

FIESOLE.

A CITY SET ON A HILL.

Search far into the mists of ancient history as you will and yet you will not find there the beginnings of that venerable Etruscan city of Fiesole, older than Florence, older than Rome, it stands dominating a landscape that fills one with wonder and delight. Florence, lying beneath it, is like a jewel set in this wide panorama; you may chance to see her in a pale blue misty light, like a delicate city of dreams, sometimes again you may see her glowing like a cluster of crusted gems in the red light of the setting sun and sometimes, when the mists lie deep in the valley beneath the hills of Fiesole, she is a city set in the clouds. Fiesole looks over long stretches of lovely Tuscan hills and valleys and from the far distance you can see the coming of the Arno. Thus in quiet sunlit glory stand the hills of Fiesole, permeated by memories of Etruscan and Roman splendour, by memories of the earliest teachings of the Event in Palestine, that great turning point of time, by memories too of how the early Christians kept the faith and of how that faith was cradled in Fiesole, memories of men like St. Antonine who prayed and laboured in Fiesole until he was called to the Episcopate of Florence, memories of Fra Angelico, the peasant priest and most exquisite of artists. His works are scattered now far from his loved Fiesole, but still about it there seems to wander the shadowy figure of a monk with a gentle face under a cowl, eyes that glimpse the gates of heaven, and fingers that grasp a pencil to tell to future ages something of the visions that were his. Palmieri, Botticelli, Machiavelli, Lorenzo the Magnificent, Dante, Mino the Sculptor, and others of the Immortals, they too have often walked through these roads and lanes of Fiesole and among the tall cypress trees, emblematical of prayer and growing in straight, tall, flame-like form towards the sky. Rich, prosperous and powerful was this city of Fiesole long before it was besieged and captured by Julius Cæsar, before Florence was born, and before her prosperity tempted many of the citizens to come down from the "city set on a hill;" this is how it comes about that, on the escutcheon of many an old Florentine family to-day, the crescent moon of Fiesole appears. But the real downfall of Fiesole came in the year 540, when crowds of northern barbarians swept from the valley of the Po, across the Apennines and into the heart of Italy. Never again did it regain its ancient glories but, on the broad sunny square of this Tuscan town, you can wander into the dim beauty of its old Cathedral and trace, here and there, the remnants of a pagan civilisation and a pagan art now helping to add to the beauty and the grace of the Christian church in "aerial Fiesole."

Take a step or two down the cliff side and you enter the policies of San Girolamo, that cradle of a great Religious Order and the home of three Beati. Its story can be traced in the earliest records of Church history for the place upon which the Monastery stands, with its lovely gardens and vineyards and, here and there, bits of old Etruscan walls was the scene of one of the earliest of Christian martyrdoms; here SS. Dulcissimus, Carissimus, Crescentius, and Marcitani sealed their faith with their blood and here the martyrdom of St. Romulus commenced. The stone, on which all but the last are said to have been beheaded, has been an object of veneration for centuries, and many a pilgrim comes to read its inscription:—

"Sopra di questo sasso, per man delle crudei fesulee genti, spettacolo di morte orrendo e tristo, quai vittime innocenti, cadero esangui i gran Campion di Cristo."

Near to where the executions took place and just under the present church is the little chapel cut out of the solid

rock and dedicated to St. Jerome (San Girolamo) in the tenth century. Perhaps there is no lovelier scene in the whole of Italy than here, where on a small platform on the cliffs we look, on the one side, across stretches of Italian country and on the other through an iron grating into a little underground chapel with, above it, that other exquisitely lovely church belonging to an age when Christianity is no longer forced to live in the dens and caves of the earth.

Unfortunately no detailed history of San Girolamo exists until a period between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, although it is believed that earlier records, connected with it, exist pretty abundantly in Florence. In any case they disappeared from Fiesole when it was raided by the Florentines in the early part of the twelfth century; a priest who is also an archæologist, states that there are immense piles of documents lying in a room in Florence and that tabulation and research there would bring to view much of the story of San Girolamo.

In 1360 a distinguished gentleman, Carlo di Conti Guidi, renounced both his profession and his estate in order to take up a life of penance. He found a grotto near the chapel of St. Jerome which had long served as a shelter for pilgrims; there he made his cell, and, having become a priest, the Bishop of Fiesole gave to him the charge of the little oratory and he soon became renowned for his sanctity. Such were among the beginnings of the history of the Chapel, cut in the rock, which we viewed through the iron grating. Soon two young Florentines became inspired by the sacrifices and holiness of the Blessed Carlo and begged to be admitted as his disciples; others followed their example and it became necessary to find accommodation for a community; cells were built, and some, in existence still, are famous as "the cells of the Beati." So well did the Order do its work that great church dignitaries soon urged the Blessed Carlo to form his community into a Religious Order and it became known as the Order of the Hermits of St. Jerome; its avowed object was to pray for the restoration of peace and union in the church and to atone for the sins of an age, noted on one side for its great religious zeal and on the other for licentiousness which hardly finds a parallel in later times. The rules of the Order were very strict; the hermits were to depend for their existence on the alms of the faithful. Soon the Order spread throughout Italy and numbered forty monasteries affiliated to San Girolamo which, as the Mother House, was always the residence of the General of the Order.

About seven years before the death of the Blessed Carlo, young Cosmo de Medici chose him as his spiritual adviser and built, close to San Girolamo, a fine villa, still known as the Villa Medici; Cosmo then need only cross a road and climb a few steps to have intercourse with the Venerable Carlo whom he revered and loved with all the enthusiasm of youth. His great desire was to build a fine monastery and to provide an endowment for the Hermits of St. Jerome, but the Blessed Carlo was immovable in his conviction that his Order should adhere to its original vows of poverty. Subsequent events showed, in the course of the centuries, that his judgment was right. In 1417 the Blessed Carlo died and Cosmo de Medici, now Grand Duke of Florence, began to add to the monastic buildings. Gradually the old strict Rules of the hermits slackened, ostensibly in order that they might have more time for study, and the Dukes of Florence charged themselves with certain amounts for the maintenance of San Girolamo. The Order must have been held as of great importance because the Oratory of St. Michele and later the Church and Monastery of St. Catherine were made over to it. In 1464 Pope Sixtus IV granted special indulgences to the Church of San Girolamo, but unfortun-

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