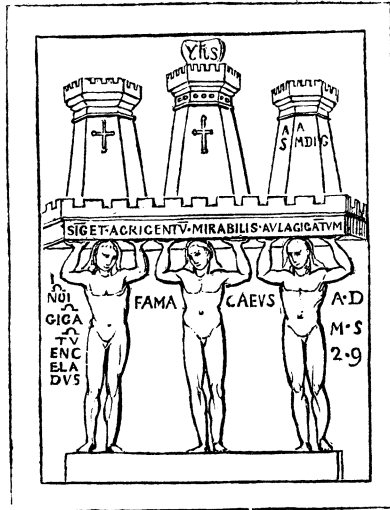


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Excerpt

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Modern Arms of the City of Girgenti, from a Bas-relief in a Church near that City.

CHAPTER I.

Departure from England—Arrival at Gibraltar—Excursion into Spain—Arrival in Sicily—Bay of Palermo—City and Noblesse—Experiment of the British Constitution—Sicilian Parliament—Errors of the British Authorities—Concise Account of Manners, &c. in the Sicilian Capital—Reflections on the general State of the Island—Departure from Palermo, and Arrival at Girgenti—Ancient Republic of Agrigentum, Commerce, Luxury, and fine Arts—Splendid Site of the City—Description of its Temples and other Antiquities—Modern City of Girgenti upon Mount Camicus—Cathedral, Public Library, &c.—Festival at the Dominican Convent—Excavations among the Tombs—Departure from Girgenti—Peasantry—Celebration of Harvest-home—Music—Arrival at and Description of Castro Giovanni—Temple of Ceres—Lake of Proserpine—Ancient Castle converted into a Gaol—Scene among the Felons—Administration of Justice, and Prison Discipline—Account of Riots and Execution at Palermo.

IN the latter end of the year 1812, I accompanied the friend to whom these pages are dedicated, in a tour through several countries

bordering on the Mediterranean, those theatres of the most interesting events recorded in the annals of history. Having completed our preparations in London, and engaged a servant experienced in foreign travel*, we embarked at Portsmouth, on board His Majesty's ship the *Revenge*, which, after a more than usual variety of storm and calm, cast anchor in the beginning of January 1813, under the rock of Gibraltar.

This inestimable jewel of the British Crown, and key of those important straits over which "Europe and Afric on each other gaze," rises so majestically from the waves, amidst scenery so strikingly sublime, as to command universal admiration; but it is peculiarly adapted to excite surprise and pleasure in the bosom of an Englishman, who finds himself, as it were, at home in a strange land, after having measured that long tract of ocean which rolls betwixt him and his native shore! Here, in the passing crowd his eye recognises the faces of his countrymen, and his ear the familiar sounds of his own language; in the shops he observes the manufactures of Great Britain, in the garrison her defenders, in the port her ships: above all, he enjoys the comforts of social life and the blessings of civil liberty, upon a barren rock, from whose lofty heights he may look down upon the confines of two quarters of the globe, peopled with the victims of ignorance, tyranny, and superstition. The light of freedom on this beacon-hill shines brighter from the surrounding gloom; he feels the glow of patriotism more ardent in his bosom, and he learns to appreciate more truly that glorious constitution for which his forefathers bled, and which they have left him as his best inheritance.

After we had exhausted the natural and artificial curiosities of Gibraltar, our residence was protracted by the agreeable society and hospitality which it afforded, and was diversified by an excursion into Morocco, as well as by a tour in the south of Spain, at a very re-

* Luigi Antonietti, a native of Piedmonte, whose honesty, fidelity, and good temper, well deserve this public acknowledgment.

markable period of its political history. The splendid entertainments of the carnival, with its bull-fights, those extraordinary exhibitions of skill, courage, and inhumanity, which we witnessed in Cadiz, the architectural beauties of Seville, with its pompous mummeries of degraded worship, were much less interesting to us than to behold the struggles of a great people for independence, and to mark the light of reason and truth, gleaming out from beneath that darkness which had so long covered the nation. It was for a long time painful to see those generous struggles terminated by the annihilation of all rights, and the re-organization of tyranny and superstition ; to discover that chains and dungeons were become the rewards of patriot eloquence and undaunted valour ; to find the rising hopes of a generous people crushed by an iron sceptre in the hands of a liberated monarch, who in his captivity was the idol of their blind attachment, for whom their best blood was spilt, and whose name was joined in all their aspirations after liberty. But Ferdinand seems at length to be recovering some of the sympathies of human nature and brighter prospects appear to hang over the destinies of Spain.

