

CORTONA, AS SEEN FROM THE FOOT OF THE HILL.

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CORTONA, October 24, 1883.

MELVILLE PHILLIPS, ESQ.

My Dear Sir:—I write you as I promised, and as it happens, from the ancient city of Cortona, perched on a lofty hill, inclosed almost by the original wall of prodigious stones laid on each other in courses without cement, built by the Etrurians. From this commanding eminence we overlook, as from



"An eagle's nest upon the crest
Of purple Appenine,"

Lake Thrasymene and the comparatively level ground where Hannibal and his Carthagenians vanquished the hardy Romans. The small stream that flows into the lake acquired its name of Sanguinetta from this battle.

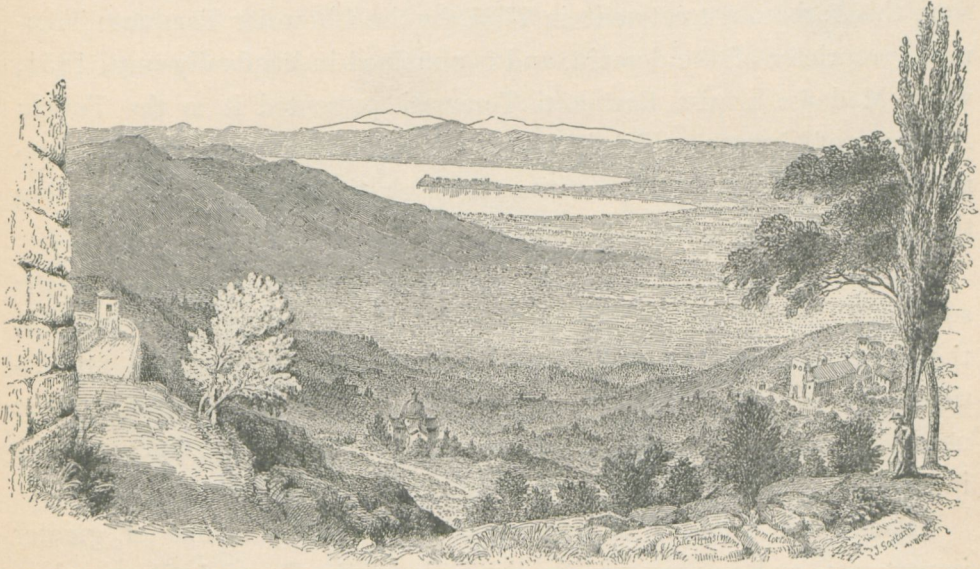
This place is exceedingly interesting on many accounts besides being one of the twelve confederated cities of ancient Etruria, you will remember that it was the birthplace of the celebrated artist,

Peter Berretini, better known as Pietro da Cortona, and this mention leads me naturally to the business that brought me here, the examination of an ancient picture in encaustic preserved in the Museum. It is the head and bust of a young female, her face viewed nearly in front, her right breast bare, and the left partially covered with drapery. Her head is crowned with a wreath, which appears to be of laurel, but it is only faintly seen amidst her dark hair. Her left arm supports a lyre, but there is only a portion of this seen because the picture is but a fragment. It was the presence of this musical instrument that caused her to be called the Muse Polyhymnia, and the work is known as the "Muse of Cortona." It is painted in encaustic on oriental slate, and is one of the only two known pictures of the kind called by the ancients *tablet* pictures, as distinguished from mural works—painted on walls. Of course there has been the usual discussion as to whether this painting is really antique, for there are always people of that peculiar propensity whose chief pleasure and amusement consist in throwing doubt on nearly everything of the past, no matter how well established by proof. But even these place it in the epoch of the great artists of the Renaissance. The general decision of the archæologists, however, is in favor of its antiquity.

There is, besides, a small work in encaustic on slate in the Pinacothek of Munich, representing a dance of nymphs and satyrs, but it is only a fragment of little account, decorative in its character, and apparently part of a border. It was bought by King Ludwig I, of Bavaria, from an antiquary of Florence. The Louvre also has three encaustic tiles, very rudely painted with portraits of the family of Pollius Soter, Archon of Thebes in the time of Hadrian, but like the Munich fragment, are of very little consequence; and the same is true of a piece, in the British Museum, of half a human face.

