had no idea of missing any opportunity to see any of the interesting places in the island.

"Va bene. Avanti!"

"Avanti!" was a favorite word with our vetturino; there was something inspiring in the ring of his voice as he pronounced it. His cheery manner and snapping eyes encouraged one to believe that come what might, surmounting all obstacles, he would conduct his patrons in safety and insure them an interesting and instructive outing. Accordingly we ordered our lunches to be ready when the vettura came for us, and so, well provisioned and provided with rugs and wraps, we set out on our journey to the mysterious town "over the hills and far away."

The weather was cold, it threatened snow, but from time to time the sunlight broke through grand masses of clouds and flooded the world with dazzling white light. We left the city by La Porta San Antonio, crossed the Oreto, and took a road leading inland along the foot-hills on the eastern side of the valley, keeping Monte Grifone on our left hand. Six miles from Palermo we came to the town of Parco, where William II. had a hunting park and lodge, on the east side of the Oreto, over against Monreale, but farther up the valley and seated higher up the mountain slopes. We

had ascended many hundred feet since leaving the sea-shore, and the temperature had fallen considerably below the freezing-point. As we left Parco and ascended into the heart of the mountains, a snow-squall swept down upon us, the wind whistled shrilly, and the air became bitterly cold. We entered a savage country, beyond all imagination desolate and bleak. We met strange, uncouth-looking men clad in sheepskins, anxiously hurrying their flocks of goats and sheep down from the mountain-passes, for already there was half an inch of snow upon the road and all the hills were white and spectral. Nevertheless, along the roadside were purple irises in full bloom, and daisies, and in the clefts of the rocks ferns and ivy and jacks-in-the-pulpit, sweet alyssum, white ranunculus, yellow buttercups, and, in strange contrast to the drifting snow, heather in full bloom, such as ones sees on the Grampians and Cumberland hills in September.

Bleaker and more barren did the land become as we ventured farther and farther into the mountains; when we reached the upper table-lands there was three inches of snow upon our road, and the bad weather threatened to be worse for hours before it began to mend. We crossed a dreary moorland, as desolate as the Doone Valley, in Devonshire; everywhere the natural rock was tossed about in weird confusion—giant blocks standing on end and piled one upon the other; huge cromlechs they looked like, enormous monuments recalling the structures of the Druids and the race of Titans. But all this waste land among the boulders and broken reefs, so far as we could distinguish for the snow, had been tilled and cultivated with the greatest care.

Four hours after leaving Palermo we arrived at Piana dei Greci, a town of about seven thousand inhabitants, the largest of the Albanian cities in Sicily.

When the Byzantine Empire fell under the dominion of the Mussulmans, Albania alone, inspired by the ardent patriotism of Scanderbeg, continued for some years to offer effectual resistance to the power of her enemies. In 1488 A.D., overcome by overwhelming numbers, the Albanians resolved to abandon their unhappy country, at no matter what sacrifice of worldly goods, rather than submit to the oppression of their conquerors. Ferdinand of Aragon, King of Naples, received the Albanian ambassadors and showed them favor, and granted to their nation the privilege of founding in Sicily four colonies of exiled people, who crossed the seas, as did the later Pilgrim Fathers, seeking "freedom to worship God" and liberty to manage their temporal affairs. Certain of these exiles settled in Sicily, at Piana dei Greci, Palazzo Adriano, Contessa, and at Mezzojuso. There these brave people made homes for themselves, and in the lonely valleys where they built their cities their descendants have continued to dwell, cherishing the traditions of an ancient race, preserving the manners and customs and regulating their living according to the habits and laws of their ancestors.

The people who were willing to exile themselves rather than resign the right of worshipping God in their own way did not change their religious beliefs nor adopt new ideas, but insisted upon having, and obtained, the right to practise the ordinances of religion according to the ritual of the Orthodox Greek Church. They did, indeed, consent to acknowledge

the spiritual supremacy of the Holy Father at Rome, but in all other things maintained their independence, especially in matters ecclesiastical. Therefore there are to be found to-day in the heart of even so devout a Catholic country as Sicily communities of people who enjoy a religious liberty which secures to them their right to believe in many things that are utterly at variance with the creed of the Church of Rome. The priests, who neither shave their beards nor use the tonsure, are permitted to marry—a privilege of which they generally avail themselves—and they live with their wives and children in parsonages, and enjoy the friendship, consideration, and confidence of their parishioners.

For many years Piana dei Greci was represented in the Italian Parliament by Signor Francesco Crispi, a native of the town. When it is remembered that Signor Crispi's predecessor and successor in office, Marquis di Rudini, is also a Sicilian, it will be understood why Sicily plays no small part in the drama of Italian politics.

