

# SICILY, THE CHANGING ISLAND

LAURENCE DAKIN

TO treat Sicily within the limits of circumscribed space, it is necessary to adopt a method of selection. One must take its cities, towns, plains or villages and regard them as the living spirit of an island that once equalled Greece in beauty and riches. There is perhaps no spot on earth more glorious in the fallen splendours of the Past, or more lovely in the robe of ruin; whether that beauty be the serrated north coast, the charm of its folding hills, its picturesque people, its warm and friendly sea, its sunshine, its volcano that claimed all but the slipper of Empedocles, or its ruined temples and amphitheatres that embrace the heart with all the alluring plaint of a lyre when touched by the hand of an Olympian.

The spirit of Sicily is so infused into the body of that island, which is less than ten thousand square miles in all, that it is difficult to say where legend leaves off and history begins. But since the earliest dawn of its existence is clothed in mythology, it is pleasing, even if open to question, to feel that Arethusa landed at the Cape of Naxos on the Taormina shore with the Greeks in the eighth century B.C., and gave her youth to the streams and eternity to the fountains; or that Pythagoras sat with the Iberians, the earliest inhabitants of the isle, and measured the heavens or composed a score on the music of the spheres.

## *Taormina the Land of Hyperion:*

Here overlooking the blue Ionian Sea is one of the loveliest places on earth. Behind the city lies Mount Etna; ash-tipped and snow-crested, the volcano sends forth a never ending stream of smoke that is waved and tormented by the changing winds, while up its slopes climb the silver-tipped olive and the timid almond, ethereal and white. To the north in the distance Calabria pulses like a passionate heart in the clear light, and the sea, murmuring gently below, fringes the shores of Taormina with a foam that is like that of some magic blue wine. Everywhere the hands of the peasants have left their marks on the soil; the gardens, the steeps of the surrounding hills have been terraced by them, and laced with lemon orchards whose rich yellow gleams gently in the sun, and whose fruits provide one of the principal industries of the town.

Yet the glory of Taormina lies in its ruins. The once beautiful Greek theatre, which has since been faced with brick by the

Romans, is a breath-taking scene. Here the dramas of Sophocles and Euripides were played long centuries ago. Simonides felt his pulse quicken under the spell of its beauty; Pindar wrote lyrics about it; Archimedes, holding that the gods first delved into geometry, thought and worked here with his intricate devices. Even now, among these splendid ruins, the plays of the ancient Greeks are performed, though not to the same distinguished audiences, but with a heart worthy of acceptance. The Sikelians, from whom the island takes its name, have bequeathed bronze-ware, pottery and a magnificent castle in ruin. Saracens, too, have marked the earth with tombs that trouble one's thought, and a later civilization has left a Gothic palace to mark the decline.

Yet over all and behind it lies the spirit of Hyperion, the Sun-god, who has never given up his home for the distant wonders of Olympus, but remains and shows himself in all his splendour to the toiling natives. It was here on another such day when Ulysses, despite his warning by Circe, about harming the flocks of the Sun-god, landed after having bound his crew by oath not to touch the sacred herd, and was detained a month by contrary winds. After a period the ship's stores ran out and the members of his crew, seeing Hyperion's cattle feeding on the slopes, slew them. On learning this, Ulysses was horror-stricken. Though they offered a portion of the kill to the offended powers, the skins crept on the ground and the meat lewed on the spits while roasting. Soon afterwards the winds abated and the Ithacans sailed away. But before they had gone far the weather changed, and a thunder and lightning storm ensued. A shaft of lightning shattered the mast and killed the pilot. Finally the vessel itself fell apart. From the keel and mast Ulysses formed a raft; the winds and waves then bore him to Calypso's island, where he was delayed for seven years. The rest of the crew perished.

Perhaps the tale has little significance now to the peasants as they go about their daily tasks, arrayed in costumes that vie with the sun and the sea, and to the children gay and happy in the mad dance of the Tarantella. But it does speak of a time bitter in the lives of their forebears.

