

The Maremma

by

Felicia Hemans

taken from
The Edinburgh Magazine
and Literary Miscellany

November 1820

by

Peter J. Bolton

The Edinburgh Magazine, November 1820
Pages 395-398

Contents

Author's Remarks
The Maremma

THE MAREMMA, A TALE.

THE following little Tale, written some time ago, was intended to have been enlarged by the introduction of other characters and incidents, and afterwards published separately; but a poem on the same subject, by a writer of considerable celebrity, having recently made its appearance, the Author of the "Maremma" has, in consequence, given up the idea of its publication in any other mode than the present.

"THE history of Desdemona has a parallel in the following passage of Dante. Nello Della Pietra had espoused a lady of noble family at Sienna, named Madonna Pia. Her beauty was the admiration of Tuscany, and excited in the heart of her husband a jealousy, which, exasperated by false reports and groundless suspicions, at length drove him to the desperate resolution of Othello. It is difficult to decide whether the lady was quite innocent, but so Dante represents her. Her husband brought her into the Maremma, which, then as now, was a district destructive to health. He never told his unfortunate wife the reason of her banishment to so dangerous a country. He did not deign to utter complaint or accusation. He lived with her alone, in cold silence, without answering her questions, or listening to her remonstrances. He patiently waited till the pestilential air should destroy the health of this young lady. In a few months she died. Some chroniclers, indeed, tell us, that Nello used the dagger to hasten her death. It is certain that he survived her, plunged in sadness and perpetual silence. Dante had, in this incident, all the materials of an ample and very poetical narrative. But he bestows on it only four verses. He meets in Purgatory three spirits; one was a captain, who fell fighting on the same side with him in the battle of Campaldino; the second, a gentleman assassinated by the treachery of the House of Este; the third was a woman unknown to the poet, and who, after the others had spoken, turned towards him with these words:

Ricordati di me; che son la Pia;
Sienna mi fe, disfecemi Maremma.
Salsi colui che inannellata pria
Disposando m'avea con la sua gemma."

Purgat. Cant. 5th.

EDINBURGH REVIEW, No. 58.

THE MAREMMA.

Mais elle etait du monde, ou les plus belles
choses,
Ont le pire destin ;
Et Rose elle a vécu ce que vivent les roses,
L'espace d'un Matin.

MALHERBE.

THERE are bright scenes beneath Italian
skies,
Where glowing suns their purest light dif-
fuse,
Uncultured flowers in wild profusion rise,
And nature lavishes her warmest hues ;
But trust thou not her smile, her balmy
breath,
Away ! her charms are but the pomp of
Death !

He in the vine-clad bowers, unseen is dwel-
ling,
Where the cool shade its freshness round
thee throws,
His voice, in every perfumed zephyr swel-
ling,
With gentlest whisper lures thee to repose,
And the soft sounds that thro' the foliage
sigh,
But woo thee still to slumber and to die.

Mysterious danger lurks, a Syren, there,
Not robed in terrors, or announced in
gloom,
But stealing o'er thee in the scented air,
And veiled in flowers, that smile to deck
thy tomb :
How may we deem, amidst their bright
array,
That heaven and earth but flatter to be-
tray ?

Sunshine, and bloom, and verdure ! can it
be,
That these but charm us with destructive
wiles ?
Where shall we turn, O Nature ! if in *thee*
Danger is masked in beauty—death in
smiles ?
Oh ! still the Circe of that fatal shore,
Where she, the sun's bright daughter,
dwelt of yore !

There, year by year, that secret peril
spreads,
Disguised in loveliness, its baleful reign,
And viewless blights o'er many a landscape
sheds,
Gay with the riches of the south, in vain,
O'er fairy bowers, and palaces of state,
Passing unseen, to leave them desolate.

And pillared halls, whose airy colonades,
Were formed to echo music's choral tone,
Are silent now, amidst deserted shades,
Peopled by sculpture's graceful forms
alone;
And fountains dash, unheard by lone al-
coves,
Neglected temples, and forsaken groves.

And there, where marble nymphs, in beau-
ty gleaming,
Midst the deep shades of plane and cypress
rise,
By wave or grot might Fancy linger,
dreaming
Of old Arcadia's woodland deities.—
Wild visions!—there no sylvan powers
convene,—
Death reigns the genius of the Elysian
scene.

Ye, too, illustrious hills of Rome! that
bear
Traces of mightier beings on your brow,
O'er you that subtle spirit of the air
Extends the desert of his empire now;—
Broods o'er the wrecks of altar, fane, and
dome,
And makes the Cæsars' ruined halls his
home.

Youth, valour, beauty, oft have felt his
power,
His crowned and chosen victims—o'er their
lot
Hath fond affection wept—each blighted
flower
In turn was loved and mourned, and is
forgot.
But one who perished, left a tale of woe,
Meet for as deep a sigh as pity can be-
stow.

