

ROADSIDE SONGS OF TUSCANY

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Roadside songs of Tuscany by Francesca Alexander & John Ruskin

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ELECTROTYPED BY
C. J. PETERS AND SON, BOSTON.

THE AUTHOR'S PREFACE.

THESE songs and hymns of the poor people have been collected, little by little, in the course of a great many years which I have passed in constant intercourse with the Tuscan contadini. They are but the *siftings*, so to say, of hundreds and hundreds which I have heard and learnt, mostly from old people: many of them have never, so far as I know, been written down before, and others it would be impossible now to find. A great many were taught me by the celebrated improvisatrice, Beatrice Bernardi of Pian degli Ontani, whose portrait I have placed in the beginning of the book, — one of the most wonderful women whom I ever knew. This Beatrice was the daughter of a stone-

mason at Melo, a little village of not very easy access on the mountain side above Cutigliano ; and her mother having died in Beatrice's infancy, she became, from early childhood, the companion and assistant of her father, accompanying him to his winter labors in the Maremma, and, as she grew larger, helping him at his work by bringing him stones for the walls and bridges which he built, carrying them balanced on her head. *She had no education in the common sense of the word, never learning even the alphabet,** but she had a wonderful memory, and could sing or recite long pieces of poetry. As a girl, she used in summer to follow the sheep, with her distaff at her waist ; and would fill up her hours of solitude by singing such ballads as "The war of St. Michael and the dragon ! The creation of the

* Italics mine. Compare Fors on education, No. 94.

world!! and the Fall of man!!!” or “The history of San Pellegrino, son of Romano, King of Scotland”; and now, in her old age, she knows nearly all the New Testament history, and much of the Old, in poetical form. She was very beautiful then, they say, with curling hair, and wonderful inspired-looking eyes, and there must always have been a great charm in her voice and smile; so it is no great wonder that Matteo Bernardi, much older than herself, and owner of a fine farm at Pian degli Ontani, and of many cattle, chose rather to marry the shepherd girl who could sing so sweetly, than another woman whom his family liked better, and who might perhaps have brought him more share of worldly prosperity. On Beatrice's wedding day, according to the old custom of the country, one or two poets improvised verses suitable to the occasion, and as she listened to them,

suddenly she felt in herself a new power, and began to sing the poetry which was then born in her mind, and having once begun, found it impossible to stop, and kept on singing a great while; so that all were astonished, and her uncle, who was present, said, "Beatrice, you have deceived me! If I had known what you were, I would have put you in a convent." From that time forth she was the great poetess of all that part of the country, and was sent for to sing and recite at weddings and other festivals for many miles around; and perhaps she might have been happy; but her husband's sister, Barbara, who lived in the house, and who had not approved of the marriage, tried very wickedly to set her brother against his wife, and to some extent succeeded. He tried to stop her singing, which seemed to him a sort of madness, and at times he treated her with great

unkindness : but sing she must, and sing she did, for it was what the Lord made her for : and she lived down all their dislike ; her husband loved her in his old age ; and Barbara, whom she nursed with motherly kindness through a long and distressing illness, was her friend before she died. Beatrice is still living, at a great age now, but still retaining much of her old beauty and brilliancy, and is waited on and cared for with much affection by a pretty granddaughter bearing the same name as herself.

As for the other songs, I have explained in the notes which I have written under them all the little that I know about them. The tunes, with the exception of those which I found printed in the *Corona di Sacre Canzoni*, I learned from the poor people themselves, and wrote down as well as I could. Most of them (though they sound very sweet to me, bringing