#### *Messina the City of Tragedy:*

In the span of three thousand years, fifteen nations have ruled Sicily, and in no place is this more marked than in Messina,

or Zancle the sickle, as the Greeks called it after its harbour, which suggests the reaper's cutter. It might have been called the blade of Thanatos the destroyer, with equal correctness. The city, which stands on the edge of the strait of that name and looks across the ever turbulent waters to the shores of Calabria, scarcely two miles away, has been the most generous of all Sicilian cities to the grim destroyer. Since the beginning of its history it seems to have been caught "between Scylla and Charybdis", the dreaded whirlpool which destroyed six of Ulysses's companions, and, as Homer says, "thrice daily sucks down water, and thrice daily vomits it forth". It is called by the sturdy little fishermen of the island who brave its perils, *garofano*, carnation, the lovely flower afloat in the water.

In 1908 the city numbered 120,000 inhabitants. Then came the terrible earthquake, which began with a half-hour shock and continued intermittently for a month, accompanied by a tidal wave which twisted and tore the coast for sixty miles. When peace settled again over the city, ninety per cent of its buildings had been destroyed and seventy-seven thousand of its people had perished.

Messina has since been rebuilt, and the kaleidoscopic races of the many nations have come to settle where so many of their kinsmen perished. Here are seen the men, women and children so individually marked, carrying on their trades in characteristic fashion, some with the regular features of the Greek, carving ornaments from coral; others reminiscent of the Saracens, engaged in the manufacturing of silks, muslins and linens; and tall blond giants from the north, occupied with the export of wines, lemons, oranges, almond and pistachio nuts: all eager, all anxious in the task of life, all here on the promontory of the fabulous whirlpool.

#### *Catania the Child of Etna:*

The will to struggle with Nature for existence was perhaps the first flash of intelligence to force its way through the dull matter in the brain of man. Now, tens of thousands of years after the first serious attempt was made, the fight goes on in the lava-built city of Catania. The black death of Etna has been turned into a veritable garden of smiling orchards. The city is scarcely more than a three-hours walk from the fire-consuming volcano, yet its two hundred thousand inhabitants are among the wealthiest of the entire island. Everywhere embracing the city, the gold of Nature is minted by the hard toiling peasants.

The countryside is alive with vineyards, and its orchards creep upward to the very brow of Etna. The meadows abound with wild flowers, and the asphodels sway and pulsate in the sun like sparkling wavelets, eyes of Saint Cecilia as they are called by the people. The city's patron is Saint Agatha, whose veil is said to have miraculously diverted a fifteen-foot lava stream which threatened Catania with destruction. Each year in February the veil is carried through the streets, as a symbol of gratitude and reverence.

Catania, which was founded by the Naxians in 730 B.C., and afterwards conquered by Hiero and named Etna, was then as now an important sea port. Through it pass some three quarters of a million tons of exports, among which are wheat, olives, silks, fruits and cotton. To the north of the city is the cave in which the giant Polyphemus lived, one of the monstrous Cyclopes in the Homeric tale so called because they had but one eye which was fixed in the centre of their foreheads.

Though the Catanians are proud of their connection with the celebrated drama of Euripides on their city's legendary past, it is to the most loved of the sons of the "daughter of Etna" that they point with pride: to Bellini the composer of the operas *Norma*, *I Puritani*, and *La Sonnambula*. The musician died in the formative days of his genius; Wagner called him the most poetic of composers. Perhaps no finer tribute has been paid to his genius than by the Academy of Music in selecting his *Norma* as the opera to be performed at its opening.

As we leave Catania so brave, so rich in the surrounding beauty of the threatening volcano, the lovely aria from *Norma* comes floating up from the city to the heart heavy in farewell:

*Ah! Bello a me ritorna.*

"Ah! Sweet, To Me Return".

