

# ITALIAN VILLAS AND THEIR GARDENS

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WITH PICTURES BY MAXFIELD PARRISH

## SIENESE VILLAS



N the order of age, the first country-seat near Siena which claims attention is the fortress-villa of Belcaro.

Frequent mention is made of the castle of Belcaro in early chronicles and documents, and it seems to have been a place of some importance as far back as the eleventh century. It stands on a hill-top clothed with oak and ilex in the beautiful wooded country to the west of Siena, and from its ancient walls one looks forth over the plain to the hill-set city and its distant circle of mountains. It was perhaps for the sake of this enchanting prospect that Baldassare Peruzzi, to whom the transformation of Belcaro is ascribed, left these crenellated walls untouched, and contented himself with adorning the inner court of the castle with a delicate mask of Renaissance architecture. A large bare villa of no architectural pretensions was added to the medieval buildings, and Peruzzi worked within the inclosed quadrangle thus formed.

A handsome architectural screen of brick and marble with a central gateway leads from a stone-paved court to a garden of about the same dimensions, at the back of which is an arcaded loggia, also of brick and marble, exquisitely light and graceful in proportion, and frescoed in the Raphaellesque manner with medallions and arabesques, fruit-garlands and brightly plumed birds. Adjoining this loggia is a small brick chapel, simple but

elegant in design, with a frescoed interior also ascribed to Peruzzi, and still beautiful under its crude repainting. The garden itself is the real *hortus inclusus* of the medieval chronicler: a small patch of ground inclosed in the fortress walls, with box-edged plots, a central well, and clipped shrubs. It is interesting as a reminder of what the medieval garden within the castle must have been, and its setting of Renaissance architecture makes it look like one of those little marble-walled pleasancess, full of fruit and flowers, in the backgrounds of Gozzoli or Lorenzo di Credi.

Several miles beyond Belcaro, in a pleasant valley among oak-wooded hills, lies the Marchese Chigi's estate of Cetinale. A huge clipped ilex, one of the few examples of Dutch topiary work in Italy, stands at the angle of the road which leads to the gates. Across the highway, facing the courtyard entrance, is another gate, guarded by statues and leading to a long *tapis vert* which ascends between double rows of square-topped ilexes to a statue on the crest of the opposite slope. The villa looks out on this perspective, facing it across an oblong courtyard flanked by low outbuildings. The main house, said to have been built (or more probably rebuilt) in 1680 by Carlo Fontana for Flavio Chigi, nephew of Pope Alexander VII, is so small and modest of aspect that one is surprised to learn that it was one of the celebrated pleasure-houses of its day. It must be remembered, however, that with

the exception of the great houses built near Rome by the Princes of the Church, and the country-seats of such reigning families as the Medici, the Italian villa was almost invariably a small and simple building, the noble proprietor having usually preferred to devote his wealth and time to the embellishment of his gardens.

The house at Cetinale is so charming, with its stately double flight of steps leading up to the first floor, and its monumental doorway opening on a central *salone*, that it may well be ascribed to the architect of San Marcello in Rome, and of Prince Lichtenstein's "Garden Palace" in Vienna. The plan of using the low-studded ground floor for offices, wine-cellar, and store-rooms, while the living-rooms are all above-stairs, shows the hand of an architect trained in the Roman school. All the Tuscan and mid-Italian villas open on a level with their gardens, while about Rome the country houses, at least on one side, have beneath the living-rooms a ground floor generally used for the storage of wine and oil.

But the glory of Cetinale is its park. Behind the villa a long grass-walk as wide as the house extends between high walls to a fantastic gateway, with statues in ivy-clad niches, and a curious crowning motive terminating in obelisks and balls. Beyond this the turf-walk continues again to a raised semicircular terrace, surrounded by a wall adorned with busts and inclosed in clipped ilexes. This terrace abuts on the ilex-clothed hillside which bounds the valley. A gateway leads directly into these wild romantic woods, and a steep irregular flight of stone steps is seen ascending the wooded slope to a tiny building on the crest of the hill. This ascent is called the Scala Santa, and the building to which it leads is a hermitage adorned with circular niches set in the form of a cross, each niche containing the bust of a saint. The hermitage being directly on the axis of the villa, one looks out from the latter down the admirable perspective of the *tapis vert* and up the Scala Santa to the little house at its summit. It is interesting to note that this effect of distance and grandeur is produced at small cost and in the simplest manner; for the grass-walk with its semicircular end forms the whole extent of the Cetinale garden. The olive-orchards and corn-fields of the farm come up to the boundary walls of

the walk, and the wood is left as nature planted it. Fontana, if it was indeed he who laid out this simple but admirable plan, was wise enough to profit by the natural advantage of the great forest of oak and ilex which clothes this part of the country, and to realize that only the broadest and simplest lines would be in harmony with so noble a background.