The other more important picture is at Sorrento, in the possession

of the Baron de Benneval, and represents Cleopatra receiving her death from the bite of an asp. This, like the Muse, is in encaustic and on oriental slate. Both were discovered beneath the present surface of the earth; one near Centoja, between Chiusi and Montepulciano, in 1732, and the other amid the ruins of Hadrian's Villa near Rome, in 1818. The latter was found in sixteen fragments but is



LAKE THRASYMENE, AS SEEN FROM THE HEIGHTS OF CORTONA.

complete. The Muse was in one piece but is obviously only a part of a picture.

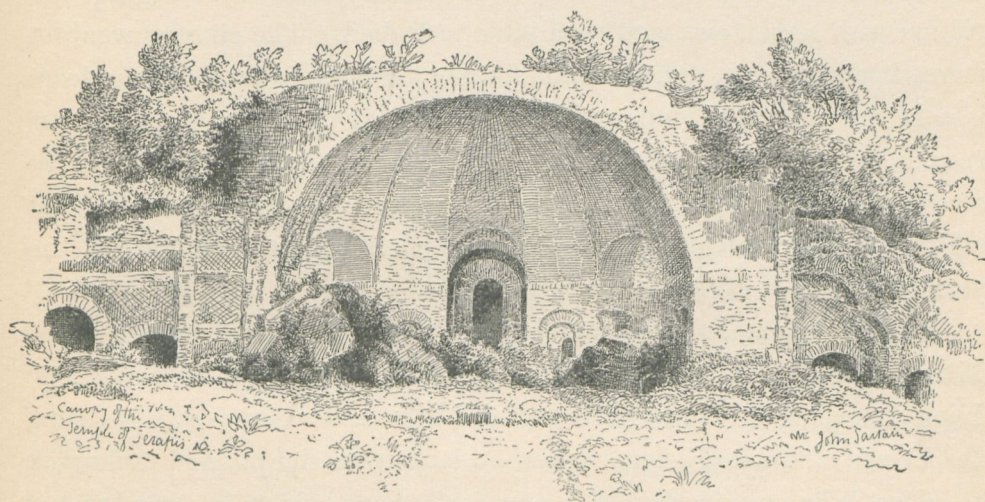
The discovery of the Muse of Cortona was accidental, and happened thus: A farmer, while plowing in a field about three miles distant from the city, turned up a piece of slate, which, on examination, appeared to have a picture upon it, and on a more thorough cleaning he discovered what he considered a representation of the Virgin Mary, so he placed it on a wall of his dwelling, and reverently fixed a taper in front of it, which he kept lighted. After a time his wife became very ill, and

growing worse, a priest arrived to administer to the dying woman. On seeing the picture, he inquired why that heathen thing was kept there. The man replied by explaining what he understood it to represent. The priest said it was nothing but a vile Pagan picture, and that he had better throw it away. The farmer decided instead to put her in what he called Purgatory, by fitting her as a door to his oven. The picture was rescued from this barbarous treatment in 1735, by the Chevalier Tommaso Tommasi, proprietor of the domain, and it remained in his family until 1851, when Madame Louise Bartolotti Tommasi presented it to the Tuscan Academy of Cortona, which has placed it in its Museum. The measurement of the picture is $38\frac{1}{2}$ centimetres high, and 33 wide, representing the figure about two-thirds the size of nature.

I cannot see that it has suffered any deterioration through its exposure to the heat of the oven, and this is probably owing to the fact that the ordeal of fire is one of the processes incident to its original production. But to secure such objects from the risk of final loss, there must needs be the protection of some governmental depository, and such this interesting object has fortunately found.

The other example of ancient tablet painting is one of greater importance, and is preserved in the Villa of the Baron de Benneval at the Piano di Sorrento. This also is in good hands, but it too ought to find a permanent resting-place in some national collection, where it should be forever safe. It represents Cleopatra receiving her death from the bite of an asp, and of course it cannot be claimed that it is a portrait from life, as it was obviously painted subsequent to her tragic end. It was discovered by Micheli; the well-known antiquary, under the cella of the temple of Serapis, at Hadrian's Villa. Of the former picture, nothing is even surmised as to its origin, except that it is evidently Greek, but of the latter there exist data that furnish a reasonable approach to a connected history. When found it was in sixteen fragments, which on being

laid together showed that scarcely any part was missing. The disjointed pieces were taken to Florence, and submitted to the critical examination of the eminent advocate, Giov. Batt. Tanucci, of the Royal Academy of Pisa, who wrote an elaborate report on the subject, showing how profoundly he was impressed with the value of the discovery. This report was printed in the "Autologia di Firenze," vol. 7. In August, 1822, the Marquis Cosimo Ridolfi, the distinguished scientist and chemist, assisted by Targiani Tozzetti, submitted the material of its composition to a