### *Syracuse the Athens of Sicily:*

The once magnificent city of Syracuse, which was the pride of ancient Greece, is still washed by the waters of the Mediterranean, the sun that looked down on its splendour is friendly and cheerful, but the riches, the commerce and culture that drew the finest genius of the Periclean Age to its portals have been gathered by the Reaper and stored in the bosom of the earth. The tyrant, the king and the politician are among those forever silent. But the voice of the poet, the philosopher and the artist is

heard in the inner hush, and the spirit of Syracuse is one with the immortal spirit of Sicily.

The rise and fall of Syracuse is a part of the eternal greed, jealousy and injured pride that have ridden the powers of the world to the dust. That city was founded by the Corinthians in 734 B.C., and until it was brought under the Romans in the second century it was one of the most important cities on the shores of the Mediterranean. Within the brief span of five hundred years it rivalled Athens in wealth and power. In 415 B.C. even Athens was humbled in war against Syracuse, and seven thousand Athenian captives were cast into the city's quarries to hew rock for its edifices.

The most noted of the rulers of ancient Syracuse was the tyrant Dionysius II, because of his connection with the poets and philosophers who have perpetuated his name. That young ruler of thirty, whose ears Aristippus found were in his feet, was erratic, unscrupulous and cruel. Plato had been attracted to him by his administration, which had successfully checked the Carthaginians, whose imperialistic advances threatened the whole Greek hegemony in Sicily. And when an invitation came to him from the brother-in-law of Dionysius to visit the court of Syracuse, Plato left Athens with all the wisdom of his sixty years to try his ideas on a reigning statesman as to the education of the "philosopher king", who, he had stated, was needed to bring about the "Perfect City". But Syracuse was not destined to become the Utopia of the philosopher's dream, nor Dionysius the philosopher king. The young ruler soon tired of his studies and quarrelled with Plato, who had told him in the heat of argument that a philosopher could be happy regardless of external events; whereon the young cynic smiled and sold him into slavery.

The philosopher, however, was soon ransomed by an admirer named Anniceris, who, in his own words, "too, could do something for philosophy".

Nor had Damocles, who lauded the happiness of kings, found kingly humour less generous; he was rewarded for eulogy by having a keen-edged sword suspended by a single horse-hair over his head as he sat at a banquet.

Yet everywhere in this city, second in all Greek hearts, rose the wonders of Doric architecture. Around the tyrant, treacherous as a morass with flowers, sprang the temples and monuments which, even to-day in ruin, quicken the pulse and open the heart to receive their pagan beauty. Here Greek genius built the

Temple of Athena, for which it is said that the goddess left the olive fount on the hill of the Acropolis. Then as now was the Fountain of Arethusa on the waterfront, from which the nymph pursued by Alpheus raised imploring hands, till, mingling into one, they sank

Through caverns measureless to man  
Down to a sunless sea.

Away from modern Syracuse, which is confined to the old island of Ortygia now attached to the mainland, is Neapolis, where the sixty-tiered theatre cut from the solid rock is situated. Here had come Aeschylus to see his *Persae* performed, and to write and to hear the lines of his *Women of Etna* echo through the stone hewn bowl. Here, too, had come Sappho the siren of Mytilene, to try her golden voice. Here Pindar and Theocritus had caught the voice of the shepherds in the fields and on the slopes, to fill all succeeding generations with song.

Though no laughter now comes from the halls of the court of Dionysius, nor does stranger stop to admire the broad shouldered philosopher as he passes lost in the wonders of thought, yet the splendours of the Past live in fragments. The peasants, rich in the colour of antique glories, pass, singing unknowingly some verse from the poets of pagan fame, and pause before the cathedral to admire the columns of the Temple of Athena now built in those walls which are dedicated to another. Thoughtfully they urge their demure small donkeys on with their oak-built *carrati*, or carts, depicting the battles of their ancestors, or in vivid colours the lives of the Saints.

