

EDITH WHARTON

ITALIAN VILLAS AND
THEIR GARDENS

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INTRODUCTION ITALIAN GARDEN-MAGIC

Though it is an exaggeration to say that there are no flowers in Italian gardens, yet to enjoy and appreciate the Italian garden-craft one must always bear in mind that it is independent of floriculture.

The Italian garden does not exist for its flowers; its flowers exist for it: they are a late and infrequent adjunct to its beauties, a parenthetical grace counting only as one more touch in the general effect of enchantment. This is no doubt partly explained by the difficulty of cultivating any but spring flowers in so hot and dry a climate, and the result has been a wonderful development of the more permanent effects to be obtained from the three other factors in garden-composition—marble, water and perennial verdure—and the achievement, by their skilful blending, of a charm independent of the seasons.

It is hard to explain to the modern garden-lover, whose whole

conception of the charm of gardens is formed of successive pictures of flower-loveliness, how this effect of enchantment can be produced by anything so dull and monotonous as a mere combination of clipped green and stonework.

The traveller returning from Italy, with his eyes and imagination full of the ineffable Italian garden-magic, knows vaguely that the enchantment exists; that he has been under its spell, and that it is more potent, more enduring, more intoxicating to every sense than the most elaborate and glowing effects of modern horticulture; but he may not have found the key to the mystery. Is it because the sky is bluer, because the vegetation is more luxuriant? Our midsummer skies are almost as deep, our foliage is as rich, and perhaps more varied; there are, indeed, not a few resemblances between the North American summer climate and that of Italy in spring and autumn.

Some of those who have fallen under the spell are inclined to ascribe the Italian garden-magic to the effect of time; but, wonder-working as this undoubtedly is, it leaves many beauties unaccounted for. To seek the answer one must go deeper: the garden must be studied in relation to the house, and both in relation to the landscape. The garden of the Middle Ages, the garden one sees in old missal illuminations and in early woodcuts, was a mere patch of ground within the castle precincts, where "simples" were grown around a central wellhead and fruit was espaliered against the walls. But in the rapid flowering of Italian civilization the castle walls were soon thrown down, and the

garden expanded, taking in the fish-pond, the bowling-green, the rose-arbour and the clipped walk. The Italian country house, especially in the centre and the south of Italy, was almost always built on a hillside, and one day the architect looked forth from the terrace of his villa, and saw that, in his survey of the garden, the enclosing landscape was naturally included: the two formed a part of the same composition.

The recognition of this fact was the first step in the development of the great garden-art of the Renaissance: the next was the architect's discovery of the means by which nature and art might be fused in his picture. He had now three problems to deal with: his garden must be adapted to the architectural lines of the house it adjoined; it must be adapted to the requirements of the inmates of the house, in the sense of providing shady walks, sunny bowling-greens, parterres and orchards, all conveniently accessible; and lastly it must be adapted to the landscape around it. At no time and in no country has this triple problem been so successfully dealt with as in the treatment of the Italian country house from the beginning of the sixteenth to the end of the eighteenth century; and in the blending of different elements, the subtle transition from the fixed and formal lines of art to the shifting and irregular lines of nature, and lastly in the essential convenience and livableness of the garden, lies the fundamental secret of the old garden-magic.

However much other factors may contribute to the total impression of charm, yet by eliminating them one after another,

by *thinking away* the flowers, the sunlight, the rich tinting of time, one finds that, underlying all these, there is the deeper harmony of design which is independent of any adventitious effects. This does not imply that a plan of an Italian garden is as beautiful as the garden itself. The more permanent materials of which the latter is made—the stonework, the evergreen foliage, the effects of rushing or motionless water, above all the lines of the natural scenery—all form a part of the artist's design. But these things are as beautiful at one season as at another; and even these are but the accessories of the fundamental plan. The inherent beauty of the garden lies in the grouping of its parts—in the converging lines of its long ilex-walks, the alternation of sunny open spaces with cool woodland shade, the proportion between terrace and bowling-green, or between the height of a wall and the width of a path. None of these details was negligible to the landscape-architect of the Renaissance: he considered the distribution of shade and sunlight, of straight lines of masonry and rippled lines of foliage, as carefully as he weighed the relation of his whole composition to the scene about it.