When we entered Piana dei Greci the main street was crowded by people hurrying to services about to begin in all the churches. We made our way to the centre of the town, where, around a small fountain, was a crowd of women and young girls, dressed in gala costumes at once striking and original. Most interesting we found them, when we remembered that they were of the fashion which prevailed in far-off Albania late in the fifteenth century. The dress consists of a woollen petticoat and a bodice made of black or dark-colored silk, embroidered and otherwise adorned. Some of the women, in lieu of hoods, wear

bright neckerchiefs, which they fasten under their chins, allowing the borders to hang down over their shoulders. Others wear curious blue "nun's-bonnets," with deep capes. All were very neat and picturesque in their costumes of time-honored fashion. On great occasions, at christenings and weddings, many of the better class of women array themselves in silken gowns and vests embroidered in gold, with short, bright-colored sleeves similarly embellished, their arms covered with white muslin trimmed with lace. Others use corsages—always, be it understood, silk and gold embroidered—and chemises garnished with lace and many-colored silken bows, and tie their hair with gay ribbons, and wear, hanging down their backs, a "schepi," or veil. A "chezza," or coif, heavy with gold thread, is the distinctive head-dress of a bride on her wedding-day. Around their waists they clasp a "brejo," or belt, with massive silver buckles engraved and gilt. Sometimes these buckles are of great value, not only on account of the weight of metal used in making them, but because of the curious and artistic repoussé work, representing the Virgin or San Nicolo (the patron saints of the Albanian colonies), or St. George, or La Madonna d' Odigitria, the protectress of the town.

We followed a crowd of worshippers into one of the churches, where we were much interested in watching ceremonies that differed materially from the ritual of the Roman Catholic Church. The grand altar stood out from the wall of the apse, and the minister placed himself on the farther side of it, facing the people. At that part of the mass when the "divine miracle of transubstantiation takes place," the priest, confront-

ing the audience, raised his right hand with two fingers extended, and stood in the attitude in which Byzantine artists were wont to depict Christ in the act of blessing. Immediately chimes were set loudly ringing in different parts of the church, and a man stationed on the front porch beat upon a drum, while the bells in the tower of the church were tolled clangorously. Men, women, and children made haste to enter the church, which in a few moments was packed to suffocation. When all the congregation had been gathered in, the drum ceased beating, the bells were silent, and the priest, taking the sacred chalice in his hands, marched down the middle aisle, followed by his assistants and the choristers; and, as he came, all the worshippers fell upon their knees and devoutly offered up petitions to the Father of All. It was a strange sight, all the stranger when the observances and ceremonies were compared with those we had witnessed the Sunday before in the great cathedral at Monreale.

Piana del Greci

After service we spent an hour or two sauntering about the town, visiting its churches, which we found to be uninteresting, decorated with tawdry pictures and cheap gilt bric-à-brac; there was nothing in any of them worth study or examination. It was a cold December day; little was to be seen of the people, who wrapped themselves closely in their capes, and the doors of the houses were kept closed. Only the better class of dwellings had panes of glass in their windows, and we saw not one vestige or suggestion of household comfort, as that word is understood in America and northern Europe. No arrangements are made to keep the houses warm or dry. There are no

fireplaces, and, as we have said, glass is but little used. The homes of the poor of this mountain city are bare, cheerless, dark, and dirty dens, in which prosperous farmers in America would not think of stabling their horses and cows. Strange to say, the children running about the streets looked healthy; they had ruddy cheeks and did not remind us of the emaciated babies and little ones we had seen in other towns. There was a general aspect and flavor of poverty and wretchedness about the place. The men were sullen in manner, and went about as if heavy of heart. The women, even those dressed in their Sunday costumes, looked sad and careworn. The atmosphere of the place was depressing. One was conscious of the prevalence of a general sentiment of discontent, of inarticulate resentment against the imagined authors of the misery, the oppressors of poverty-stricken, hopeless humanity. The snow fell almost constantly, the wind swept over the mountain-top and drove the mist through the narrow streets; therefore, long before our vetturino had made ready to set out on the homeward journey we had wearied of sight-seeing and longed to be gone from the town, the short list of whose attractions we had exhausted.

We did not know, until our return to Palermo, that had we applied to the proper person in authority we could have had arranged for us, with little trouble and delay, a marriage service. We regretted that we had not told the proprietor of the Hôtel des Palmes of our intention to visit Piana dei Greci.

"Had you told me you expected to be in Piana dei Greci, I should have telephoned to the sindaco, and he would have arranged for a marriage ceremony to

be held in the church; then you would have seen something to repay you for your trouble in taking so long a ride on so inclement a day."

"Do they keep engaged couples in Piana dei Greci, so that marriages can be celebrated for the entertainment of travellers?" we wonderingly inquired. Our host made answer:

"I suppose very often couples who cannot make up their minds to go to church to have the knot tied fast by the priest are influenced by the fact that guests of my hotel are willing to pay a small fee to the clergyman and give something to the bride and groom to enable them to set up their own household gods." Truly, the misery of the people of this mountain town must be great when, for a small fee, young men and maidens are willing to assume the cares and responsibilities of married life.

William Agnew Paton

Piana dei Greci

1898 ■