As charming in its way, though less romantic and original, is the Marchese Chigi's other seat of Vicobello, a mile or two beyond the Porta Ovile, on the other side of Siena. Vicobello lies in an open villa-studded country in complete contrast to the wooded hills about Cetinale. The villa is placed on a long narrow ridge of land, falling away abruptly at the back and front. A straight entrance avenue runs parallel to the outer walls of the outbuildings, which form the boundary of the court, the latter being entered through a vaulted *porte-cochère*. Facing this entrance (as at Cetinale) is a handsome gateway guarded by statues and set in a semicircular wall. Passing through this gate, one descends to a series of terraces planted with straight rows of the square-topped ilexes so characteristic of the Sienese gardens. These densely shaded terraces descend to a level stretch of sward (perhaps an old bowling-green) bordered by a wall of clipped ilexes, at the foot of the hill on which the villa stands.

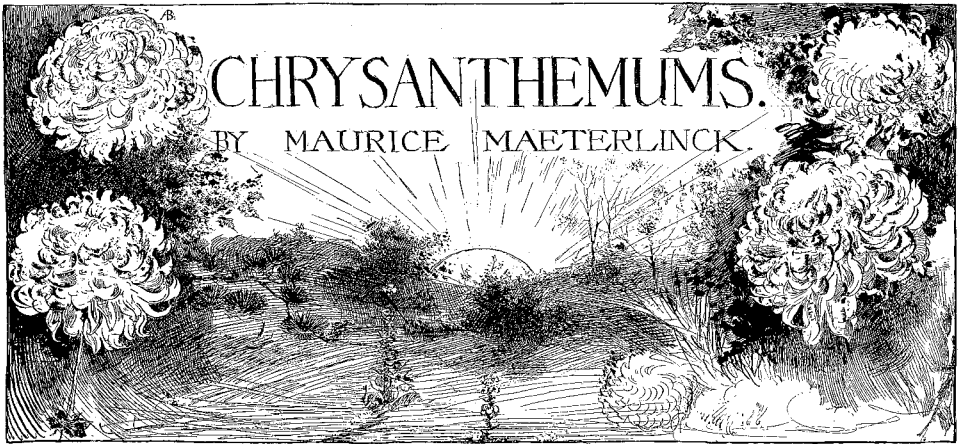
On entering the forecourt, one faces the villa, a dignified oblong building of simple Renaissance architecture, ascribed in the local guide-book to Baldassare Peruzzi, and certainly of earlier construction than the house at Cetinale. On the left, a gate in a high wall leads to a walled garden, bounded by a long lemon-house which continues the line of the outbuildings on the court. Opposite, a corresponding gateway opens into the *bosco* which is the indispensable adjunct of the Italian country house. On the other side of the villa are two long terraces, one beneath the other, corresponding in dimensions with the court, and flanked on one hand by walled terrace-gardens, descending on one side from the grove, on the other from the upper garden adjoining the court. The plan, which is as elaborate and minutely divided as that of Cetinale is spacious and simple, shows an equally sure appreciation of natural conditions, and of the distinc-

tion between a *villa suburbana* and a country estate. The walls of the upper garden are espaliered with fruit-trees, and the boxed flower-plots are probably laid out much as they were in the eighteenth century. All the architectural details are beautiful, especially a well in the court, set in the wall between Ionic columns, and a charming garden-house at the end of the upper garden, in the form of an open archway faced with Doric pilasters, before a semicircular recess with a marble seat. The descending walled gardens, with their different levels, give opportunity for many charming architectural effects—busts in niches, curving steps, and well-placed vases and statues; and the whole treatment of Vicobello is remarkable for the discretion and sureness of taste with which these ornamental touches are added. There is no excess of decoration, no crowding of effects, and the garden plan is in perfect keeping with the simple stateliness of the house.

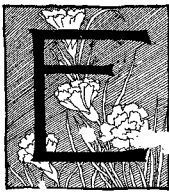
About a mile from Vicobello, on an olive-clad hillside near the famous monastery of the Osservanza, lies another villa of much more modest dimensions, with grounds which, though in some respects typically Sieneſe, are in one way unique in Italy. This is La Palazzina, the estate of the De' Gori family. The small seventeenth-century house, with its adjoining chapel and outbuildings, lies directly on the public road, and forms the boundary of its own grounds. The charming garden-façade, with its voluted sky-line, and the two-storied open loggia forming the central motive of the elevation, faces on a terrace-like open space, bounded by a wall, and now irregularly planted à l'Anglaise, but doubtless once the site of the old flower-garden. Before the house stands an old well with a beautiful wrought-iron railing, and on the axis of the central loggia a gate opens into one of the pleached ilex-alleys which are the glory of the Palazzina. This ancient tunnel of gnarled and interlocked trees, where a green twilight reigns in the hottest summer noon, extends for several hundred feet along a ridge of ground ending in a sort of circular knoll or platform, surrounded by an impenetrable wall of square-clipped ilexes. The platform has in its centre a round clearing, from which four narrow paths radiate at right