Then, again, any one who studies the old Italian gardens will be struck with the way in which the architect broadened and simplified his plan if it faced a grandiose landscape. Intricacy of detail, complicated groupings of terraces, fountains, labyrinths and porticoes, are found in sites where there is no great sweep of landscape attuning the eye to larger impressions. The farther north one goes, the less grand the landscape becomes and

the more elaborate the garden. The great pleasure-grounds overlooking the Roman Campagna are laid out on severe and majestic lines: the parts are few; the total effect is one of breadth and simplicity.

It is because, in the modern revival of gardening, so little attention has been paid to these first principles of the art that the garden-lover should not content himself with a vague enjoyment of old Italian gardens, but should try to extract from them principles which may be applied at home. He should observe, for instance, that the old Italian garden was meant to be lived in—a use to which, at least in America, the modern garden is seldom put. He should note that, to this end, the grounds were as carefully and conveniently planned as the house, with broad paths (in which two or more could go abreast) leading from one division to another; with shade easily accessible from the house, as well as a sunny sheltered walk for winter; and with effective transitions from the dusk of wooded alleys to open flowery spaces or to the level sward of the bowling-green. He should remember that the terraces and formal gardens adjoined the house, that the ilex or laurel walks beyond were clipped into shape to effect a transition between the straight lines of masonry and the untrimmed growth of the woodland to which they led, and that each step away from architecture was a nearer approach to nature.

The cult of the Italian garden has spread from England to America, and there is a general feeling that, by placing a marble bench here and a sun-dial there, Italian “effects” may be

achieved. The results produced, even where much money and thought have been expended, are not altogether satisfactory; and some critics have thence inferred that the Italian garden is, so to speak, *untranslatable*, that it cannot be adequately rendered in another landscape and another age.

Certain effects, those which depend on architectural grandeur as well as those due to colouring and age, are no doubt unattainable; but there is, none the less, much to be learned from the old Italian gardens, and the first lesson is that, if they are to be a real inspiration, they must be copied, not in the letter but in the spirit. That is, a marble sarcophagus and a dozen twisted columns will not make an Italian garden; but a piece of ground laid out and planted on the principles of the old garden-craft will be, not indeed an Italian garden in the literal sense, but, what is far better, *a garden as well adapted to its surroundings as were the models which inspired it.*

This is the secret to be learned from the villas of Italy; and no one who has looked at them with this object in view will be content to relapse into vague admiration of their loveliness. As Browning, in passing Cape St. Vincent and Trafalgar Bay, cried out:

“Here and here did England help me: how can I help England?”—say,

so the garden-lover, who longs to transfer something of the

old garden-magic to his own patch of ground at home, will ask himself, in wandering under the umbrella-pines of the Villa Borghese, or through the box-parterres of the Villa Lante: What can I bring away from here? And the more he studies and compares, the more inevitably will the answer be: “Not this or that amputated statue, or broken bas-relief, or fragmentary effect of any sort, but a sense of the informing spirit—an understanding of the gardener’s purpose, and of the uses to which he meant his garden to be put.”

I

FLORENTINE VILLAS

For centuries Florence has been celebrated for her villa-clad hills. According to an old chronicler, the country houses were more splendid than those in the town, and stood so close-set among their olive-orchards and vineyards that the traveller "thought himself in Florence three leagues before reaching the city."

Many of these houses still survive, strongly planted on their broad terraces, from the fifteenth-century farmhouse-villa, with its projecting eaves and square tower, to the many-windowed *maison de plaisance* in which the luxurious nobles of the seventeenth century spent the gambling and chocolate-drinking weeks of the vintage season. It is characteristic of Florentine thrift and conservatism that the greater number of these later and more pretentious villas are merely additions to the plain old buildings, while, even in the rare cases where the whole structure is new, the baroque exuberance which became fashionable in the seventeenth century is tempered by a restraint and severity peculiarly Tuscan.

So numerous and well preserved are the buildings of this order about Florence that the student who should attempt to give an account of them would have before him a long and laborious

undertaking; but where the villa is to be considered in relation to its garden, the task is reduced to narrow limits. There is perhaps no region of Italy so rich in old villas and so lacking in old gardens as the neighbourhood of Florence. Various causes have brought about this result. The environs of Florence have always been frequented by the wealthy classes, not only Italian but foreign. The Tuscan nobility have usually been rich enough to alter their gardens in accordance with the varying horticultural fashions imported from England and France; and the English who have colonized in such numbers the slopes above the Arno have contributed not a little to the destruction of the old gardens by introducing into their horticultural plans two features entirely alien to the Tuscan climate and soil, namely, lawns and deciduous shade-trees.

