

## (1) INTRODUCTION.

I VISITED the Bay of Naples in the year 1818. On the 8th of December, my companion and I went to see the antiquities which are scattered on the shores of Baiæ. We took a boat there from Naples.

Nearing Baiæ, the translucent waters of a calm sea disclosed fragments of old Roman villas, interlaced by seaweed and touched with diamond tints by the flash of sunbeams on the shining waters. Though it was winter, the genial warmth on sea and land seemed more appropriate to early spring, and it was with sensations of placid delight that we disembarked on that volcanic shore and wandered through various ruined temples, baths, and classic spots renowned from myth and ancient poetry.

At length, through a gash in a rocky hillside, we entered the gloomy realm of the Cumæan Sibyl, legendary priestess and prophetess of Apollo. The red flames of our guides' flaring torches dimmed duskily in the murky subterranean passages, whose darkness seemed eager to swallow any light. At one natural archway, we asked whether we could enter and continue; but the guides pointed to the reflection of their torches on the water that paved the floor there, leaving us to form our own conclusions. It was a pity, they added, for it led to the Sibyl's Cave. Excited and curious now, we insisted upon

attempting the passage. Sure enough, we found the edges dry and passable. Reaching a large, dark, empty cavern, which the guides assured us was the Sibyl's Cave, we were disappointed, but examined everything closely, seeking traces of the wonders it had witnessed.

All we found was a small opening on one side. The guides said it led nowhere. My companion and I decided to try it anyhow, guessing it might be the way to the real cavern. But our guides protested, loudly, in their native Neapolitan dialect, with which we were not very familiar. We gathered that there were ghosts ahead—that the roof would fall in—that the passage was too narrow to admit us—also, that a deep hole further on was filled with water and might drown us. My friend shortened the harangue by taking the man's torch from him. We proceeded alone.

The passage did indeed grow narrower and lower. Though bent almost double, we kept on until we reached a place where we could stand upright. Our self-congratulations and relief were extinguished by a current of air that blew out our torch and left us in utter darkness. We'd brought no matches. All we could do was go back—but where was the passage? We groped around the walls until we found an opening that led, however, to a second, ascending passage which terminated like the first in a wider space. Here, though, a very doubtful twilight made it just possible to see around us. A dim cavern; high on one side we spotted a low arch from which the little light seemed to be issuing. With considerable difficulty we scrambled up and

found another, slightly less dim passage to another narrow ascent. Several more such followed, which our resolution alone permitted us to surmount.

At last we beheld the source of the light we'd been following: the aperture in an arched dome-like roof, overgrown with brush and brambles which acted as a veil, obscuring the day, and giving a solemn religious hue to the cavern below. This was spacious and nearly circular, with a raised seat or small couch of stone at one end. In the middle lay the perfect snow-white skeleton of a goat. The animal must have missed its footing as it grazed on the hill above and fallen headlong. Ages perhaps had elapsed since this catastrophe; and the brief rip it had made above had been repaired by vegetative growth many dozen summers past.

Otherwise the cavern contained nothing but piles of leaves, fragments of bark, and some pale filmy stuff that resembled husks from unripe Indian corn. Fatigued by our climb through the caverns, we seated ourselves on the rocky couch. The sounds of tinkling sheep-bells and the shout of a shepherd-boy reached us from above.

At length my friend, who had taken up some of the leaves from the floor, exclaimed, "This is the Sibyl's cave! Look—these are Sibylline leaves, the written prophecies, here." On examination, we found that all the leaves, bark, and other substances were traced with written characters. What appeared to us more astonishing, was that these writings were expressed in a variety of languages. Some—ancient Chaldean, and

Egyptian hieroglyphics, old as the Pyramids—were unknown to us. Stranger still, some we recognized, including English and Italian. We could make out little by the dim light, but they did seem to contain prophecies; and often exclamations of exultation or woe, of victory or defeat, were traced on their thin scant pages. There were detailed relations of events not long past, and names we knew, of modern date.

This was certainly the Sibyl's Cave; not indeed exactly as Virgil describes it, with a hundred entrances; but the whole of this land had been so convulsed by earthquake and volcano that the change was not wonderful. For the preservation of these leaves we could probably thank the accident which had closed the cavern mouth, and the swift-growing vegetation overhead which had sealed it against storms. Between us, we made a hasty selection of those we could understand; laden with our treasure, we then retraced our steps and after much difficulty succeeded in rejoining our guides.

During our stay at Naples, we often returned to this cave, skimming the sunlit sea on our way, and each time added to our store. Since then, whenever possible, I've been employed in deciphering these sacred remains. Their meaning, wondrous and eloquent, has often repaid my toil, soothing me in sorrow, and exciting my imagination to the most daring flights. For awhile, my labors were not solitary; but that time is gone; and, along with the chosen and matchless companion of my toils, their dearest reward is also lost to me.

*Di mie tenere frondi altro lavoro  
Credea mostrarte; e qual fero pianeta  
Ne' nvidia insieme, o mio nobil tesoro?*

wrote Petrarch. (“I thought to show you further labors from my tender leaves: but what cruel planet envied us being together, O my noble treasure?”)

In the chapters that follow, I present the public with my latest discoveries among the slight Sibylline pages. Scattered and unconnected as they were, I have been obliged to add links, and model the work into a consistent form. But the main substance rests on the truths contained in the original poetic rhapsodies, and on the divine intuition which their ancient authoress obtained from heaven.

I have often wondered at the subject of her verses. Sometimes I have thought that, obscure and chaotic as they are, they owe their present form to me, their decipherer. As if we should hand another painter the fragments of a masterpiece, say Raphael's Transfiguration, from the Vatican Collections, to put back together; in the resulting mosaic we'd find expressed the second artist's own peculiar mind and talent. Doubtless the leaves of the Cumæan Sibyl have suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were unintelligible in their pristine condition.

My labors have cheered long hours of solitude, and taken me out of a cheerless world whose once-smiling face has turned from me, to another one glowing with imagination and power.

Will my readers ask how I could find solace in the narration of misery and woeful change? This is one of the mysteries of our nature, which holds full sway over me, and from whose influence I cannot escape. I confess: I have not been unmoved by the development of the tale; I have been depressed, even agonized, by some of what I've faithfully transcribed from my materials. Yet such is human nature, that the excitement of mind was also dear to me. Imagination—painter of tempest, earthquake, and the stormy, ruin-fraught passions of humanity—softened my real sorrows and endless regrets, by clothing these fictitious ones in that ideality which takes the mortal sting from pain.

I hardly know whether this apology is necessary. The merits of my adaptation and translation must decide how well I have bestowed my time and imperfect powers, in giving form and substance to the frail attenuated Leaves of the Sibyl.

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