

Basilicata (September-October 1847)

On 29 August the *Journal* resumes:

A day of arrangements for past and future. Ciccio received his thirty-one dollars and a half, with four more for good service; whereon the angel guide burst into tears, and said he should have thought it quite enough to have worked for such nice people as we two for his stipulated pay only; he moreover declared that we appeared to him in the light of sons and nephews, and that he would live or die for us, as, how and when we pleased. Dìghi-dòghi-dà was indeed a most meritorious fellow.¹

This was not a final parting, however, for Lear retained Ciccio to accompany him to the spectacular mountain village of Pentadatilo, of which they had caught only a glimpse, before rejoining Proby to embark on a tour of the eastern half of Calabria. In a letter to Ann outlining their projected itinerary, he had warm words too for the latter, 'who I find one of the best creatures possible, & I dare say it was my own ill temper that made him seem hasty. We get on perfectly well together now, & I shall be very sorry to part with him.'²

After leaving Proby in Messina, Lear and Ciccio set out three days later armed with an introduction to the Don of Melito, which Lear had counted on using as his base. However,

albeit Don Pietro [Tropaea] gave me a most friendly welcome, it is not to be disguised that his casino was of the dirtiest; and when I contemplated the ten dogs and a very unpleasant huge tame sheep which animated his rooms, I congratulated myself that I was not to abide long with them.

Moreover, it appeared to me that some evil, general or particular, was brooding over the household, which consisted of a wife, haggard and dirty in appearance and agitated in a very painful degree; an only son, wild and terrified in every look; and a brother and nephew from Montebello, strange, gloomy and mysterious in aspect and manner. The host also apologised for being ill at ease and unwell. The singular uneasiness of the whole party increased presently at the sound of two or three guns being fired, and Donna Lucia Tropaea, bursting into tears, left the room with all the family but Don Pietro, who became more and more incoherent and flurried, imparting the most astounding revelations relative to his lady and her situation, which he declared made all the family and himself most afflicted and nervous.

These excuses for so remarkable a derangement as I observed in the manner of all the individuals of the family did not deceive me, and I once more suspected, more strongly than ever, that 'something was to be foreseen'. The feeling was confirmed at supper-time, when the assembled circle seemed to have agreed among themselves that it was impossible to conceal their alarm, and a rapid succession of questions was put to me as to what I knew of political changes about to take place immediately.

'Had I heard nothing? Nothing? Not even at Reggio?'

'Indeed I had not.'

'Bosh! It was folly to pretend ignorance: I must be aware that the country was on the very eve of a general revolution!'

It was useless to protest, and I perceived that a sullen ill-will was the only feeling prevalent towards me from persons who seemed positive that I would give no information on a subject they persisted in declaring I fully understood. So I remained silent, when another brother from Montebello was suddenly announced, and after a few whispers a scene of alarm and horror ensued.

'The revolution has already begun!' shrieked aloud Don Pietro; sobs and groans and clamour followed, and the

moaning hostess, after weeping frantically, fell into a violent fit and was carried out, the party breaking up in the most admired disorder, after a display, at least so it appeared to me, of feelings in which fear and dismay greatly predominated over hope or boldness.

As for me, revolution or no revolution, here I am in the toe of Italy all alone, and I must find my way out of it as best I may; so, wrapping myself in my plaid and extinguishing the light, I lay down in the front room on the bed allotted me, whose exterior was not indicative of cleanliness or rest.

Lear's instinctive distaste for sound and fury of any description disqualified him as an ally to the rebel cause. As he complained in a letter to Fortescue, 'What is the use of all these revolutions which lead to nothing? As the displeased turnspit said to an angry cookmaid.'

Hardly was I forgetting the supper scene in sleep, when a singular noise awoke me. After all, thought I, I am to encounter some real Calabrian romance, and as I sat up and listened the mysterious noise was again repeated. It proceeded from under my bed, and resembled a hideous gurgling sob four or five times reiterated. Feeling certain that I was not alone, I softly put out my hand for that never-to-be-omitted night companion in travelling – a phosphorus box – when before I could reach it my bed was lifted up by some incomprehensible agency below, and puffing and sobs, mingled with a tiny tinkling sound, accompanied this Calabrian mystery. There was no time to be lost, and having persevered in obtaining a light in spite of this disagreeable interruption, I jumped off the bed, and with a stick thrust hastily and hardly below the bed to put the intruder, ghostly or bodily, on to fair fighting ground – Baa-aa-a!

Shade of [the Gothic-horror novelist] Mrs. Radcliffe! It was the large dirty tame sheep! So I forthwith opened a door into the next room, and bolted out the domestic tormentor.

For once, none of the host family was up to see them off in the morning, but when Ciccio was questioned on the significance of this he replied only with 'a clucking sort of glottal ejaculation; nevertheless, he seemed anxious and gloomy'.