Many indeed are the parterres and terraces which have disappeared before the Britannic craving for a lawn, many the olive-orchards and vineyards which must have given way to the thinly dotted "specimen trees" so dear to the English landscape-gardener, who is still, with rare exceptions, the slave of his famous eighteenth-century predecessors, Repton and "Capability Brown," as the English architect is still the descendant of Pugin and the Gothic revival. This Anglicization of the Tuscan garden did not, of course, come only from direct English influence. The *jardin anglais* was fashionable in France when Marie Antoinette laid out the Petit Trianon, and Herr Tuckermann, in his book on Italian gardens, propounds a theory,

for which he gives no very clear reasons, to the effect that the naturalistic school of gardening actually originated in Italy, in the Borghese gardens in Rome, which he supposes to have been laid out more or less in their present form by Giovanni Fontana, as early as the first quarter of the seventeenth century.

It is certain, at any rate, that the Florentines adopted the new fashion early in the nineteenth century, as is shown—to give but one instance—in the vast Torrigiani gardens, near the Porta Romana, laid out by the Marchese Torrigiani about 1830 in the most approved “landscape” style, with an almost complete neglect of the characteristic Tuscan vegetation and a corresponding disregard of Italian climate and habits. The large English colony has, however, undoubtedly done much to encourage, even in the present day, the alteration of the old gardens and the introduction of alien vegetation in those which have been partly preserved. It is, for instance, typical of the old Tuscan villa that the farm, or *podere*, should come up to the edge of the terrace on which the house stands; but in most cases where old villas have been bought by foreigners, the vineyards and olive-orchards near the house have been turned into lawns dotted with plantations of exotic trees. Under these circumstances it is not surprising that but few unaltered gardens are to be found near Florence. To learn what the old Tuscan garden was, one must search the environs of the smaller towns, and there are more interesting examples about Siena than in the whole circuit of the Florentine hills.

The old Italian architects distinguished two classes of country houses: the *villa suburbana*, or *maison de plaisance* (literally the pleasure-house), standing within or just without the city walls, surrounded by pleasure-grounds and built for a few weeks' residence; and the country house, which is an expansion of the old farm, and stands generally farther out of town, among its fields and vineyards—the seat of the country gentleman living on his estates. The Italian pleasure-garden did not reach its full development till the middle of the sixteenth century, and doubtless many of the old Florentine villas, the semi-castle and the quasi-farm of the fourteenth century, stood as they do now, on a bare terrace among the vines, with a small walled enclosure for the cultivation of herbs and vegetables. But of the period in which the garden began to be a studied architectural extension of the house, few examples are to be found near Florence.

The most important, if not the most pleasing, of Tuscan pleasure-gardens lies, however, within the city walls. This is the Boboli garden, laid out on the steep hillside behind the Pitti Palace. The plan of the Boboli garden is not only magnificent in itself, but interesting as one of the rare examples, in Tuscany, of a Renaissance garden still undisturbed in its main outlines. Eleonora de' Medici, who purchased the Pitti Palace in 1549, soon afterward acquired the neighbouring ground, and the garden was laid out by Il Tribolo, continued by Buontalenti, and completed by Bartolommeo Ammanati, to whom is also due the garden façade of the palace. The scheme of the garden is

worthy of careful study, though in many respects the effect it now produces is far less impressive than its designers intended. Probably no grounds of equal grandeur and extent have less of that peculiar magic which one associates with the old Italian garden—a fact doubtless due less to defects of composition than to later changes in the details of planting and decoration. Still, the main outline remains and is full of instruction to the garden-lover.

The palace is built against the steep hillside, which is dug out to receive it, a high retaining-wall being built far enough back from the central body of the house to allow the latter to stand free. The ground floor of the palace is so far below ground that its windows look across a paved court at the face of the retaining-wall, which Ammanati decorated with an architectural composition representing a grotto, from which water was meant to gush as though issuing from the hillside. This grotto he surmounted with a magnificent fountain, standing on a level with the first-floor windows of the palace and with the surrounding gardens. The arrangement shows ingenuity in overcoming a technical difficulty, and the effect, from the garden, is very successful, though the well-like court makes an unfortunate gap between the house and its grounds.