A voice of music, from Sienna's walls,
Is floating joyous on the summer air,
And there are banquets in her stately halls,
And graceful revels of the gay and fair,
And brilliant wreaths the altar have ar-
rayed,
Where meet her noblest youth, and love-
liest maid.

To that young bride each grace hath Na-
ture given,
Which glows on Art's divinest dream,—her
eye
Hath a pure sunbeam of her native hea-
ven—
Her cheek a tinge of morning's richest dye;
Fair as that daughter of the south, whose
form
Still breathes and charms, in Vinci's co-
lours warm. †

But is she blest?—for sometimes o'er her
smile
A soft sweet shade of pensiveness is cast,
And in her liquid glance there seems
awhile,
To dwell some thought whose soul is with
the past.
Yet soon it flies—a cloud that leaves no
trace
On the sky's azure of its dwelling-place.

Perchance, at times, within her heart may
rise
Remembrance of some early love or woe,
Faded, yet scarce forgotten—in her eyes,
Wakening the half-formed tear that may
not flow.
Yet radiant seems her lot as aught on
earth,
Where still some pining thought comes
darkly o'er our mirth.

The world before her smiles—its changeful
gaze
She hath not proved as yet—her path
seems gay
With flowers and sunshine—and the voice
of praise
Is still the joyous herald of her way ;
And beauty's light around her dwells, to
throw,
O'er every scene, its own resplendent glow.

Such is the young Bianca—graced with all
That nature, fortune, youth, at once can
give ;
Pure in their loveliness—her looks recall
Such dreams, as ne'er life's early bloom
survive ;
And when she speaks, each thrilling tone
is fraught
With sweetness, born of high and heaven-
ly thought.

And he, to whom are breath'd her vows
of faith
Is brave, and noble—Child of high descent,
He hath stood fearless in the ranks of
death,
'Mid slaughtered heaps, the warrior's mo-
nument :
And proudly marshalled his Carroccio's
way,
Amidst the wildest wreck of war's array.

And his the chivalrous, commanding mien,
Where high-born grandeur blends with
courtly grace ;

Yet may a lightning glance at times be
seen,
Of fiery passions, darting o'er his face,
And fierce the spirit kindling in his eye,—
But e'en while yet we gaze, its quick, wild
flashes die.

And calmly can Pietra smile, concealing
As if forgotten, vengeance, hate, remorse ;
And veil the workings of each darker feel-
ing,
Deep in his soul concentrating its force :
But yet, he loves—Oh ! who hath loved,
nor known
Affection's power exalt the bosom all its
own ?

The days roll on—and still Bianca's lot
Seems as a path of Eden—Thou mightst
deem
That grief, the mighty chastener, had for-
got
To wake her soul from life's enchanted
dream ;
And, if her brow a moment's sadness wear,
It sheds but grace more intellectual there.

A few short years, and all is changed—her
fate
Seems with some deep mysterious cloud
o'ercast.
—Have jealous doubts transformed to
wrath and hate,
The love whose glow Expression's power
surpassed ?
Lo ! on Pietra's brow a sullen gloom
Is gathering day by day, prophetic of her
doom.

Oh ! can he meet that eye, of light serene,
Whence the pure spirit looks in radiance
forth,
And view that bright intelligence of mien,
Formed to express but thoughts of loftiest
worth,
Yet deem that vice within that heart can
reign ?
—How shall he e'er confide in aught on
earth again ?

In silence oft, with strange, vindictive gaze,
Transient, yet filled with meaning stern
and wild,
Her features, calm in beauty, he surveys,
Then turns away, and fixes on her child
So dark a glance, as thrills a mother's
mind
With some vague fear, scarce owned, and
undefined.

There stands a lonely dwelling, by the
wave
Of the blue deep which bathes Italia's
shore,
Far from all sounds, but rippling seas,
that lave
Grey rocks, with foliage richly shadowed
o'er ;

And sighing winds, that murmur thro'
the wood,
Fringing the beach of that Hesperian flood.

Fair is that house of solitude—and fair
The green Maremma, far around it spread,
A sun-bright waste of beauty—yet an air
Of brooding sadness o'er the scene is shed,
No human footstep tracks the lone domain,
The desert of luxuriance glows in vain.

And silent are the marble halls that rise
'Mid founts, and cypress-walks, and olive-
groves;
All sleeps in sunshine, 'neath Cerulcan
skies,
And still around the sea-breeze lightly
roves;
Yet every trace of man reveals alone,
That there life once hath flourished—and
is gone.

There, till around them slowly, softly steal-
ing
The summer air, deceit in every sigh,
Came fraught with death, its power no sign
revealing,
Thy sires, Pietra, dwelt, in days gone by;
And strains of mirth and melody have
flowed,
Where stands, all voiceless now, the still
abode.