The route to Pentedatilo lay along the bed of a steep-sided ravine and it was not until they worked their way up onto higher ground, almost directly beneath the village, that they caught their next sight of it:

The appearance of Pentedatilo is perfectly magical, and repays whatever trouble the effort to reach it may so far have cost. Wild spires of stone shoot up into the air, barren and clearly defined, in the form (as its name implies) of a gigantic hand against the sky, and in the crevices and holes of this fearfully savage pyramid the houses of Pentedatilo are wedged, while darkness and terror brood over all the abyss around this, the strangest of human abodes. Again, a descent to the river and all traces of the place are gone, and it is not till after repassing the stream and performing a weary climb to the farther side that the stupendous and amazing precipice is reached; the habitations on its surface now consist of little more than a small village, though the remains of a large castle and extensive ruins of buildings are marks of Pentedatilo having once seen better days.

As soon as Lear got to work with his sketchbook

the whole population bristled on wall and window, and the few women who passed me on their way to the hanging vineyards which fringe the cliffs low down by the edge of the river screamed aloud on seeing me and rushed back to their rocky fastnesses. As it is hardly possible to make these people understand ordinary Italian, a stranger might, if alone, be awkwardly situated in the event of any misunderstanding. Had the Pentedatilini thought fit to roll stones on the intruder, his fate must have been hard; but they seemed full with fear alone.

Not surprisingly, he chose discretion over valour and moved on higher up the ravine to Montebello, where he had an invitation to lunch with Don Pietro Amazichi. The latter,

though receiving me with every kindness and hospitality, was as much agitated as my acquaintances at Mélito. It seems evident that coming events are casting rapidly deepening shadows, and in vain again do I try to persuade my hosts that I am not in the secret. 'It is impossible,' they said; 'you only left Reggio yesterday, it is true; but it is certain that the rev-

olution broke out last night, and everyone has known for days past what would happen.'

On which there was another scene. The lady of Montebello, less feeble than she of Mélito, gave way to the deepest affliction; her exclamation of 'My sons! My two sons! I have parted from them for ever in this world!' I shall not easily forget; and the husband strove to comfort her with such deep feeling that I became truly grieved for these poor people, ignorant though I was actually of pending circumstances.

By now thoroughly alarmed on his own account, Lear decided to return post haste in order to find out what was happening for himself. As it turned out, he was to witness the outbreak of the Risorgimento, the civil war that would convulse the whole of Italy for the next 20 years:

At the hour of one in the night we reached Reggio, and here the secret divulged itself at once. How strange was the scene! All the quiet town was brilliantly lighted up, and every house illuminated; no women or children were visible, but troops of men, by twenties and thirties, all armed, and preceded by bands of music and banners inscribed 'Viva Pio IX' or 'Viva la Costituzione', were parading the high street from end to end.

'What's happened, Ciccio?' said I.

'Oh, don't you see?' said the unhappy muleteer, with a suppressed groan. 'Oh, don't you see? It's a revolution! Dìghi, dòghi, dà!'

No one took the least notice of us as we passed along, and we soon arrived at Giordano's Hotel. The doors were barred, nor could I readily gain admittance; at length the waiter appeared, but he was uproariously drunk.

'Is Signor Proby arrived by boat from Messina?' said I.

'Oh, what boat! Oh, what Messina! Oh, what beautiful revolution! Ai! ao! Orra birra burra - ba!' was the reply.

'Fetch me the keys of my room,' said I; 'I want to get at my trunk -'

'Oh, what keys! Oh, what room! Oh, what trunk! Ai, ai!'

'But where are the keys?' I repeated.

'There are no more keys,' screamed the excited cameriere; 'there are no more passports, there are no more Kings – no more laws – no more judges – no more anything – nothing except love, liberty, friendship and the constitution – there are the keys – ai! o-o-o-o-orra birra bà!!'

Without disputing the existence of love, liberty, friendship or the constitution, it was easy to see that matters were all out of order, so, taking Ciccio with me, I went hastily through the strangely-altered streets to Cavaliere da Nava's house. From him, whom with his family I found in serious distress, I heard that a concerted plot had broken out on the preceding day; that all the Government officials had been seized, he (da Nava), the Intendente and others being all confined to their houses; that the telegraph and the castle still held out, but would be attacked in a day or two; that the insurgents, consisting mostly of young men from the neighbouring towns and villages, had already marched into Reggio, and were hourly increasing in number; that on the opposite shore, Messina was also in full revolt; and that the future arrangements of the Government could only be known after time had been allowed for telegraphic communication between Reggio and Naples.

The Government officials are all naturally dejected, as nothing of their future fate is known, except so much as may be divined from the fact that no one has hitherto been maltreated. Thus, the agitation of the people at Montebello and Mélito; the suspicions of Don Tito and of the woodmen at Basilicò, and even those of the fat Baron Rivettini, were all fully explained and justified; for whether those persons were for or against the Government, the appearance of strangers on the very eve of a preconcerted revolt was enough to make them ask questions and put them all in a fuss.