

## EDITORIAL CORRESPONDENCE.

*Affairs in Italy—Priests and Monks—Rich Monasteries and Churches—Artists—Machinery—Mosaics—Laurentian Library—Trip to Naples via Rome.*

NAPLES, Jan. 28, 1868.

The recent troubles in Italy that so much agitated the whole surface of European politics have pretty much subsided, but the calm has in it a portent of evil, and it is impossible to feel any degree of security for the future of this people, who seem determined to carry forward the work of uniting Italy under one government. Nine years ago the French Emperor at Magenta, Solferino, and Montebello gave powerful aid toward the unity of Italy, and the work has since been going forward with the slow healing process of a fractured limb, and might have been complete at this moment but for the intermeddling of this same French Emperor. So long as he thrusts himself in the way, to check the wishes of the Italians, so long will Italy be afflicted with political and social upheavals.

There are still great apprehensions of trouble in Italy. The people are fretting impatiently under the check which has been put upon their hopes, and it is with the utmost difficulty that Victor Emanuel, who is much more of a bluff soldier than a shrewd politician, has been able to keep his crown. He is now unpopular in Italy simply, I believe, for the reason that he has not been able to lead the people to a full realization of their wishes.

I had a curiosity to visit the Parliament now sitting at Florence. There was a simplicity about the proceedings which made it seem like our own "Republican Court." No pomp, no show, no ceremony. A very spirited debate was going on—one of the members was charging the Ministry face to face with having palmed off upon the people some falsified documents, for the purpose of misleading them, and though called to order by the presiding officer, who vigorously rang his tea bell, the member insisted upon his right to speak, and in this he was sustained by a majority of the members. It was charming to notice with what apparent freedom members gave utterance to their views of public policy, an evidence that some of the fire of ancient Italy still burns.

It is impossible not to see and feel that the church of Rome, so much venerated for its history and antiquity, is gradually losing its hold upon the affections of a large class of its believers. The priests have not the same power and influence over the masses as in former times, and are even caricatured in public prints, an irreverence which I am assured would not have been tolerated until quite recently, and no one can look upon the horde of monks that traverse the streets without feeling a sort of commiseration for their unhappy situation. Their work in Italy and elsewhere in Europe appears to be nearly finished, their extensive monasteries, cloisters, and elegant chapels are almost deserted, and they seem now to be wandering about the streets and solitary places, destitute, afflicted, and tormented.

Some of the magnificent church edifices in Italy, as in Spain and elsewhere, with their rich marbles, decorations, and master works in sculpture, painting, and fresco, are monuments of the skill and refined taste of these monks, and will always constitute one of the chief objects of interest to all travelers. Some persons seem to delight in abusing these wandering children of the church, but they are glad to spend time and money to see and admire the wonders of art which they have collected. If the ecclesiastical and monastic edifices and fine scriptural pictures could be suddenly swept away from Italy, much of the interest which now clings to it would disappear, for with rare exceptions a mere, shapeless mass of ruins and the associations of ancient history, are of comparatively little interest except to antiquarians, scholars, and minds well instructed in historical reading.

The people of Italy at this moment are reduced to the straits of a paper currency, and even individual shopkeepers, for the want of small change, pass current in the cities. Gold now commands a premium of fifteen per cent, and coppers six per cent, yet with the exception of the necessities of life, which are now higher than at any former period, the price of labor and merchandise remain about the same. The business of the country is heavily depressed, but the Italian who wishes to pass for a gentleman upon the Lung Arno or the Corso must contrive in some way to sport his fine stovepipe hat, also a seat at the opera where his "bravos" can be energetically rendered, and if possible a fine equipage, even though he must needs go without his dinner and live at his home in squalid discomfort.

The Italian always has his house, however humble, but he spends a good deal of his time in loitering about the promenades and cafés, though he never frequents the hotel; therefore spacious bar-rooms are never seen in them, and when rents are high the hotel, even with plenty of rooms at three and five francs per day, may remain empty. The hotels are for travelers, not for residents. Bar room tipping, the curse of our own country, is a thing almost unknown in Italy. I was informed by a resident that there was but one establishment in Florence where a gentleman could go up to the bar and obtain a prepared drink, such as are furnished at every bar-room in New York. Drunkenness, as we so well understand it, is also a thing unknown, and the records of crime and immorality indicate a better state of society than is found in either English or American cities.