April 10th.—Having bid a final adieu to Gibraltar, we proceeded, from necessity more than choice, to Alicante, which was at this time the seat of war, on the south-east coast of Spain : we landed in hopes of enjoying the novel spectacle of military operations, but soon found that affairs were in no train to gratify the curiosity of amateurs ; we therefore seized a very early opportunity of re-embarking on board the Pilot brig of war, in which after various adventures, we beheld the classic shores of Sicily on the 1st of May.

It was a fine evening in this delightful season of the year when we cast anchor in the bay of Palermo. The land-breeze wafted fragrance from the orange groves in its environs ; the sea was covered even to the horizon, with innumerable little vessels, whose white triangular sails, crossing each other to catch the gale, seemed like the extended pinions of aquatic birds ; whilst the deep radiance of the setting sun gilded the

fantastic summits of that grand semicircle of mountains, which surround the “conca d’oro,” that “golden shell,” in which Sicilian poets represent Palermo as set like a beauteous pearl. In these delightful retreats*, which rival even the shores of Parthenope, we were fortunate enough to land just before news arrived of the plague in Malta, by which means we escaped the tedious intervention of quarantine.

Palermo has been so often and so well described, that I need not enter into a particular detail of its beauties. It is a city worthy of the fine island of which it is the capital; it is divided into four parts, by two long streets, terminated with lofty gates, and forming, at their intersection, a fine piazza, called the “Quattro Cantonieri.” It contains many superb edifices, profusely adorned with native marbles, amongst which the following deserve particular observation:—The college of the Jesuits, at this time used for the session of parliament; the cathedral, whose oriental gothic outside puts to shame its modern interior; and the royal palace, to which a curious chapel is attached, in the arabesque style, covered from top to bottom with rich mosaic.

The island, though at this time menaced with invasion by a strong force upon the Calabrian coast, was secured from all the horrors of war by a protecting British army; and as Palermo was the residence of those Neapolitan nobles who had fled with Ferdinand, few capitals in Europe could vie with it in splendour; though it must be confessed, this splendour was chiefly external, for the prime comforts of domestic life, as well as the pleasures of refined taste and rational society, were lamentably sacrificed to vain parade and ostentatious decoration: ambitious poverty was preferred to elegant economy, and the appearance of

* The gardens in the suburbs of Palermo, and the conca d’oro, are unrivalled in beauty. “La città di Palermo (says Bisaccione, Lib. i. Mem. Hist.), ha d’intorno una corona di monti, che rendono il piano et la città in forma di conca.” “Palermo, città magnifica, ha un contado ove contende l’amenità con la dovizia d’ogni cosa, et si chiama perciò conca d’oro”—(Rosacci descrizione di Sic.) It is called by Fazzello, the Sicilian historian—“Ager non Siciliae modo sed Italiae quoque pulcherrimus.” Its beauty in ancient times may be learned from Athenæus: ἡ δὲ Πανορμίτις τῆς Συκελίας πᾶσα Κῆπος προσαγορεύεται, ἵα τὸ πᾶσα εἶναι πλήρης δένδρων ἡμέρων. Lib. xii. 524.

EXPERIMENT OF THE BRITISH CONSTITUTION.

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happiness to its reality. Thus, though the public promenade of the Marina glittered every evening with its costly equipages and gaudy liveries, many noble mansions exhibited most disgusting scenes of penury and meanness. A few families, however, ought, in justice, to be excepted from this general censure: that of the Prince Gramonte, in particular, appeared a pattern of conjugal virtue and domestic felicity: its members were sensible, well-informed, and polite; educated in the English system, and able to converse in our language with nearly as much fluency as in their own: the same encomiums will apply, in every particular, to the family of the Duke di Sangro; and I should be very much wanting in gratitude, if I omitted to mention the continuance of that genuine hospitality in the Prince Butera, which so many Englishmen have experienced, in happier times, at Naples.