Yet more pagan than Christian seem these inheritors of so many centuries of change, so many tragedies of the fortunes of time, as they pass singing amidst the adversities of the present, and smiling in the promise of the future.

*Enna, The Vale of Proserpine:*

The rains, the burning suns and invisible hammers of the winds have chipped and levelled the Temples, sifted and spread the dust of monuments raised to the vanity of kings over the island. But the winds, the suns and the little rains have only enhanced the riches of Enna, made her plains the flower-dressed fields of the gods, for whom there is no ruin, no decay, but peace, beauty and peace. And here after so many centuries, so many hard fought years, the flowers remain, the wild rich flowers

of the Greek poets, who found that the dogs of the hunt lost sport of the game among them, and the hunters swooned from "that delicious pain":

That fair field  
Of Enna where Proserpine gathering flowers,  
Herself a fairer flower, by gloomy Dis  
Was gathered.

It was here in the flower filled fields of Enna that Proserpine was gathering violets and lilies when Pluto, the god of the underworld, saw her and carried her off to be his queen. There between Enna and Syracuse, on the banks of the river Cyane, where the papyrus grows wild, he struck the banks with his trident, and the earth opened and gave him passage to Tartarus, a passage that was to cause the earth to mourn her loss and remain barren while she was detained by the god for a period of six months each year. When she was again restored to her mother Ceres, Spring reappeared, and the wild flowers that have made Enna famous throughout the civilized world spread their riches and beauty over the plains.

Enna has another claim to immortality; here among the flower carpeted glades Aeschylus came to rest. One Spring morning when the great dramatist was strolling through the fields an eagle flying above dropped a large turtle on his head, killing all that was mortal of the poet who had come to draw inspiration and to refill his heart with the rich droppng beauty of Enna, which is the beauty of Spring.

*Girgenti A Grecian Idyll:*

In no place in the world is there a scene to equal Girgenti; not even in Greece is there a sight that would appeal more to a Greek, were he to awaken after three thousand years of sleep, than this city, this dream of Dorian beauty overlooking the sea, which Pindar called "the fairest of mortal cities".

Akragas, as the Greeks called it, was once a city of nearly a million inhabitants, a city whose riches had equalled if not surpassed Syracuse. And now to wander through Girgenti, set like a tiara on the brow of the green-laced summit facing the sea, is to know the secrets of time, to feel the pulse of eternity beat with all its commanding strength through the body, and to feel the ecstasy of the heart answering the call of beauty.

The excitement, the passion and colour of a city of a million people have given way to the easeful rustle of the few, as the sun gives way to the quiet hush of evening. Poverty peers from the dark corners of the town. But the wealth of the labours of man endures. The ageless columns of golden-brown temples surround and embrace the city amid age-old silence.

It was here, beneath the timeless skies, overlooking the wonders that are Girgenti's, that Plato wrote that its people "built as though never expecting to die and feasted as if they had only an hour to live". If it is possible for a people to live in their work, then death has never come to the moulders of the glory of Girgenti. There is about the temples of Concord and of Juno Lacinia, golden-brown against the blue spaciousness of heaven, the magnificence of Nature, that magnificence of Nature of which Girgenti's most celebrated son Empedocles said, "There can be no change. . . but a mingling and separation". And of all the temples built by the pious hands of the Greeks, there is none so perfect, so splendid in its entirety as the Temple of Concord. After twenty-five hundred years, except for the roof, it stands the most harmonious example of Doric architecture in existence. Scarcely less beautiful is the fragment of the Temple of Castor and Pollux; rich as a bar of music, its sole remaining corner haunts the mind and troubles the imagination. Of once glorious Temple of Hercules but a single column raises its magnificence into the heavens, and the majestic Temple of Zeus, which was the colossus of antiquity, is but a suggestion, a ruin to mark the fall of the king of the gods.