CANOPY OF THE TEMPLE OF SERAPIS, HADRIAN'S VILLA.

chemical analysis, and in that way arrived at exact knowledge of the vehicles employed along with the coloring pigments. These proved to be two-thirds resin and one-third wax. These experiments are detailed in a report that was also printed in the "Autologia," in 1822, and of which I have obtained a copy. The original manuscripts of both reports are deposited with the public archives of Florence. Finally the broken pieces were fitted together and united in a bed of cement. Both pictures are on oriental slate of a grayish tint.

The history of the Cleopatra since its discovery is briefly this. Dr. Micheli and his brother, who were associated in the ownership, endeavored to secure a safe and permanent repository for their treasure in the famous Florentine Museum through a sale to the Grand Duke of Tuscany, but the large price demanded was refused, at a time so little removed from the political convulsions and great wars of the first French Empire, the finances of the Duchy requiring yet many years of economy for their re-establishment. Some years later, the business of the Micheli brothers falling into a decline, they realized funds by pledging the picture with some Jews, and soon after both died. The charges went on increasing with time, and the heirs finding themselves unable to redeem it, sold it to an acquaintance of the Baron de Benneval, subject to these accumulated charges, and he rescued it from the hands of the usurers at serious sacrifice. Subsequently the new owner also found he could not afford to keep it, and the present owner purchased it from him in the year 1860.

Since that date, the picture has been exhibited in London, Paris, Munich and Rome. At Munich, M. Plater, the well-known restorer of King Ludwig's collection of Greek and Etruscan vases purchased from the Prince of Casino, being very enthusiastic over the picture, undertook to place it on an underbed of a peculiar cement, which has rendered it so secure that since then it can be transported from place to place without risk.

In 1869 the Emperor Louis Napoleon made an offer to purchase, which was reluctantly agreed to, and the picture was transported to Paris with the view to the fulfilment of the arrangement; but the war with Germany began, and just on the arrival of the picture in Paris there occurred the battle of Forbach, which caused hesitation as to risking its delivery. During the German siege of Paris and the Commune following, the painting was under the protection of the Prince

Czartoryski, and after the liberation of the city the picture was returned to Sorrento, where it has remained ever since.

I have now only to relate what appears to have been the origin of the picture, and how it came to the place where it was found. Augustus Cæsar being deprived of the presence of Cleopatra in person to grace his triumph (the Queen having evaded that humiliating exposure by suicide), decided on having at least a representation of her. It is on record that a picture was painted for this purpose, and was borne on a car or litter near his own, along with other objects of Egyptian interest and of great value, taken from the monument in which she died; and since it was thus carried on the attendant car, it was obviously a *tablet* picture. After it had answered this use, he placed it as an offering in the temple of Saturn at Rome. There can be little doubt that this is the Sorrento picture.

This painting has given rise to voluminous literary research, and some writers claim that it is the work of the famous Byzantine artist, Timomakos, who was the author of two pictures purchased by Julius Cæsar at the enormous price of eighty talents (\$350,000), which he presented as an offering to the temple of Venus Genetrix. One of these was of "Medea," the other "Ajax," the former one unfinished. It is also asserted that this artist saw Cleopatra when she visited Greece, summoned thither by Mark Anthony, and Anthon places him as cotemporary with Cæsar and the Egyptian Queen, although some authorities locate him at an earlier period. Be this as it may, by whomsoever done, it was doubtless painted about twenty-nine years before the Christian era—assuming it to be the identical picture known to have been produced for the use named. Some hundred and forty years later, the Emperor Hadrian removed from Rome a large amount of the choicest art treasures of the city to enrich and adorn the vast villa he had caused to be built near Tivoli (the ancient Tibur), and no doubt the Sorrento

Cleopatra picture was among the objects thus gathered, and it found an appropriate resting-place in the temple of the Egyptian god Serapis, since that was the locality of its discovery. It is well known how many of the most beautiful and celebrated statues that enrich the national museums of Europe were dug out of the ruins of this wonderful villa, as, for example, the "Venus de Medici," the "Antinous," and other important works.