Painful as it was to remark the extreme imbecility of the reigning family, the dissolute morals of the nobles, the perversion of justice, the iniquity of the laws, and the general venality and corruption, in a country which requires only the co-operation of man with the bounty of Providence, to make it a paradise upon earth, it was still gratifying to an Englishman to observe the efforts made by Great Britain to recover this ally from such a state of national degradation. By her influence Ferdinand had resigned the authority, though he retained the name of king: the queen, who had too long indulged in the most atrocious acts of tyranny, and connected herself with the interests of Buonaparte*, waited only for a favourable wind at Marsala to quit for ever the Sicilian shores: whilst the hereditary prince, glad to purchase present power at the expence of future privilege, consented to adopt

* Several conspiracies were detected at Messina, in which she was clearly implicated, for delivering up the citadel and flotilla, and betraying our army to the French. In the last of these her correspondence was disclosed with the chief officer of police in Messina, called the captain of justice (Capitano della Giustizia). This agent of hers was tried by a jury of his own countrymen, condemned, and hanged. At the place of execution the poor man made loud lament, complaining bitterly of his hardship in suffering the punishment of death for executing the commands of his own sovereign, whom he thought it his duty to obey.

the representative system of government. In this state of things the experiment of a political regeneration was attempted; but the pure blood of the English constitution refused to mix with the corrupt mass of the Sicilian state; and it was found impracticable to engraft an enlightened code of laws upon a nation immersed in ignorance, superstition, and immorality. Whether it is necessary that the constitution of a state, like that of the human frame, should grow up by degrees to strength, and pass through the stages of infancy and youth before it arrives at the maturity of manhood, it is difficult to determine: but it would seem that both political and moral constitutions owe many of their characters to physical causes and the peculiarities of climate; and though it would be wrong to yield so far to the doctrine of temperament as to measure national virtues and vices by parallels of latitude, yet such is found to be the ardent and inflammatory temper of the more southern tribes, that they seem absolutely to require the strong coercion of monarchical power, whilst the popular deliberative assembly seems better suited to a northern atmosphere, where no violent ebullitions of passion destroy the dignity of debate, or excite measures of impulse rather than of reflection.

In the moral as well as in the natural world there is an inexhaustible variety of good, which constitutes perhaps the greatest charm of existence; and, though it must be confessed, that no form of government has ever been devised, so admirably calculated to secure the blessings of social order as the British constitution, yet it does not follow that the rights of civil liberty may not be secured by a different organization of power more adapted to the peculiar character of a people. Be this as it may, no words can describe the scenes which daily occurred upon the introduction of the representative system in Sicily. The house of parliament, neither moderated by discretion nor conducted with dignity, bore the semblance of a receptacle for lunatics, instead of a council-room for legislators; and the disgraceful scenes so often enacted at the hustings in England, were here transferred to the

ERRORS OF THE BRITISH AUTHORITIES.

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very floor of the senate. As soon as the president had proposed the subject for debate, and restored some degree of order from the confusion of tongues that followed, a system of crimination and recrimination was invariably commenced by several speakers, accompanied with such furious gesticulations and hideous contortions of countenance, such bitter taunts and personal invectives, that blows generally ensued: this was the signal for universal uproar; the president's voice was unheeded and unheard; the whole house arose, partisans of different antagonists mingled in the affray, when the ground was literally seen covered with combatants, kicking, biting, scratching, and exhibiting all the evolutions and manœuvres of the old Pancratic contests. Such a state of things could not be expected to last a long time: indeed this constitutional synod was dissolved in the very first year of its creation, and martial law established. The fault of the British government seems to have consisted in this, that it went too far for the furtherance of tranquillity, and not far enough for the security of civil liberty: it endeavoured to make a representative government amalgamate with feudal rights, ecclesiastical privileges, and a wretched system of bigotry and intolerance: either it ought to have first levelled these obstructions before it built up the sacred edifice of freedom, or have contented itself with introducing some practical reform into the established system of Sicilian legislature; for instance, it might have obliged the nominal authorities to correct their worst abuses, to abolish certain rights and tenures relating to the non-alienation of land, to reform the police, the courts of justice, and the iniquitous tribunal of patrimony, to destroy monopolies, and abrogate the odious corn-laws, which not only deprive the agriculturist of his fair reward, but press upon the people more heavily than those of the Romans under the administration of the infamous Verres: these, or some of these advantages might have remained to our unfortunate allies at the conclusion of the war, whereas that constitution, so beautiful in theory, which rose at once, like a

fairy-palace, to perfection, vanished also like that baseless fabric without having left a trace of its existence.

