

"Italy in the Sixteenth Century."

An Address

By

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Endowed by nature with the idea of perfection, we contemplate with the greatest pleasure a continual advancement towards that end. We delight in observing the daily growth of the flower from the unassuming bud which was first exhibited. We regard with the most agreeable sensations the youth, who, resisting the propensities of his evil nature, day by day increases in that which is good. We look with the highest gratification upon that people which constantly grows in civilization, in learning and in renown. But with what pain do we contemplate a reversion of this beautiful order of the universe! How lamentable is the idea of the present wretched and degenerate condition of man compared with that pure and heavenly state in which he existed before the fall of Adam! How sadly do we review the time of innocent and playful childhood before we were corrupted by the pernicious influences of this degraded world! What sorrowful emotions possess the bosom when we behold the decay and smouldering ruins of Empires, States and Cities! With such feelings is the heart touched when we consider the condition of Italy in the sixteenth Century in view of the bright days of her former glory. No longer does "Imperial Rome, on her seven hills" exult in the glorious conquests of a Caesar or an Anthony. No more do her sons, a happy people, sing to their enchantment the delighted verses of Virgil, or listen with irresistible emotions, to the placid streams of

eloquence flowing from the mouth of Cicero. Having fallen a prey to the rude tribes of the North, a sad change has overspread their country. Even that beautiful language which before constituted the pride of the Roman people has been sadly corrupted. ~~And~~ there now remains only the vestiges of their former glory.

Four years before this period, Italy had been the great seat of religious persecution and intolerance. The popes of the church of Rome, assuming as successors of St. Peter, the possession of the keys of the church on earth, sent forth their edicts throughout the civilized world, and claimed obedience from all mankind. By their dreadful fanaticism, all Europe had been thrown into a tumultuous uproar, and the sword, as the instrument of the Cross, had been, by Christian man, bathed in the blood of his fellows. Fire and the sword spread terror and desolation throughout many of the fairest portions of the Eastern continent; and to the perpetrators of these hideous deeds was promised a glorious reward in the dwelling place of the "God of Peace".

But alas! The crimes of the church were now reviving on her own devoted head. In the unjust and unauthorized exercise of her power, dissensions had arisen within her own bosom. And, disgusted with the licentious conduct of her sacred officers, and the falling tyranny of her dominion, many who had previously professed her faith, followed in the steps of the stern and inflexible Luther. The world now beheld the verification of the maxim, "Truth is mighty, and will prevail"; as the Reformation began to enroll under its banner thousands of the Chris-

tians of Germany, Switzerland and Britain. The most holy successors of St. Peter, condescending to fall so far below their sacred positions, as to take the field as warriors, now engaged in the embroils and disputes of the heads of civil governments, and were greatly instrumental in causing Italy to present the sad picture of "a house divided against itself." Truly lamentable was the state of the country at this time. Torn in sunder by raging parties, she was composed of small, disunited, and distracted provinces, and, in the language of Prescott, "the gift of the beauty which she possessed to so extraordinary a degree only made her a more tempting prize to the spoiler, whom she had not the strength or the courage to resist. The Turkish corsair fell upon her coasts, plundered her maritime towns, and swept off their inhabitants into slavery. The European, scarcely less barbarous, crossed the Alps, and striking into the interior, fell upon the towns and hamlets that lay sheltered among the hills and in the quiet valleys, and converted them into heaps of ruins".

The rumblings of a mightier storm echoed through the land as Charles, the fifth, and Francis, the first, ascended the thrones of Spain and France. Both possessing claims in Italy, immediately repaired to this land of battles to wreak their fiery vengeance. The clash of arms was now heard throughout the peninsula, the lovely plains of Italy, converted into battle fields, drank the blood of many of the noblest sons of Southern Europe, and the verdant fields, "so delightful to look upon", became burial places for the dead. But a calm as wonderful as the storm soon succeeded. Charles, becoming absolute monarch of Italy, "the Nations", says the historian, "were at length

hopeless, passive, and enslaved."

Such was the sad condition of Italy in the sixteenth century. But we are rejoiced to find remaining, a few bright spots to deck the desert waste. With profound pleasure do we contemplate amid this gloomy picture, the buds of genius springing from beneath the dreary cluster. Ariosto, Berni and Tasso, following in the footsteps of the gifted Dante, roused by their success in the poetic art, to reopen the fountains which had for centuries lain smothered beneath the wreck of northern vandalism. Though Tasso was confined for a time to the gloomy precincts of a madhouse, his genius could not be inactive, but continually brought forth its gifts to the altar of poetry, and added to the literature of the day, productions which would delight the most exquisite tastes of the nineteenth century.

Nor can we on this subject, pass over the name of the "Tuscan statesman, philosopher and historian" Machiavelli, who takes the first rank among the prose writers of that day. Though much censured for his political opinions, we cannot but ^{view with} admiration a man, who had, at such a period, the boldness to proclaim his sentiments, and stake his life upon the issue.

Leaving aside the literature of this age we now come to the consideration of that rarer and more exquisite talent, the genius for art, in which Italy has for centuries led the rest of the world. We are here greeted by the well known names of Michael Angelo and Raffaele, Titian and Correggio. Michael Angelo, who has been called the "Dante of Art," exhibits in his various works, a genius, an equal for which we must now seek in vain. The Frescoes of the Sistine chapel, the painting of which was forced upon him by Pope

Julius, the Second, remain a living monument to his fame. His representations of various scriptural scenes, which display those wonderful events in the most impressive manner, have fixed a standard to which no modern artist can attain. As a sculptor, he seems to have "bodied forth forms of beauty from the rugged rock and ^{gave} them, as it were, sentiment and feeling"; and he has left many monuments to transmit his name to futurity - to remind the traveller who visits Italy, of the mighty genius that adorned the sixteenth century.

But the glory of Italy in works of art does not rest alone on the master-pieces of Michael Angelo. In "the poet painter", the accomplished Raffaele, we behold a rival who was in many respects even his superior. A celestial glow appears to decorate the dwelling-place of the transcendent genius of this most eminent master of art. When we contemplate his exquisite paintings the mind seems borne on the soft wings of fancy far above the gross realities of this unfulfilling world. Though allowed by Divine Will only a short period for the exercise of that talent which was the astonishment of mankind, he has left sufficient works to place his name high in "Janes proud temple". And long will they be commemorated since he has set forth in the most delightful form the ideal images of the Catholic faith.

While the love of art was so preeminent in Italy as at this period, we would naturally expect some brilliant displays of architectural taste. Of these we find numerous instances. Assisted by the immense wealth of the Romish Church, which has ever been fond of elegant display, Bramante, Michael Angelo and Raffaele gave many exhibitions of their ^{living} genius in the plans of

support chapels, not a few of which remain to the present day to proclaim the merit of their architects.

But here let us pause and look back upon this people. Much indeed do we find to admire, much to praise. When we consider the mighty impulses which the sons of Italy have given to the study of art, we confess our incalculable debt of gratitude. And, at the same time, we rejoice in the contemplation of those blazing of genius whose bright effulgence shone throughout the mechanical world. But these, says the historian, "died hand in hand with freedom before the close of the sixteenth century". And in viewing this side of the picture, we must lament that so fair a land as Italy — a land where

"Blossoms and fruits and flowers together rise
And the whole year in gay confusion lies," —
should ever reach a fate so sad. And we are here led to exclaim with Prescott, "Ill fares it with a land which in an age of violence has given itself up to the study of the graceful and the beautiful, to the neglect of those hardy virtues which alone can secure a nation's independence."