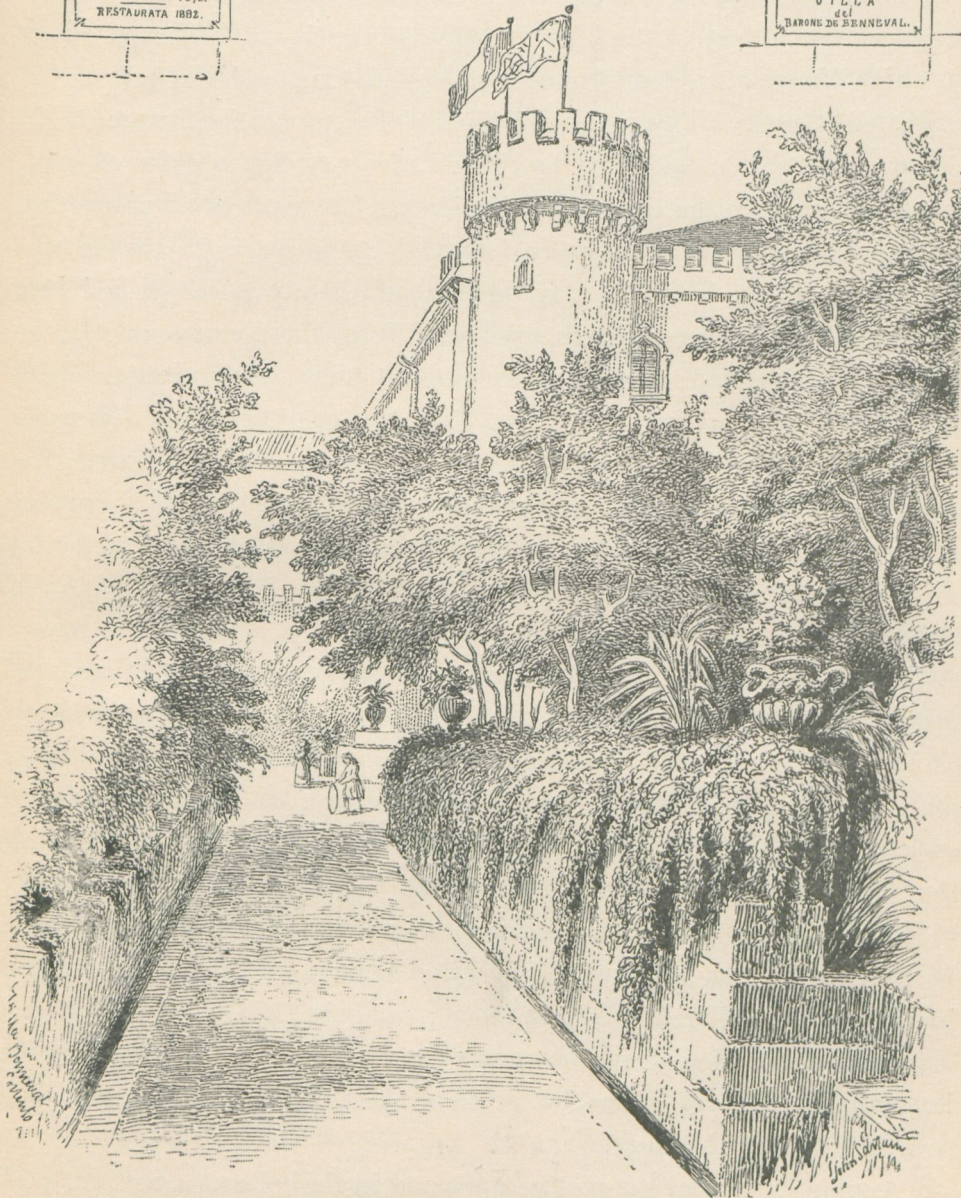
The Muse of Cortona, although a small picture, is nearly life-size, but the Cleopatra is full life-size, though like the Muse it is only half length, including, however, more of the figure. The famous Queen is depicted with the crown of the Ptolemys on her head, splendid jewels around her neck and in her ears, and on her arms are bracelets similar to those found by Schliemann in the tomb of Helen of Troy. A red mantle gathered in a knot on each shoulder covers her right breast, but the left is exposed to the bite of the Asp, or rather the Naja, a small serpent native to Africa. Three small scars indicate where the reptile has already bitten, and we see that it is in the act of again inserting its fangs. The expression of grief and pain is well rendered in her face, her tongue is pressed forward against the slightly opened teeth, the upper lip lifted, the lower lip droops. The pupils of the eyes are raised until half concealed by the upper lids, the escaping tears, the nose drawn and narrowed above the nostrils, all these express forcibly the mental and bodily anguish of the Queen.