The amusements at Palermo appeared to us very insipid. The opera, which was once considered a school of music, owed now its principal attraction to the talents of an *English lady*, who sustained the post of Prima Donna. The orchestra was respectable, and contained many amateurs, who volunteered their services. The same piece repeated nightly to disgust, is sometimes varied, it scarcely can be said relieved, by the introduction of a tragedy, in which rant and declamation take the place of feeling and expression: the only thing that seemed worthy of imitation was a classical attention to the unity of place: the scene being rarely changed, is carried on without any interruption of a green curtain, or dissipation of ideas by musical interludes between the acts. Annexed to the opera-house is a fine suite of rooms, called the *Conversazione*, though from it all conversation seems banished by universal consent: it is, indeed, a temple over which the joint Demons of Gambling and Intrigue preside, and on that account is a very favourite resort of the Sicilian nobility and gentry: here, if the husband loses his money at the gaming-table, Signora may recover it by the sale of her charms; for in no country upon earth does a man bear the burthen upon his brows with greater patience: immorality, in this point of view, is at its height, and though immodesty does not shock the stranger, as in more northern cities, by daring with unblushing front the public gaze, yet her pandars meet you at every corner of the street, and are scarcely less disgusting to a mind not totally devoid of sensibility and moral principle. Notwithstanding this representation, I think the female sex in Sicily, with regard both to manners and morals, are superior to the men, to whom indeed the greatest part of their vices are attributable; for as soon as one sex disregards virtue, the other will rarely be at any pains to keep it: much mischief also is deducible from the faulty education of their

MANNERS OF THE SICILIAN CAPITAL.

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girls within the gloomy unsocial cloisters of a convent, from the restraints of which they rush at once into a deceitful world without the guidance of example or experience, with few accomplishments either useful or ornamental, but with minds imbued in all the frivolities of superstition, eager only to make themselves compensation by a surfeit of pleasure for that time which they have spent without any enjoyment at all. Intellectual acquirements indeed are considered quite superfluous, where the only end of a woman's being is to dispose of herself in marriage; and as marriage is made a matter of traffic, all ideas of mutual attachment, all that refinement which dignifies the institution is totally unknown: a young lady of high rank in Palermo was offered to my friend with less ceremony than a horse or a parcel of ground would be submitted to a person desirous to purchase. Both men and women are ill dressed, and appear still worse to an Englishman who sees the old cast-off fashions of his country revived here in the highest circles: in their address, they use that profusion of compliments to which the Italian language is so disgustingly accommodated: they are easy of access, civil to foreigners, and ready to devote their whole time to their service; though time, by the bye, is a possession to which they attach the least possible value. From the defects of their education proceeds that degrading familiarity with inferiors which is too prevalent amongst the higher classes. I have seen a Sicilian nobleman, a court favourite, and superintendant of a royal palace, seated in an old chair at his own door between his cook and butler, to enjoy a social chat in the cool of the evening. I have also seen the head servant in a family of the first rank help to entertain his master's guests by his skill at billiards in the morning, and by his powers of conversation at the dinner-table, where he stood to carve the meat: no very high estimate of manners will be formed where both sexes spit without ceremony upon the floor of a drawing-room, and carry off in their pockets confectionary and other relics of a dinner.

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Literature and science are at a very low ebb in Sicily, chiefly through want of encouragement, for I believe the people are not deficient in native genius: the Latin language is still cultivated with some success, but the Greek is almost an unknown tongue: amongst the literati I met with more antiquarians than scholars, and more pedants than either. The middle and lower classes are generally kept in good humour by festivals and processions, or now and then a lottery, for they love gambling as well as their betters; give them these amusements, with bread and iced water, and the care of politics will scarcely ever spoil their sleep or digestion. The management of the lottery is admirably calculated both to stimulate cupidity and to disappoint it. The capital prizes are held up to public view, like the pictures of a show, disposed in figures formed of Spanish dollars, representing a ship, a lion, sun, a star, or any aother device: the grand prize this year was an allegorical representation of the new constitution, which in the end turned out quite as delusive to the people as its prototype, for all these valuable lots invariably find their way, by some fatality or instinct, into royal pockets. A hundred tickets, neatly rolled up in very small bits of paper, are sold at the low price of one dollar; thus, for a very trifling sum, a person may keep his mind in a state of pleasurable excitement during the whole day. As for the superstition of the lower orders, it is extreme; in many instances turning to infidelity, in others to a vile debasement of intellect, and in some to downright blasphemy; for instance, the devil is very commonly invoked as a Saint, and the public-houses hang out for a sign of invitation, not the chequers or a Turk's head, but the extraordinary phrase of "Viva la Divina Provvidenza,"—"Long life to Divine Providence*!"

* The author is inclined to think that the subjoined publication, sold, with a great variety of a similar description, by the common hawkers, through the towns of Sicily, like ballads in England, will justify any expressions he may have used in this and the following pages, respecting the idolatrous superstitions imposed upon the people of this country, instead of pure and genuine Christianity. He gives it in the original; for it is too shocking to translate.