

## SEVEN BOOKS OF SOME IMPORTANCE

### I.

#### THE BLASHFIELDS' "ITALIAN CITIES."\*

The only possible plea on which the average writer can speak of Italy is that of having lit on some unnoticed place, some unrecorded phase of art, some detail insignificant enough to have dropped out of the ever-growing catalogue of her treasures. For the privilege of adding one more foot-note to those glowing pages, the lover of Italy will wade patiently through much vague theorising and feeble rhetoric; but the author who comes forward with a book on the great land-marks—who boldly heads his chapters with immortal names—must expect to be measured by another standard. He who has anything to say about Rome, Florence or Siena must justify himself by saying it extraordinarily well.

This condition Mr. and Mrs. Blashfield have admirably fulfilled in their two volumes on *Italian Cities*. They have brought to their task, in addition to exact technical knowledge, that imaginative sensibility not often combined with it; and these qualities have been merged and mellowed, as it were, in a long familiarity with Italian life and speech. In these days of "superficial omniscience" few writers can show such an equipment, and those who have it do not always know how to use it. The command of a vivid and flexible prose has enabled the authors of *Italian Cities* to present their results in the most interesting book of Italian impressions that has appeared in English since Symonds's volumes. To the most superficial reader Mr. and Mrs. Blashfield's pages must be full of charm; and to one familiar with the aspect of Italy, and knowing something of its artistic and political past, they possess the varied suggestion which characterises the country itself. Perhaps, indeed, the most remarkable quality of the book is the skill with which various tastes are taken into account, with which the claims of erudition and emotion, of historic exactness and poetic

fancy, are fused into a homogeneous "sensation" of Italy. To compare, for instance, the analogy drawn between Saint Francis and Epictetus, in the chapter on Assisi, with the charming little *genre* picture of a visit to the nuns of Cortona gives some idea of the flexibility of view that has enabled the authors to survey so many aspects of their subject. Equally striking in its way is the sombre record of the great siege of Siena, extracted with masterly conciseness from the pages of Brantôme and Monluc, while the curiously graphic picture of the Perugia of to-day is like some raised topographical map in its vivid and minute precision. It was to be expected that in their study of Italy the main interest of the authors should centre in her art. The impartiality with which they have traced the successive manifestations of this art may be observed from the opening pages on the Byzantine craftsmen to those in which Correggio, the painter's painter, is discussed with the same discriminating sympathy as the unknown artists who lined the tomb of Galla Placidia with mosaics "blue as the heart of a sapphire." Such catholicity of judgment has not always marked the English or American art-critic, and the present work doubtless owes something of its artistic balance to the technical competence of one of the authors. Some of the happiest of the reflections with which it abounds are drawn from this professional experience. The analysis of the early Sienese school of painting contains, for example, an admirably drawn contrast between the critical standpoint of artist and amateur. "The inarticulate work of art," the authors say, "appeals to the critic: he 'discovers' it, pleads for it, reveals it. Indeed, he soon ceases to see it objectively, and it often appeals to him only through the medium which his own fancy has created. Why has so much been written about Botticelli, so little about Donatello? Why is Simone Martini more stimulating to eloquence than Veronese? Because . . . the master-craftsmen need no apologists and offer no handle to facile criticism. . . . Finally, to analyse or define the enduring charm of a world-famous picture is a form of mental exercise; to rhapsodise over a

\**Italian Cities*. By E. and E. W. Blashfield. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 2 vols. \$4.00.

Sano di Pietro or a Matteo Giovanni . . . an inexpensive form of mental dissipation." Words of gold, which, omitting the specific reference to painting, might well be written up in every critic's laboratory.

Felicity in summing up a series of deductions or impressions is in fact characteristic of Mr. and Mrs. Blashfield's book. What, for instance, could be a better way of defining Mantegna's talent than to say that he resolved the almost impossible proposition of *achieving grandeur without simplicity*? Another telling phrase defines one of the least-understood exigencies of decorative painting: "When he [the decorative artist] can draw and paint every detail of his subject, then, and not till then, can he suppress judiciously; for a man may leave out intelligently only what he has entirely possessed." Equally effective, but with the quite different quality of metaphorical aptness, is the definition of the axioms of Epictetus as possessing "the noble nudity of antique marbles;" or the description of the mosaics of the Lower Empire, when the imagery of paganism was being remodelled for Christian use, and "as in these same mosaics the Magi bring gifts to the Mother of God, so each dethroned goddess pays tribute to the new Queen of Heaven."

To those who love the mere visible Italy, irrespective of her latent appeals to the imagination, the descriptive touches scattered through the book will have a special charm. None who know Mantua can fail to appreciate the delicately-pencilled vignette with which the chapter on that city opens; and how vividly is Siena called to sight in the passage beginning: "We have seen the city in many phases: under black clouds, with hailstones shining in stormy, struggling sunshine against the sculptures of the Fonte Gaia . . . and set like a town in a missal-border against a still, flat, blue background of sky"! The sureness of touch with which the writers have differentiated the outer aspect of the cities they depict, so that each stands forth in individual outline and colour, must convince even readers unacquainted with Italy that their descriptions are the result of personal impressions, and not of any preconceived literary or artistic ideal. The whole book, in fact, has this quality of

spontaneous observation and reflection, of having, in the French phrase, been *felt* rather than filtered through other sensibilities.

"Here in Italy," our authors cry, "where the civilisations overlie one another, and where history is piled strata upon strata, we are perforce obliged to limit our impressions;" and so with an estimate of their book: it is impossible to trace the innumerable threads of suggestion branching off from every subject on which they touch. To have placed these threads in their readers' hands, to have started them afresh on the endless quest of knowledge and beauty, is to have fulfilled in a noble sense Montesquieu's definition of a great thought: "C'est lorsqu' on dit une chose qui en fait voir un grand nombre d' autres." As faithful lovers of Italy, this is doubtless the end the authors would most wish to have attained.

Edith Wharton.

## II.

### MAETERLINCK'S "LIFE OF THE BEE."\*

To read M. Maeterlinck's exquisitely poetical rendering of the life of the bee is to find a new delight in summer, a new interest in the myriad flowers sown broadcast over the warm bosom of nature, and an ever increasing wonder at the marvellously adjusted laws which govern even the smallest of her creatures. From being an intangible, indolently accepted part of the summer stir and joyousness, the drowsy hum of the bee seeking the quivering soul of the flower has gained a new meaning for us, and we find ourselves looking as eagerly for the truth and standing as thoughtfully before the baffling unknown as the author himself. In his inimitable way he speaks of the bees giving their honey and sweet-smelling wax to man.

But more precious still is their summoning him to the joy of the beautiful months; for events in which the bees take part happen only when skies are pure, at the winsome hours of the year when flowers keep holiday. They are the soul of the summer, the clock

\* The Life of the Bee. By Maurice Maeterlinck. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company.