The charitable institutions of Florence are numerous and well cared for. One of the most ancient is the *Misericordia*, founded many centuries ago by the aid of a fund collected as fines for profane swearing, imposed upon themselves by workmen employed in the extensive cloth factories which at one time were quite numerous in Florence. Forty men are on duty all the time, and at the monotonous toll of the great

cathedral bell they go forth on their mission of mercy, masked and clothed in a black monastic dress, and bring to the institution the sick poor, or those who have been wounded to afford them succor, or when killed, a Christian burial. They understand the language of the tolling bell as well as our firemen do when summoned to their duty. I noticed when a procession of the *misericordia* passed through the streets that citizens lifted their hats and soldiers presented arms, in token of respect to the society, which has a long and humane history of noble deeds.

Artists in Italy are poorly paid, and works of art can be purchased very cheaply. I noticed in one of the public galleries an artist at work, skillfully copying some exquisite little pictures. I had the curiosity to learn how much he was paid for his labor. He gave me the price of the picture and the time required to finish it, and I found that he was earning about five francs per day, out of which he had himself to support. Noticing upon the walls of the gallery an elaborate picture of the "Adoration of the Wise Men," painted by one of Italy's old masters, I inquired of the artist his charge for making a copy of it; he replied, twelve hundred francs, which meant paper money, and moreover he assured me that to do it well would occupy his time the best part of a year. With a view to verify the correctness of the estimate, I took the trouble to make the same inquiry of another artist of considerable reputation, and he informed me that he could not undertake to complete the copy short of nine months time and at five times the price previously given by the other artist. There are nearly a thousand artists in Florence—sculptors and painters—a great majority of whom eke out a beggarly existence. Visitors to the galleries of art are besieged by the importunities of these people to buy their works, and they even beg permission to fetch them to your lodgings. They also operate through servants to secure, if possible, admittance, hoping thereby to dispose of their productions. Bargaining is the rule throughout all Italy, so far as my observation extends, and the purchaser can usually fix his own price upon all articles of handicraft. The contrast between the condition of the working classes here and in our own country is very great, and beggary is so common that one must necessarily harden his heart to all the piteous appeals that are made for charity, otherwise the cost of giving would exceed the cost of traveling.

The manufacture of Florentine mosaics is still an important branch of industry and requires the greatest degree of skill to work the pieces into so many fanciful and exquisite forms. The slab usually employed for the frame work of the mosaic is known as the "paragon stone," found in Belgium and Scotland. It is black and very dense, and is capable of receiving a brilliant polish. The holes are all sawed by the use of a small steel wire, strung upon a bow, and which lasts but from three to five minutes, when another length is required. The pieces to be inserted are of various natural colors, selected with great care, and are all cut in the same way to an exact measurement, the process being exceedingly slow and tedious. After the sawing, the small pieces are fitted into the matrices according to a design previously prepared, and are then secured to their places by a tough cement, the whole resting upon an under slab of slate. The mosaic is finished by polishing the surface by hand, by means of porphyry. A month's time is frequently required to polish a fine table top. In the king's palace is a mosaic table that cost the labor of fourteen years, and the expense is said to have been \$200,000. It was made at the government works, for the London Exhibition of 1851. A costly toy, to be sure, but foreign governments don't mind the expense, so long as they can wring the money from the people. There still exists in Italy a strong prejudice against the introduction of labor saving machinery. Mechanics here cherish the crude old notion that machinery would destroy the value of their labor instead of enhancing its dignity and increasing its demands; therefore they are content to plod on day after day, through weary manipulations, which could be performed much more profitably by a machine. I was informed by an American residing in Florence, that it would not be safe for any one to introduce a circular saw, therefore boards and all other pieces of lumber are ripped by an old fashioned slitting saw, worked by two men. Of modern agricultural machinery little or none is employed, and all attempts to improve the quality of the silk-worm have failed mainly through the opposition of those who insist upon carrying on the operations of the worm in their own houses. I cannot conceive of a better and more humane service to be done for the advancement of the working classes of Italy, than to instruct them in the proper use of improved tools and processes, and to convince them that by their use great benefits would result therefrom. People in Italy have no fires in their places of business, and it is often considered a luxury to have a fire in their houses; beside, the fireplaces are constructed so deep that the heat all goes up chimney, and very little comfort is derived from it. The people warm themselves by the use of an earthen jar or pot, with a few embers in it, which they carry about by a fixed bail or handle. The jar, often highly ornamented, is about the size of a small flower pot, and it is amusing to see the people huddling over them trying to keep their fingers warm.

In my last letter, I spoke of the many fine churches of Florence, but neglected to state that although elegantly fitted up few of them have finished fronts—a serious defect that was explained to me as resulting from the circumstance that in earlier times a heavy tax was laid upon all finished churches, therefore to avoid this tax the front was left in a rough state. Some of the most splendid churches in the city present this singular contrast—externally, a rough stone wall, or a plain stuccoed front; the interior finely painted, gilded, and otherwise adorned.