And thither doth her Lord, remorseless,
bear
Bianca with her child—his altered eye
And brow a stern and fearful calmness
wear,
While his dark spirit seals their doom—
to die;
And the deep bodings of his victim's
heart,
Tell her, from fruitless hope at once to
part.

It is the summer's glorious prime—and
blending
Its blue transparence with the skies, the
deep,
Each tint of Heaven upon its breast de-
scending,
Scarce murmurs as it heaves, in glassy
sleep,
And on its wave reflects, more softly
bright,
That lovely shore of solitude and light.

Fragrance in each warm southern gale is
breathing,
Decked with young flowers the rich Ma-
remma glows,
Neglected vines the trees are wildly wreath-
ing,
And the fresh myrtle in exuberance blows,
And far around, a deep and sunny bloom
Mantles the scene, as garlands robe the
tomb.

Yes! 'tis *thy* tomb, Bianca! fairest flower!
The voice that calls thee speaks in every
gale,
Which, o'er thee breathing with insidious
power,
Bids the young roses of thy cheek turn
pale,
And, fatal in its softness, day by day,
Steals from that eye some trembling spark
away.

But sink not yet—for there are darker
woes,
Daughter of Beauty! in thy spring-morn
fading,
Sufferings more keen for thee reserved than
those
Of lingering Death, which thus thine eye
are shading!
Nerve then thy heart to meet that bitter
lot,
'Tis Agony—but soon to be forgot!

What deeper pangs maternal hearts can
wring,
Than hourly to behold the spoiler's breath
Shedding, as mildews on the bloom of
spring,
O'er Infancy's fair cheek the blight of
Death?
To gaze and shrink, as gathering shades
o'er-cast
The pale smooth brow, yet watch it, to the
last!

Such pangs were thine, young mother!—
Thou didst bend
O'er thy fair boy, and raise his drooping
head,
And faint and hopeless, far from every
friend,
Keep thy sad midnight-vigils near his bed,
And watch his patient, supplicating eye,
Fixed upon thee—on thee!—who couldst
no aid supply!

There was no voice to cheer thy lonely
woe
Through those dark hours—to thee the
wind's low sigh,
And the faint murmur of the ocean's flow,
Came like some spirit whispering—"He
must die!"
And thou didst vainly clasp him to the
breast
His young and sunny smile so oft with
Hope had blest.

'Tis past—that fearful trial—he is gone—
But thou, sad mourner! hast not long to
weep,
The hour of Nature's chartered peace comes
on,
And thou shalt share thine infant's holy
sleep.
A few short sufferings yet—and Death
shall be
As a bright messenger from Heaven to
thee.

But ask not—hope not—one relenting
thought
From him who doomed thee thus to waste
away,
Whose heart, with sullen, speechless ven-
geance fraught,
Broods in dark triumph o'er thy slow de-
cay,
And coldly, sternly, silently can trace
The gradual withering of each youthful
grace.

And yet the day of vain remorse shall
come,
When thou, bright victim ! on his dreams
shalt rise
As an accusing angel—and thy tomb,
A martyr's shrine, be hallowed in his eyes !
Then shall thine innocence his bosom
wring,
More than thy fancied guilt with jealous
pangs could sting.

Lift thy meek eyes to Heaven—for all on
earth,
Young sufferer ! fades before thee—Thou
art lone—
Hope, Fortune, Love, smiled brightly on
thy birth,
Thine hour of death is all Affliction's own !
It is our task to suffer—and our fate
To learn that mighty lesson, soon or late.
The season's glory fades—the vintage-lay
Through joyous Italy resounds no more ;
But mortal loveliness hath passed away,
Fairer than aught in summer's glowing
store.
Beauty and youth are gone—behold them
such
As Death hath made them with his blight-
ing touch !

The summer's breath came o'er them—and
they died !
Softly it came, to give luxuriance birth,
Called forth young Nature in her festal
pride,
But bore to them their summons from the
earth !
Again shall blow that mild, delicious
breeze,
And wake to life and light all flowers—but
these.

No sculptured urn, nor verse thy virtues
telling,
O lost and loveliest one ! adorns thy grave,
But o'er that humble cypress-shaded dwel-
ling
The dew-drops glisten, and the wild-flowers
wave—
Emblems more meet, in transient light and
bloom,
For thee, who thus didst pass in brightness
to the tomb !

* See Madame de Stael's fine description, in her *Corinne*, of the Villa Borghese, deserted on account of the Mal'aria.

† An allusion to Leonardo da Vinci's picture of his wife Mona Lisa, supposed to be the most perfect imitation of Nature ever exhibited in painting. See Vasari in his *Lives of the Painters*.

* See the description of this sort of consecrated war-chariot in Sismondi's *Histoire des Republiques Italiennes, &c.* Vol. I. p. 394.