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978-1-108-06618-1 - Social Aspects of the Italian Revolution, in a Series of Letters from Florence: With a Sketch of Subsequent Events up to the Present Time

Theodosia Garrow Trollope

Excerpt

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SOCIAL ASPECTS
OF
THE ITALIAN REVOLUTION.



I.

THE FALL OF A DYNASTY.—THE FLORENTINES BETTER THAN THEIR REPUTATION.—REVOLUTION-DAY ON THE PIAZZA.—A TRIAL OF TEMPER.—A SILENT FAREWELL.—TENDER MERCIES OF A “PATERNAL” GOVERNMENT.—A SIGNAL FAILURE.—NO HELP IN THE FORTRESS.

Florence, April 27, 1859.

WE have made at Florence a revolution with rose-water. Since yesterday evening a dynasty has been, *not* overturned, but calmly put aside; an entire change of national policy effected; a provisional government appointed, and we appear no doubt at this moment to English eyes to be boiling and bubbling, poor souls! in the fiery cauldron of revolution. But truly, considering all these things, the real state of our surroundings on this beautiful starlight night of the 27th of April, when, for the first time, we shall lie down under

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the shadow of the Silver Cross of Savoy, together with the manner in which the citizens of Florence have borne and bear themselves on this occasion, merit a word of notice even in the proud centres of civilization, inasmuch as these social phenomena have deeper meanings in them and point to more enduring and world-wide conclusions than even the political earthquake tremblings which are beginning to shake the Peninsula from Monte Viso to Vesuvius.

I think that some of the fluent "Own Correspondents" who in 1848 were wont to be so wittily pleasant at the expense of the corps of dilapidated Tuscan and Roman volunteers setting out on their desperate errand to the Italian "Crusade," with very faint glimmerings indeed of drill and discipline, and in a state of utterly benighted heathenry respecting the mysteries of pipe-clay and military precision,—I think, I say, that even those agreeable *faiseurs d'esprit* would perforce have confessed, had they lived through this day in Florence, that the last ten years of suffering and humiliation have strangely matured and tempered the fitful impulses and aspirations of the then half-asleep, half-childish, wholly misruled population of Tuscany. A people so conditioned as this, is too often considered by those happily born and bred under more wholesome political influences, to be a

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CONDUCT OF THE FLORENTINES.

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totally worn-out, effete, degraded race, fit only for the fate of the savourless salt of the Scripture denunciation. But such a race *could* not have carried itself as the Florentine people did to-day—such a race *would* not, with the army to back it up, and the city absolutely at its mercy, with plenty of excuses for excess, and valid reasons more than enough for bitter retaliation on its rulers, have abstained from every lightest shadow of riot or disorder, nay, of insult to even the most unpopular among them, and effected its will with a dignified enthusiasm and a singleness of purpose as far removed from theatrical bravado as from wavering timidity.

I will venture to say, at the risk of seeming to exaggerate the merits of our bloodless revolutionaries and the admirable guidance of the leaders of the movement, that neither London nor Paris, high places of civilization though they be, would, under similar circumstances, have presented a like aspect.

One great reason, it is true, for the perfect tranquillity of our now masterless city, which at this moment is tucking its bedclothes round it as quietly and far more hopefully than it did two nights ago, is, the prevalent sobriety of the working classes in Tuscany. The madness of strong drink, except in rare individual cases, is happily unknown to these

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excitable Southern brains ; and it were well if Lombardy, and even Piedmont, took a lesson from them in this respect. Moreover, the bitter experience of '48 has taught the movers of the popular masses to restrain as far as possible, instead of encouraging the fervour of triumphant demonstration among them, after its first tumultuous blazing out, lest the earnestness of purpose so long and systematically trodden out of them should run up, as one may say, too luxuriantly into leaf and blossom, and leave but little pith and toughness to the stem.

I saw our great new square (whilome Piazza Maria Antonia, henceforth Piazza della Indipendenza) thronged this morning with near twelve thousand people, all a-bloom with red, green, and white banners (the old beloved Italian tricolour), ringing with shouts of "Viva la *nostra* Italia!" and with the liberty hymn of '48, yet so orderly, so righteously peaceable in its whole aspect, that timid women came out to join the throng, and little children climbed upon the stone benches and shouted and clapped their weak hands at the glorious show. It seemed to me then, and seems yet more now, that the result is an accomplished fact ; that grievous wrong has (perhaps unwittingly) been done this people in the eyes of other nations, and that not a little of the old far-away civi-

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A TRIAL OF TEMPER.

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lization yet remains at the people's heart, underlying the heaped-up foulness and ruin of civil broils and Medicean and Austrian rule. In such momentous crises as this, the old Tuscan groundwork shows out, giving promise of better things in store.

There were moments, however, in the course of this day, at which the provocations offered to the liberal portion, that is, the all but entirety of Florence, threatened to be more than the ingrained civility and gentleness even of the Tuscans could endure. When the popular excitement was at its height, when the troops were fraternizing with the citizens, and the narrow streets near the "Mercato Nuovo" were thronged with eager crowds, shouting "Viva l'Italia!" "Viva il Piemonte e la guerra!" General Ferrari, an Austrian officer who has hitherto been Commander-in-Chief of the troops, and has won the ill-will of military and civilians, thrust himself forward in the crowd, and taking matters with a high hand, commenced an insulting harangue, which was speedily cut short by the closing round him of a huge wave of people; but before their exasperation had reached the point of the slightest personal reprisal, some of the leaders of the movement promptly interfered, dispersed the crowd immediately surrounding him, and placing him under the care of four soldiers, had him

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conducted safely out of the throng. Another instance of popular moderation was shown outside the Porta San Gallo, when the carriages containing the Grand-Duke and his family took the road to Bologna, after making the long circuit of the walls on this second occasion of his flight from his people.