Everywhere about Girgenti is a sense of eternity. It was with the Greeks when they were dreaming their immortal art, and dotting the surrounding orange and olive-grove plains with the yellow sandstone temples that hold out inviting hands to all succeeding ages. It is there to-day. It is in the drowsing fields and among the temples where the flocks feed lazily and the shepherd, fresh from some idyll of Therocritus, propped against a temple column, plays his *caramella*, perhaps to some shepherdess across the years. It is in the people, in the many mixed races who have come to conquer the island of Sicily, and have been conquered by the rich, soft beauty of the Sicilian spirit.

#### *Palermo the City of Happiness:*

The story of Palermo is best told by the name the Greeks gave it: "Panormus", "All Harbour". And this is the impression



it leaves on the mind of the modern traveller. Its twelve mile arc-shaped harbour, formed by the mountains of Solous and Pallegirino, is a magnificent sight, a city of white splendour, so cheerful, so scintillating in its beauty that it is called "La Felice", "the happy", by its half million inhabitants.

The principal builders of Palermo were the Phoenicians. Their keen sense for trade taught them that any natural harbour on the shores of the Mediterranean was a stairway leading to the treasury of the world. The rich soil, the fine fruitful plain skirted the water's edge, upon which grew the most luxuriant lemon and orange groves on earth, caused the founding there of the largest of all Phoenician colonies in Sicily. Round this shell-like harbour the ships of the first traders of the world came and went, leaving behind the Palermo of to-day. It is little wonder that this fabulously rich strip of land came to be known as "La Conca d'Oro", "the golden shell". It is the most fertile in all Sicily, and the most loved by Pomona.

The growth of Palermo has been spread over many centuries, each marked by some event notable in the pages of world history. Like the oak it has known many storms, many dark doubtful years, but as with the tree they have only forced its roots deeper into the soil of the years, Time has given it dignity, and stamped its foliage with beauty.

There were the early struggles of the Greeks and the Carthaginians, then of the Carthaginians and the Romans. And all the while the age-old mountain of Pellegrino has looked on, often lending its adamant breast to the defenders of the city as a shield. It was on the crest of this mount overlooking Palermo that Hamilcar the Carthaginian settled with his soldiers and their families in 247 B.C., to keep the ferocious Romans in check. Then came the reign of the triumphant Romans, which marks a dark page in the chronicles of the island. Sicily under the mailed fist of Rome was the granary of the nation, and for hundreds of years slaves were brought to the island from all corners of the empire to till fields to the lashes of cruel overlords.

The story of Palermo from this period onward is a pageant of conquering nations and races. Goths and Vandals with their Germanic blood brought German cruelties. The Saracens brandishing the crescent sword of Mecca, hewed it into a Moslem stronghold. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Normans under Roger and Robert de Hauteville bestowed upon the island city a magnificence unequalled by any except by the Greeks. The Palatine chapel and the cathedral at Monreale are gems that still

dwarf the imagination with a magnificence which all the harsh penalties of the Bourbons could not erase. This spirit which the Normans instilled into the Palermitans was to stand them in many trials until in 1861 Garibaldi liberated the island from the Spanish and incorporated it into the new kingdom of Italy.

The city now after so many trials and tribulations constitutes the Sicilian Riviera. Its delightful climate is a stimulant to the people who find diversion in its open-air cafes, its operas, its marionette theatres, or sauntering in leisurely fashion along its palm-shaded boulevards. There is to be found about Palermo at all times a childlike gaiety, a gaiety which one feels in the streets, in the market place, in the blue and scarlet plumes bobbing gently on the head of some coy small donkey guiding a sluggish mule through the streets, ornamented with rows of minute mirrors to keep the evil eye away. It is found in the flower vendors filling the city with their myriad coloured blossoms and their myriad coloured cries.

This childlike gaiety is perhaps the spirit which has kept the soul of Sicily alive, and will continue to keep it alive through all the years to come. It is the spirit which permeates the ages that fold gently over the land, and imbues with beauty this island of ceaseless change.