The Laurentian Library, connected with the church and old monastery of San Lorenzo, contains one of the richest collections of rare manuscripts to be found in the world. They are solidly bound, and each volume is fastened to the desk by a heavy iron chain. Here are to be seen the Pandects of Justinian, captured at Amalfi seven hundred years ago, also manuscripts of Tacitus, Virgil, Horace, Petrarch, Dante, Cicero's Epistles, and many other classical works; also, a copy of the famous Decameron of Boccaccio, dated 1331, a book that greatly interested me, because of a statement I noticed in an English paper to the effect that in 1813 a copy of the Decameron was purchased at an auction sale in London, by the Marquis of Blandford, for the sum of £2,250, and that upon his death it was bought by his early rival for the book, Lord Spencer, for £918. The journal furthermore declared that only two other copies were known to exist, one in the Ambrosian Library at Milan, the other in the Imperial Library at Paris. It seems, however, that there is a Decameron at Florence, and if I remember rightly, it bears an earlier date than that purchased by the Marquis.

But I must not linger in Florence; the eruption of Vesuvius demands our presence at Naples. We took our departure on a dark, rainy night, with the expectation of getting an outside view of Rome at an early hour in the morning. About an hour before we reached the "Eternal City," a pontifical officer took our passports, in return for which we were handed a receipt, with the assurance that before leaving the state the passports would be returned. We had a distant view of the dome of St. Peter's, and for several miles on our way to Naples, we rode along the Campagna and very near to the broken arches of the famous Claudian aqueduct, and numberless scattered piles of stone, which brought back a faint idea of a ruined city, once the mistress of the world. After a tedious ride of eight hours, we were set down in the suburbs of Naples, in a pelting rain storm, and became the prey of a pack of hackmen and rangers, whose seemed anxious to devour us, bag and baggage.

S. H. W.

P. S.—Just as I was about to close this letter, Naples was thrown into an intense excitement by a very shocking calamity, the full extent of which it is now impossible to ascertain. It appears, that, about six o'clock this evening, a considerable portion of an abrupt hill, called the *Piazzo Falcone*, which rises high above a principal and much frequented street, that runs along the bay side of the city, suddenly gave way, overwhelming a public-house, beside several dwellings and shops, also burying in its ruins a large number of people. I have just returned from the scene of the disaster, about five minutes' walk from the hotel, and found an immense pile of earth and rubbish filling up the street for a long distance. A force of soldiers were on guard, and gangs of men were at work trying to dig out the bodies of those unfortunates who were buried under the ruin.

I understand that Bayard Taylor resided in one of the houses which was destroyed, but, fortunately, he with his family were temporarily absent when the catastrophe occurred.

During the past ten days Naples has been visited by two severe rain storms; and, one night, the shock of an earthquake was sensibly felt throughout the city, which will no doubt account for this land slide.

Vesuvius, to-night, is more splendid than at any time since this eruption began. The discharge of the lava is increasing, and the surface of the cone toward Naples is almost entirely covered with the red hot mass, which now flows down through seven distinct streams.

#### Anthracite Gunpowder.

Ehrhardt, of London, has lately obtained as above. "The powder is composed of nitrate of potash and chlorate of potash mixed in proper proportions with mineral carbon. Powder thus compounded is less liable to accidental explosion, inasmuch as it does not explode when ignited in the open air, but burns slowly, something like common gunpowder when wet. But when confined, as in a gun, or in a blasting hole in a rock, it explodes with even greater force than ordinary gunpowder. It is not much affected by dampness, and generates but little smoke in burning.

"To make this powder, the several ingredients must be finely pulverized and then intimately mixed together. The more finely they are pulverized the better. They require no other preparation. When the ingredients are well mixed the powder is ready for use. The proportions of the ingredients may be varied for different kinds of work. For use in coal mines, I prefer to take one part by bulk of chlorate of potash, four parts of nitrate of potash, and five parts of mineral coal. For blasting granite or other hard rocks, I prefer to take one part of chlorate of potash, two parts of nitrate of potash, and three parts of mineral carbon.

"The mineral carbon may be either bituminous coal or anthracite, but I prefer to use the anthracite known as "red ash." Wood charcoal may be used instead of mineral coal, but it is not so good. Nitrate of soda may also be used in place of the nitrate of potash."

#### Improvement in Generating Illuminating Gas.

Ferdinand King, of Richmond, Va., who has lately obtained a patent, says:—"I take of the oil that runs from the gas tar produced at gas or coke works about two parts, and crude petroleum about one part, and mix them together, forming a compound oil. From this compound oil I generate gas by treating it in any oil-gas generator, in the same way that other oils are treated for the same purpose. It makes a superior illuminating gas, at a very small expense, and will be found of great value for lighting private houses and single buildings or establishments which cannot be supplied by public gas works."