

**THE BEAUTY OF
AMALFI: AN
ITALIAN TALE**

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The Beauty of Amalfi: An Italian Tale by Anonymous

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An Italian Tale.



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THE BEAUTY OF AMALFI.

CLOSE behind the town of Amalfi, of ancient fame, so situate that its rugged head glistens in the first smile of morning, and purples in the last glance of the departing orb of day, lies a high and steep hill. Thick plantations of pine trees, the growth of many years, cumber the soil where once the flower-plot bloomed; and where man used to sit, the small beasts of the forest now wander with fearless step.

I loved to resort to this hill, especially during the summer heats, when the wood was green, and the grasshoppers chirped joyously in the thick brakes, on account of the coolness of the air there, and the delicious view which its midway height commands. From my seat in the shade, I could watch the advance of the sea-breeze as it sped from afar, crisping on its

line of way the glassy surface of the main, and feel its coolness as, after swiftly skimming the sultry plain below, it wandered, lingeringly, till lost in the depths of the rustling pine-forest. Then, presently, would come the Zephyr of the land, contrasting with the salt freshness of its brother of the sea, warm and blowing with aromatic breath, laden with the fragrance of the garden, and the sweet perfume of the wild myrtles that shed their blue berries upon the stony hills.

My eyes were never tired with dwelling upon the beautiful panorama that lay beneath and around me; and the habit, instead of engendering satiety, served only to supply fresh enjoyments, that ended in becoming a daily want.

Far as the eye can reach, towards the right, rises the classic promontory of the virgin goddess, overhanging the deep blue sea that slumbers, childlike, in its stony bed; and dimly seen beyond it, the upper outlines of romantic Capri stand out as an azure mist-cloud floating against the sunny sky. Nearer, the ridge of rock that divides the Gulf of Salerno from the neighbouring bay sweeps, with gradual rises and falls, towards the clear foreground, where the white-washed houses of Amalfi, crescent-

shaped, cluster over the yellow sands. You remark the islets of the Sirens, masses of brown stone, like specks upon the surface of the turquoise, and Positano, romantically perched upon its narrow ledge. Far away towards the left stretches an expanse of the liveliest green—the plain between the mountains and the sea—traversed by the thin waters of Sele, upon whose banks the fat sedge and the luxuriant briar have supplanted the roses of mysterious Pæstum. And bounding the prospect lies a range of low hills, so distant, that at mid-day earth and air and sea seem blended together in one and the same mass. But as the sun, sinking towards the watery horizon, paints every feature of the landscape with the brightest and clearest hues, the dim forms grow distinct, and the distant cape appears as a reflection of the Sorrentine headland.

My favourite place on the hill-side was a little crag, jutting out from its rounded shoulder, where an abrupt fall in the slope below allowed an open prospect of the Mediterranean and the enchanting shores that border it. By the crumbling heaps of masonry that lay scattered about, and the presence of aloes, cypresses, and other trees which are seen more often in the vicinity

of the cottage than in the forest, I could judge that the place had not always been desolate, and a rough but solid cross of pine branches, planted a few yards above, and away from the crag, served to confirm the impression.

But in that region of ruins, where cities and towns lie buried in the dust, and the deep sea rolls over palace and earthly paradise, and the thousand vestiges of departed splendour, who cares to inquire about the poor remains of a peasant's cot? and where every foot of land is rich in the memories of deathless deeds, who applies himself to tracing out the obscure tale of some boor's or bandit's vulgar crime? So month after month had fled away before I thought of making any inquiries about those who in past days had gazed upon the same splendid prospect which attracted me to the spot. When, however, a certain languid curiosity that suggested a few chance questions to the peasants of that country still remained ungratified—receiving, for all answer, "But, sir, what do I know?"—the feeling became stronger, and I began to push my research with ardour. At last, having met with a priest of Airola—a man deeply read in the local legends of the olden time—I obtained from

him a brief outline—sketched somewhat carelessly and superciliously, as if the matter were unworthy of his attention—which, by references to others, I filled up with the necessary details. The reason of my committing them to paper was, perhaps, the contrast between the homely ideas with which imagination supplied me when sitting, thoughtfully, upon the crag, and the reality of the tale of its ruins. I expected the common story of everyday horrors; I, therefore, was agreeably disappointed in finding an unusual tenderness and sadness in the Legend of the Beauty of Amalfi.

Which tenderness and sadness if thou acknowledgest not, reader, is thy fault as well as mine—the fault of thy hardness to feel, as well as of my incapacity to describe.

* * * *

It was seldom that cultivator and fisherman, an antagonistic race in these regions, were on terms of friendship like Mariano, the last tenant of the ruined cottage upon the hill-side, and Pietro, the sturdy old sailor of Amalfi; and as they had married wives that were blood relations, people wondered and wondered about their intimacy, and continually whispered, When will they fall out? Despite of which, they were