

A Visit to Arrone and Other Villages Amongst the Hills of Umbria.

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"The darkness is passing and the true light now shineth."

Arrone is a little Italian town, perched upon a rock amongst the lower hills of the Apennines, in the province of Umbria. It commands a view of the great valley of the river Nera, whose slopes are clothed with vines and olives, although high up above it. Some forty miles or so distant, there is a village which is entirely under snow for some months in the year, the houses being made to communicate the one with the other.

Arrone then is a town founded upon a rock. Its streets are solid rock, its houses are built in the rock, living rock projects inside many of the buildings and serves as seats and tables. Those who built this town long ago were Christian men. They knew Christ as the Rock of Ages, and on him they built their hopes for time and for eternity. A proof of this is found in the old disused church of the place. Its walls are covered with thirteenth century frescoes, which are thoroughly Christian. Like these in St. Mark's Church, Venice, they exhibit not the glory of the Virgin, not the supremacy of St. Peter, not the sacredness of church tradition, but Jesus Christ and him crucified. The evangelists are there, each with his open gospel and its message of salvation glowing upon its page. Here, in this out-of-the-way mountain village, we find proofs of the purity of the early faith of its inhabitants, and confirmation of the fact that early christianity in Italy was pure christianity, that ancient catholicism is modern protestantism, and that modern popery has ceased altogether to be either christian or catholic, and is simply a mixture of paganism and political intrigue and ambition.

Arrone also, unhappily furnished me with proofs of that. In the parish church there was a large hideous image mounted on a chair. It was the *Madonna della Quercia*, and the custom used to be to bear it enthroned through the village for the people to adore, and to present to it gifts in money and kind, that it might grant them its protection and blessing. Another Madonna I saw in the church, was that one the present Pope, Leo XIII., has done so much to spread the worship of,—the *Madonna del Rosario*. Leo XIII. in an encyclical published lately, has told the world that he traces to her every blessing he enjoys, and that the faithful should "go boldly unto her throne of grace, using the form of prayer which she herself has given us, and which she accepts." This Madonna used also to be carried on certain days through the village, as the sister idol, the *Madonna della Quercia*, was borne. I was very glad however to find that the villagers had risen up against this papal idolatry, that the Madonnas had become the objects of popular ridicule, and that the priests had found themselves compelled to celebrate their pagan rites inside the walls of their church. Beyond this throwing off of paganism I found a putting on of the old christianity that had characterised the inhabitants of this village in far back times. Count Campello, the brave ex-canon of St. Peter's, has a church and a school here, and I found the pick of the boys of the town in his school and the more intelligent portion of the villagers in his church. An evening school that he carries on for grown up lads I found well attended, and I found the same boys at his Sunday morning school. Thus the rising generation here, as throughout Italy, are ambitious to learn, and are being instructed in both secular and sacred knowledge, and we may expect to find in a few years a great change in Italy, and a general return to the christian faith. Long ago Padre Cerchi said to Count Campello, and through him to all christian reformers in Italy, "go on in your christianising work; at present results may be small, but remember you are preparing the way for a great reform." Signor Ruggero Bonghi said lately, in an open letter to the Pope, which was published in the chief Italian magazines, the *Nuova Antologia*, "The reform work

going on in Italy is at present limited, but there is this remarkable fact in connection with it, that nowhere has it ever met with opposition from the people, on the contrary, everywhere it has been welcomed." Italy is negatively protestant. The yoke and burden of the papacy has been thrown off. It is a system recognized as a material, intellectual and spiritual curse. At present the Papal Guarantees, which form part of the Italian Constitution, prevent the government and people overthrowing the papacy altogether as a natural institution. But Parliament that passed the Papal Guarantees can cancel them, and they are only biding their time to do so.

Another village we visited amongst the mountains of Umbria was called Casteldilago. Here we found that the parish priest was the village tinker. His shop and forge adjoined the church, and on entering these places we found pots and pans, pitchers and copper vessels of all kinds, agricultural implements for repair, and all the paraphernalia of a tinker's and smith's shop, and the worthy priest, in priestly dress, with a leather apron on, cutting tin with his scissors and hammering out iron. I bought a lamp and a drinking vessel from him as specimens of an Italian parish priest's work. Well, I have no doubt that this priest is better employed than most of his kind in Italy, and as a tinker he deserves all praise, but as a minister of the pretended church of Christ what is he? What of that church is thus represented? To talk of popery as a church at all, and as having a spiritual mission in Italy is absurd. It is simply a material system of idolatry and fraud that happily the people have ceased to believe in. In this same village we found a young evangelist carrying on services, and a week-night and Sunday school. He was a native of the village and was working in connection with Count Campello's reform movement.

One other village we visited in Umbria is called Papiigno. Here I had the happiness of seeing its inhabitants as a whole throw off the papacy and embrace christianity. The young men had for many reasons resolved never to enter the Church of Rome, and indeed the whole village had done so. The young men visited the other villages I have mentioned, and saw the evangelistic and reform work going on. Whilst we were at Arrone they sent a deputation to ask Count Campello and us to visit their village, and hold religious services, and explain the gospel fully. We did so one Sunday evening. The village with its band of music met us on the way thither. It conducted us in triumph into the place. A meeting was held, and there and then the villagers resolved to be done with Popery which they had found a mockery and a fraud, and to henceforth have a church which would teach them what was good in their own language. Since then religious services have been held, and arrangements are now being made to buy or build a hall, and to settle an evangelist in their midst.

Such are a few of the facts I learned when in Umbria, of the revolution that is passing over that part of the country, and which is indeed passing over the whole land. They are facts full of encouragement and hope. I believe that Italy has in store for it a bright spiritual, as well as material future. The nation was born thirty years ago when it gained its unity and independence. It is now growing stronger and better. "The darkness is passing, and the true light now shineth."

The sins of Christian nations cannot be rightly charged to Christianity, for it does not sanction, but forbids them. So-called Christian nations sometimes do frightfully un-Christian things, or at least allow them to be done, and for this they will be called to give an account by the God of justice and judgment. Where Christianity is not known, or where it has been ignored and rejected, it withholds the evidence of its power; but where it has been accepted it does not shrink from the test, but rather triumphs in its achievements. Its attitude towards mankind is marked by gracious urgency, not compulsion; by gentle condescension, not pride,