

THROUGH A MONOCLE

A VISIT TO NAPLES.

IT is always a risk to go back to a place you have liked much and about which your dreams have woven a mesh of romance. In retrospect, only the bright parts of the picture have been visible; but reality will bring it all back—light and shadow both. The unpleasant features you had forgotten will recur, and the colours of the dreams will fade. I was compelled to take such a risk, however, in the case of Naples; for it was the only gateway by which I could get to Egypt. Consequently I awoke one morning to find the ship steaming into that bright bay over which half the poets of the world have gone mad. My first thought was that I did not want a bath of Naples bay water—hardly a romantic touch. But the bath steward assured me that he had run my bath well out at sea before the bay had been even approached. By the time I was dressed, we were tied up to the wharf, and I was so prosaic that I went in to breakfast before I mounted to the deck to see either grim Vesuvius or the “blue Vesuvian Bay.”

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THIS was a bad beginning. The next step was no better. My first visit to the loved city was a brisk business jaunt to get the steamship company to take one of my trunks in charge and put it on the ship for Egypt, and to arrange with Cook's for the shipment of the other. I went ashore and plunged into the labyrinth of streets and found myself in a part of the city of which I knew little—that near the wharves and the railway station. But eventually I got my bearings and did my business with as little sense that I was at last in peerless Naples once more as if I had been rushing around a Canadian city. Even the coral vendors and the girls who insist on selling you great bunches of flowers, did not awaken me. But presently we got off the steamer with our hand baggage and took a cab up to the old hotel on the side of the hill—and the magic curtain rolled back. Now I saw Naples. The gay crowds in the streets became visible. The lovely ovals of the girls' faces came out of the background—the roguishness of the boys who beg with a laugh. Soon the mounting road commanded a view over the bay, and there was Capri as of yore sleeping just off the Sorrente shore, there lay the white ring of villages from Terre del Greco to Castellammare, there rose the mediaeval Castello dell' Ovo at the foot of the hill, and overhead were the heights of St. Elmo.

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I FOUND, however, that my visit to Spain had shifted Naples somewhat in the scale of romantic cities. The streets did not seem so narrow nor the street scenes so ingenuous and piquant as they did before I knew the streets of Seville and Granada. When I first saw Naples, it was the most Southern city I had ever visited—in fact, almost the only city with that fascination of outdoor life which is a mark of the South. Thus everything was new and without parallel. Now, however, I came to it fresh not only from Andalusia but from Tangier, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli as well. Naples seemed very modern and mid-European by contrast. I am sorry that I could not have got out to Amalfi, which was the last word of the romantic and the picturesque when I saw it before, and my fancy will not let me remove it from that pedestal even now. But would it have stood the test of a visit? I should have liked to try it. But what Naples lost as a southern city, it gained as a modern seaport. I had no idea it was so brisk and businesslike a city. Its trade and commerce must be enormous, and it seemed to be fully armed with the most up-to-date equipment for the handling of it after watching them load cattle by the horns at Tangier and all the fuss over a few freighters at Tripoli.

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THE changes were few since my last visit. Vesuvius had changed shape, and there were some newly ruined towns on its slopes. The old Villa del Popolo on the seashore seemed to have disappeared. Some new Pompeian antiquities appeared in the museums, and the artists who want to sell you copies there, were more numerous and enterprising. But the gay Toledo was just as vivacious and fascinating as ever; the Greek and Roman marbles in the museum were rearranged but the same surpassingly lovely things they were when I first saw them fresh from the collections of Rome; the views from