A great throng had gathered to see him pass, and there was no little murmuring of an intention to “wish him a good journey (*augurargli il buon viaggio*).” But here again the wise and generous guidance prevailed, and the carriages passed by in unbroken silence far more significant than would have been the bitterest invectives.

But it still behoves me to show the full merit of such forbearances on such an occasion, and to this end it is necessary to relate a fact which transpired at an early hour of this eventful *revolution day*, and which has placed the character of our late sovereign and his family in a darker point of view than it was accustomed to be regarded. Be it remembered that the story is no mere flying rumour hatched in the heat of revolutionary ferment, but the unvarnished tale of an eye-and-ear-witness of the circumstances.

It appears that certain papers containing sealed orders had been deposited as much as two years back, on occasion of the Leghorn disturbances, at our two

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fortresses, the Fortezza da Basso and that of Belvedere, as well as at every other *corps de garde* in the city. In case of any popular movement taking place, the Commandant of the Fortezza da Basso had orders to fire three guns,—a signal to be answered by three more guns from the Fortezza di Belvedere, and then, and *not till then*, the sealed orders were to be opened. This morning the popular movement *did* take place, but by a change in the programme, on which the prudent projectors by no means counted (the fraternization of the troops with the people), the first effect of the rising was to hoist the huge tricoloured banner on the very walls of the Fortezza da Basso, which rang with shouts of “*Viva la Guerra!*” from the soldiery within and the people without, while the guns of course kept a discreet silence.

When half-past nine o'clock came, and the Palazzo Pitti heard the shouts and saw the banners, but missed the gun-signal which was expected to work on these ugly phantoms of nationality like cockcrow on a flight of ghosts, the Grand-Duchess, accompanied by her second son, the Archduke, who was Colonel of the Artillery, set out in person for the Fortezza di Belvedere by the private way through the Boboli Gardens. The Grand-Duke was at that moment at the Council, doggedly refusing every con-

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cession to the entreaties of his people. Arrived at the fortress, their Royal Highnesses summoned the whole of the officers to their presence, and caused the Commandant to open and read aloud the *sealed orders*. The reading lasted some twenty minutes, and at its close the whole audience, with the exception of the Royal visitors, stood breathless with wonder and indignation—as well they might. The sealed orders prepared so long before contained a minutely-particularized plan for the repression of any popular movement by the following infallible means. While both the fortresses were to fire down upon the defenceless city, the troops were directed to advance through all the great thoroughfares in triple file, that in the centre with fixed bayonets, *and those on the right and left trottoirs firing in each at the windows of the houses on the opposite side of the street!*

Truly, a more atrocious project for trampling out in blood the aspirations of a people which, at least in modern times, has never been guilty of any excess that should call for harsh or sanguinary coercion, was never laid as a damning sin at the door of any ruler. A dead silence followed the reading of this precious document. The officers stood with heads bowed down, and did not venture to look

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A SIGNAL FAILURE.

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each other in the face. At last, the Archduke said, "Gentlemen! you have heard your orders. I think no comment is needed. It is for you now to do your duty." And with that he would have dismissed them forthwith. But one of the young officers present respectfully but firmly answered him, "I think your Highness cannot be aware of the state of the city, nor of the disposition of the troops, or you would not require of us the pursuance of such a line of conduct. The movement is a *national one*, and expresses *our* desires as well as those of the people." "Be silent!" broke in the Archduke, "what right have you to speak?" But the stout-hearted officer did speak, nothing daunted, while he owned that the so doing was in fact an act of insubordination; and so much to the purpose did he speak that the Archduke could no longer doubt that no co-operation was to be expected from the military in opposition to the popular movement. The young lieutenant (he was but a lieutenant) who had so nobly stood the first brunt of the storm, now gave place to other interlocutors, who, by every variety of persuasion, attempted to convince, against their will, the unconvincible Highnesses, and he meanwhile hurried off with a brother-officer to the *corps de garde* at the Palazzo Pitti, to prevent the possibility of the per-

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formance of the monstrous commands contained in the sealed orders. They found the soldiers there quietly at breakfast, and seeing that for the present there was nothing to be feared from that quarter, they left them with the strict injunction not to move unless in obedience "to fresh orders from their superiors;" and hurried back to the fortress, where they arrived in time to find the Grand-Duchess, true sister of her brother Bomba, haranguing the assembled officers with most eloquent invectives, and crying, "So you are all of you traitors to us, are you? Not even our persons are safe now in your hands."

"Nay," replied one of the officers, "we are ready to defend your Highness and your family with our lives if need be, as is our duty; but that which your Highness demands of us lies beyond our duty, and therefore we cannot do it." So after a stormy discussion, in high and impotent wrath the royal personages broke up the conference, and the result is already a matter of notoriety. And thus was accomplished a revolution not only unmarked by any act of violence, but unaccompanied even by the interruption of the ordinary avocations of the citizens, or so much as a harsh word except those of the royal personages above recorded.