angles, one abutting on the pleached walk, the others on the outer ilex-wall. Between these paths are four small circular spaces planted with stunted ilexes and cypresses, which are cut down to the height of shrubs. In these dwarf trees blinded thrushes are tied as decoys to their wild kin, who are shot at from the circular clearing or the side paths. This elaborate plantation is a perfectly preserved specimen of a species of bird-trap once, alas! very common in this part of Italy, and in which one may picture the young gallants of Folgore da San Gimignano's Sieneſe sonnets "Of the Months" taking their cruel pleasure on a September day.

Another antique alley of pleached ilexes, as densely shaded but not quite as long, runs from the end of the terrace to a small open-air theater which is the greatest curiosity of the Villa de' Gori. The pit of this theater is a semicircular opening, bounded by a low wall or seat, which is backed by a high ilex-hedge. The parterre is laid out in an elaborate *broderie* of turf and gravel, above which the stage is raised about three feet. The pit and the stage are inclosed in a double hedge of ilex, so that the actors may reach the wings without being seen by the audience; but the stage-setting consists of rows of clipped cypresses, each advancing a few feet beyond the one before it, so that they form a perspective running up to the back of the stage, and terminated by the tall shaft of a single cypress which towers high into the blue in the exact center of the background. No mere description of its plan can convey the charm of this exquisite little theater, approached through the mysterious dusk of the long pleached alley, and lying in sunshine and silence under its roof of blue sky, in its walls of unchanging verdure. Imagination must people the stage with the sylvan figures of the *Aminta* or the *Pastor Fido*, and must place on the encircling seats a company of *nobil donne* in pearls and satin, with their cavaliers in the black Spanish habit and falling lace collar which Vandyke has immortalized in his Genoese portraits; and the remembrance of this leafy stage will lend new life to the reading of the Italian pastorals, and throw a brighter sunlight over the woodland comedies of Shakspeare.



WITH DECORATIONS BY ALFRED BRENNAN



EVERY year, in November, at the season which follows on the hour of the dead, the crowning and majestic hour of autumn, reverently I go to visit the chrysanthemums in the places where chance offers them to me. For the rest, it matters little where they are shown to me by the good will of travel or sojourn. They are, indeed, the most universal, the most diverse of flowers; but their diversity and surprises are, so to speak, concerted, like those of fashion, in I know not what arbitrary Edens. At the same moment, even as with the silks, the laces, jewels, and curls, a mysterious voice gives the password in time and space; and, decile as the most beautiful women, simultaneously, in every country, in every latitude, the flowers obey the sacred decree.

It is sufficient, then, to enter at random one of those crystal museums in which their somewhat funereal riches are displayed under the harmonious veil of the days of November. We at once grasp the dominant idea, the obtrusive beauty, the unexpected effort of the year in this special world, strange and privileged even in the midst of the strange and privileged world of flowers. And we ask ourselves if this new idea is a profound and really necessary idea on the part of the sun, the earth, life, autumn, or man.

LATELY I went to the hothouses at Cours-la-Reine, to admire the year's gentle and gorgeous floral feast, the last which the

snows of December and January, like a wide belt of peace, sleep, silence, and night, separate from the delicious festivals that commence again with the germination (powerful already, though hardly visible) which seeks the light in February.

They are there, under the immense transparent dome, the noble flowers of the month of fogs; they are there, at the royal meeting-place, all the grave little autumn fairies, whose dances and attitudes seem to have been struck motionless with a single word. The eye that recognizes them and has learned to love them perceives at the first pleased glance that they have actively and dutifully continued to evolve toward their uncertain ideal. Go back for a moment to their modest origin: look at the poor buttercup of yore, the humble little crimson or damask rose that still smiles sadly, along the roads full of dead leaves, in the scanty garden patches of our villages; compare with them those enormous masses and fleeces of snow, those disks and globes of red copper, those spheres of old silver, those trophies of alabaster and amethyst, that innumerable and delirious prodigy of petals which seems to be trying to exhaust to its last riddle the world of autumnal shapes and shades which the winter intrusts to the bosom of the sleeping woods; let the unwonted and unexpected varieties pass before your eyes; admire and appraise them.

Here, for instance, is the marvelous family of the stars: flat stars, bursting stars, diaphanous stars, solid and fleshy stars, milky ways and constellations of the