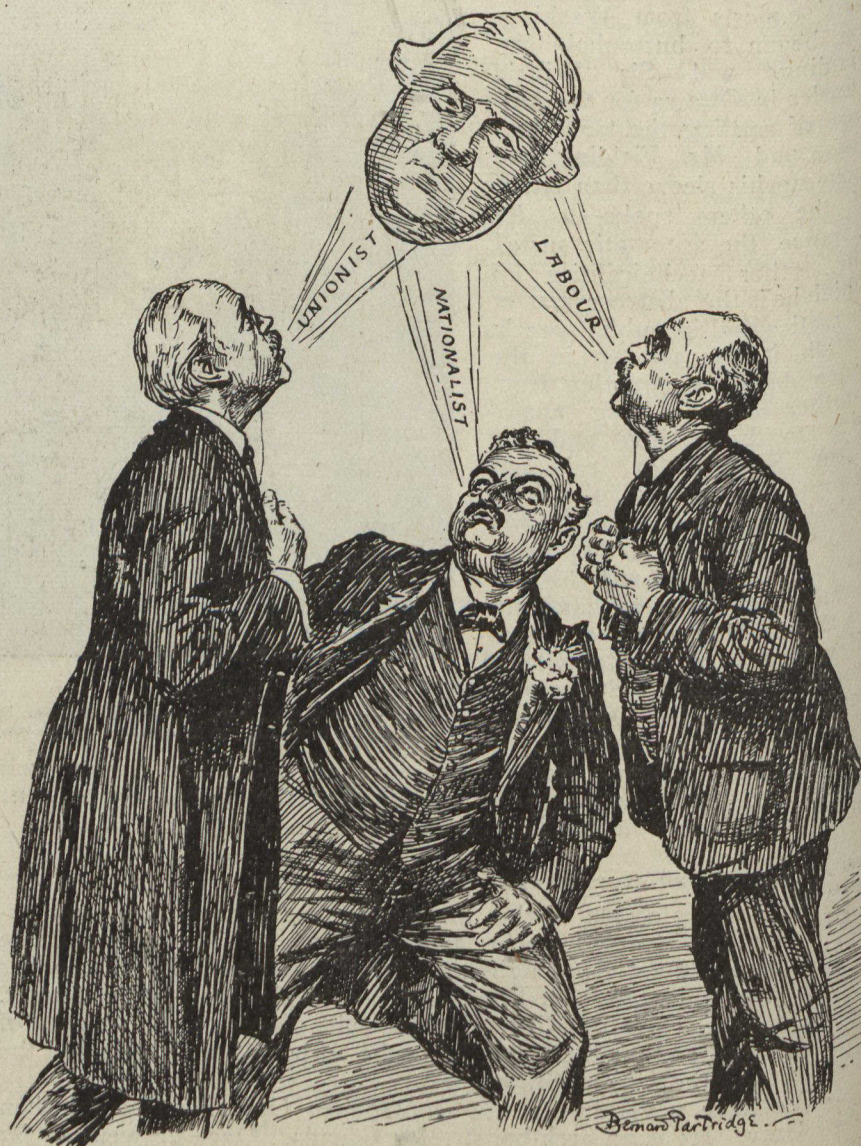
the Corse Vittorio Emanuele as splendid; and the romance clinging to those old shores as compelling. Some new hotels had risen, and one old one at least had degenerated. There seemed to be more statues in the Villa Nazionale, but fewer itinerant salesmen of coral, tortoise shell and other souvenirs along the sea wall. There were still goats on the sidewalks but few as compared with the Spanish cities, and the light-hearted character of the people had become a daily experience on the streets of Andalusia. To go to Naples from Southern Spain is to go from superlative to comparative in this regard while to go from Northern Europe or America is to go from negative to a bright positive.

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OF course, the tourists were the same—except that the percentage of Germans had greatly risen. The Germans seem now to have displaced the English as second to the Americans. But they were all doing the same things. Here a group would be discussing the drive from Sorrento by way of Amalfi to Cava—one section being just back from it and the other picking up pointers for the venture. You heard the old names—Ravelle, the Cappuccini, Paestum, the Grotte Bleue. You looked at the apparently commonplace people who were pronouncing these magic “pass-words” into paradise, and you saw them collecting—perhaps, laboriously at times—a fund of golden memories which would brighten many a staid evening by the home reading lamp. But our ship to Egypt steamed in past Capri at noon, and we must be on board for dinner. That night, however, a last bit of bright Naples came down to bid us “adieu.” We heard the thrumming of a guitar over the side and the singing of girls. We went to look, and there was a small boat far down by the great hull of the ship, and in it a company of young men and maidens in a circle of light cast by a couple of large lamps. The men played on their guitars, and the girls stood up and sang the old songs—and some new ones. So, as ten years before there floated over the waters of the bay “Yame, Yame,” and “Addio, bella Napoli.” Then, as a delicate compliment to any Americans who might be on board, they sang “Blue Bell.”

THE MONOCLE MAN.

WHY THE ASQUITH MINISTRY REMAINS IN OFFICE



Mr. Arthur Balfour (joining in). “It goes against the grain—(puff!)—but I can't afford to let it drop—(puff!)—just yet.”—Punch