The rich attire in which the picture represents her, is in accordance with the facts of her death, for it is known that she caused herself to be arrayed in royal robes, and every personal adornment, in order to meet her end right royally, and thus she was found after death.

The Greeks set great value on the works of their best painters and enormous prices are recorded as having been paid for them, as you know. A picture painted by Apelles for the city of Cos, of Venus Anadyomene

ANNO 1200.
RIEDIFICATA 1675.
RESTAURATA 1882.

VILLA
del
BARONE DE BENNEVAL.



VILLA BENNEVAL, PIANO DI SORRENTO.

rising from the sea, was received by Augustus Cæsar three hundred years later as an equivalent for one hundred thousand dollars, notwithstanding an irreparable injury to the lower portion of the figure. The paintings by which Zeuxis, Apelles, Protogenes, Apollodorus, and the rest of the celebrated Greek artists achieved their lofty reputation, were *tablet* pictures, wrought in encaustic by the aid of a very high degree of heat, a method lost since the time of the ancients. The process of production of these Greek tablet pictures is described by Pliny as far as he was acquainted with it, but in his day the art had already so far passed into disuse as to have become nearly obsolete. Taste for pictures among the Romans had declined rapidly and he laments that they no longer cared for them; they were out of fashion. The pictures found on the walls of Pompeii, Herculaneum, and elsewhere, are for the most part of a merely decorative character, rising occasionally, however, into a superior manner, such as may be seen in the example acquired not long since by the British Museum from my friend, Mr. George Richmond, R. A., of London.

Works in sculpture, it is true, were still in demand, and the style of the day may be judged by the labors of the artist's chisel on the Arch of Titus at Rome. But so rapid was the loss of skill, even in sculpture, that the Titus Arch was despoiled of a portion of its adornments to enrich that of Constantine, on which edifice they contrast strikingly with the puerile productions of the later period.

As I said, much has been written concerning this Sorrento picture. In 1879 there was published in Naples a pamphlet about it written by Emmanuele Berni, Conte Canani; and in 1881, the "Nouveau Temps" of St. Petersburg, contained a long article in the Russian language by Michael Iwanoff, a correspondent of that journal, who had seen and studied the work.

Another review of the picture appeared in the "Revista Settimanale"

by a high authority in matters of this nature, and Houssaye speaks of it in an article upon the "Ancient Paintings of the Museum of Naples," published in the "Revue des Deux Mondes," in 1874, and regrets that it had not been purchased for one of the great museums of Europe. At first he attributed it to Leonardo da Vinci, an authorship disproved by its process of production, for in his time, the ancient art of painting in encaustic still remained a lost art. But this opinion expressed the famous critic's high appreciation of the artistic excellence of the work.

The most important of all the papers that have appeared was published at Augsburg, in the "Allgemeine Zeitung," in August, 1882, in the supplements to the numbers 227, 228, 229 and 230. It is from the pen of Dr. R. Schoener, and is a most elaborate, learned and exhaustive treatise, leaving, it would seem, nothing more that could be said on the subject. I have with me copies of all these essays, and if a book were made of a portion of them, in a manner to avoid repetition, it would constitute an interesting and most instructive work. And such a book I propose to myself to make as soon as I arrive home, illustrated with sketched representations of the places where the pictures are now, and where the Cleopatra was found. Also with faithful finished engravings on steel of both the Muse of Cortona and the Cleopatra.

There now remains but little more to detain me here beyond making a couple of sketches, one of the famous lake Thrasymene—"reedy Thrasymene," as Macaulay names it—with the city of Castiglione del Lago on the extreme end of a tongue of land protruded far out into the lake. This will be taken "from where Cortona lifts to heaven her diadem of towers." The other will be of the city of Cortona as seen from the foot of the hill on which she stands. Then I leave for dear Florence, on my way home, and on my arrival will submit to your critical inspection the materials I have collected for my projected book.

Ever yours truly,

JOHN SARTAIN.