



CASTELL DI SANGRO

IN THE ABRUZZI
BY ANNE MACDONELL : WITH
TWELVE ILLUSTRATIONS AFTER
WATER-COLOUR DRAWINGS BY
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Stefano in Rivo. Among its possessions was one of the Tremiti isles. The Saracens sacked and burned the abbey, killed the monks, and then went on to Ortona, which could not withstand their onslaught. Worse damage still was suffered at Francavilla. From thence they went inland in two squadrons, one of which made for Tollo, the other for Villamagna. At Tollo they summoned the defenders of the place to surrender. The garrison congregated in the now demolished tower, allowed a band of the Saracens, by a feint, to occupy some part of the citadel, and then, having them in their power, killed them. The rest, renouncing their designs of pillage, hurried back to the coast. Such is the origin of the "Representation" of Tollo.

The second division had reached the first houses of Villamagna, when suddenly a meteor, accompanied by thunder, lightning, and hail, burst on them. The commander retired to the nearest church, where he presented to the *arciprete*—in homage to the patron Santa Margherita—a diadem studded with many precious stones, which he had worn on his turban. This historic jewel was preserved for nearly two centuries, and then a priest sold it; so that of the *pennacchietto*, as it was called, there only remains a faint memory.

This happening is commemorated in the feast of Santa Margherita at Villamagna. The statue of the saint is brought out of the church. Before it walk bands of women and girls, bearing on their heads copper pots filled with grain, and on the top a bunch of sweet basil. They are followed by youths armed with long poles adorned with ears of corn. A number of barrels form a *repositoir* for the statue; and when she is placed there the "Representation" begins. About a score of young men, clad in odds and ends of ancient garments and uniforms, armed with daggers, scimitars, and bows and arrows, play the Saracens. Two of them on foot and two on horseback

advance, to a discreet distance from the statue; and there, with fierce mien and determined gesture, they set fire to a sheaf of straw, thus signifying danger to the saint, her temple, and her *protégés*. Then one gallops back to bring on the main body to the attack. There is much shooting of bows and arrows and whirling of swords and scimitars, when, behold, a wonder in the heavens! Down through the air comes a long beam wrapped in tow and all in flames. The Saracens on foot fall prostrate to the ground, and the cavaliers fall over the necks of their horses. There is a pause full of well-simulated terror; and then the procession takes its way back to the church, whither, after some showy perambulation of the streets, the Saracens also wend, throwing themselves before the saint in humblest adoration. Coming out, they mount their horses, and feign to flee as hard as ever they can from the village. So ends the drama.

The "Representations" are mute drama in action. The *talami*, on the contrary, are what we should call tableaux vivants. A *talamo* is a portable scenic platform. At the back of it rises a triangular wall on which is hung whatever little scenery is needed—for instance, a yellow wooden disc represents the light of day. In front of this, and well raised, sits a child Madonna, and at the sides are two children dressed as angels. These three appear in all *talami*. In the foreground are the personages of the scriptural story to be represented—nowadays nearly always children. As the *talami* are carried on the shoulders of men, who wear the robes of their confraternities, the little actors are tied on securely, though, indeed, they sit or stand with much solemn dignity, and would never disgrace the occasion by toppling over. Generally, at least half a dozen of these *talami* are prepared, stationed at various points of the village for a

given time, after which they are moved on in the procession, headed by the particular virgin or saint of the festa, so that all the tableaux are gradually shown along the whole route, amid the singing and shouting of the crowds and the cracking of squibs. Here are some subjects often represented, taken at random from various programmes: Moses saved from the water.—Moses striking the rock.—Solomon leading the Queen of Sheba to his palace.—Abraham's sacrifice.—The Tables of the Law.—The Burning Bush.—The Annunciation.—The Adoration of the Shepherds.—The Flight into Egypt.—The Marriage of Cana.—The Ascension.—etc., etc.

The progress of the procession is of necessity slow; and besides, time for devotion, for wonderment, and for singing must be allowed. The tableaux are crude, and sometimes grotesque, but now and then forceful and original, and owe more to tradition and less to a taste deteriorated by bad chromo-lithography than one might suppose.

One of the most interesting features of the *talami*, and one that is invariably present, is the distinct proof of their pagan origin, hardly concealed at all. The festa may be that of Our Lady of Refuge, or Our Lady of the Rosary; but in reality Mary here is but the heiress of Ceres. The last *talamo* always represents "The cultivators and the women bringing to Mary the produce of the fields." After the procession of these living pictures there commonly follow a pair of oxen drawing a cart laden with sheaves, while youths mounted on it throw handfuls of ears of corn among the people. There is a wild scramble for these *sacre spighe*, which bring luck to all, and which mothers hold to be of special efficacy in certain children's maladies. In old times—there are still men and women who remember it—bands of peasants used to follow with picks and spades, pretending to dig, and to scatter grain in imaginary furrows,

and hunters, too, with guns, who feigned to follow the game, and fired blank shots. All these are remnants of the ancient propitiatory feasts in honour of Ceres, who is now called Mary. The *talami* may be seen here and there in the Abruzzi; but the stranger will not hear of them unless he make it clearly and widely known that his interest in such things is genuine. It is probably due to the apathy of the clergy when they fall into disuse; for the desire to realize history and scripture story through the eyes is as keen as ever among the people, and explains the vogue of the cinematograph in the towns.

I have named but two or three of the scenic festas of the Abruzzi. In my notes on the Scanno district I shall speak of the feast of St. Dominic of Cocullo, a popular saint whose day is commemorated in various parts of the province after a fashion that calls to mind one of the oldest powers of the Abruzzesi, that of serpent-charming. And there are many noted and fashionable festas in the larger places, where the municipal authorities and the railway companies exploit the devotion of the people, and where the religious and local aspects of the fêtes are apt to be lost in the displays of fireworks and in the newer forms of popular amusements.

This pictorial side of religion is a strong feature; but it ministers to only one side of the Abruzzese nature—a nature with deeps and darks in it, and with a strain of morbidity, too, almost Spanish. Could it be otherwise in these mountain solitudes, where disaster has never for long hidden its grim face? The death's-head and the bleeding Christ, racked and distorted with physical sufferings, are familiar objects in the churches—and they bring their own kind of comfort. Nor is the conception of the Virgin and the saints as survivals of the lost gods and the fairies a complete one. Whole cycles of legends