Behind the fountain, and in a line with it, a horseshoe-shaped amphitheatre has been cut out of the hillside, surrounded by tiers of stone seats adorned with statues in niches and backed by clipped laurel hedges, behind which rise the ilex-clad slopes of

the upper gardens. This amphitheatre is one of the triumphs of Italian garden-architecture. In general design and detail it belongs to the pure Renaissance, without trace of the heavy and fantastic *barocchismo* which, half a century later, began to disfigure such compositions in the villas near Rome. Indeed, comparison with the grotesque garden-architecture of the Villa d'Este at Tivoli, which is but little later in date, shows how long the Tuscan sense of proportion and refinement of taste resisted the ever-growing desire to astonish instead of charming the spectator.

On each side of the amphitheatre, clipped ilex-walks climb the hill, coming out some distance above on a plateau containing the toy lake with its little island, the Isola Bella, which was once the pride of the Boboli garden. This portion of the grounds has been so stripped of its architectural adornments and of its surrounding vegetation that it is now merely forlorn; and the same may be said of the little upper garden, reached by an imposing flight of steps and commanding a wide view over Florence. One must revert to the architect's plan to see how admirably adapted it was to the difficulties of the site he had to deal with, and how skilfully he harmonized the dense shade of his ilex-groves with the great open spaces and pompous architectural effects necessary in a garden which was to form a worthy setting for the pageants of a Renaissance court. It is interesting to note in this connection that the flower-garden, or *giardino segreto*, which in Renaissance gardens almost invariably adjoins the house, has here been relegated to the hilltop, doubtless because the only

level space near the palace was required for state ceremonies and theatrical entertainments rather than for private enjoyment.

It is partly because the Boboli is a court-garden, and not designed for private use, that it is less interesting and instructive than many others of less importance. Yet the other Medicean villas near Florence, though designed on much simpler lines, have the same lack of personal charm. It is perhaps owing to the fact that Florence was so long under the dominion of one all-powerful family that there is so little variety in her pleasure-houses. Pratolino, Poggio a Caiano, Cafaggiuolo, Careggi, Castello and Petraia, one and all, whatever their origin, soon passed into the possession of the Medici, and thence into that of the Austrian grand dukes who succeeded them; and of the three whose gardens have been partly preserved, Castello, Petraia and Poggio Imperiale, it may be said that they have the same impersonal official look as the Boboli.

Castello and Petraia, situated a mile apart beyond the village of Quarto, were both built by Buontalenti, that brilliant pupil of Ammanati's who had a share in the planning of the gardens behind the Pitti. Castello stands on level ground, and its severely plain façade, with windows on consoles and rusticated doorway, faces what is now a highway, though, according to the print of Zocchi, the eighteenth-century engraver, a semicircular space enclosed in a low wall once extended between the house and the road, as at the neighbouring Villa Corsini and at Poggio Imperiale. It was an admirable rule of the old Italian architects,

where the garden-space was small and where the site permitted, to build their villas facing the road, so that the full extent of the grounds was secured to the private use of the inmates, instead of being laid open by a public approach to the house. This rule is still followed by French villa-architects, and it is exceptional in France to see a villa entered from its grounds when it may be approached directly from the highroad.

Behind Castello the ground rises in terraces, enclosed in lateral walls, to a high retaining-wall at the back, surmounted by a wood of ilexes which contains a pool with an island. Montaigne, who describes but few gardens in his Italian diary, mentions that the terraces of Castello are *en pente* (sic); that is, they incline gradually toward the house, with the slope of the ground. This bold and unusual adaptation of formal gardening to the natural exigencies of the site is also seen in the terraced gardens of the beautiful Villa Imperiali (now Scassi) at Sampierdarena, near Genoa. The plan of the garden at Castello is admirable, but in detail it has been modernized at the cost of all its charm. Wide steps lead up to the first terrace, where Il Tribolo's stately fountain of bronze and marble stands surrounded by marble benches and statues on fine rusticated pedestals. Unhappily, fountain and statues have lately been scrubbed to preternatural whiteness, and the same spirit of improvement has turned the old parterres into sunburnt turf, and dotted it with copper beeches and pampas-grass. Montaigne alludes to the *berceaux*, or pleached walks, and to the close-set cypresses which made

a delicious coolness in this garden; and as one looks across its sun-scorched expanse one perceives that its lack of charm is explained by lack of shade.

As is usual in Italian gardens built against a hillside, the retaining-wall at the back serves for the great decorative motive at Castello. It is reached by wide marble steps, and flanked at the sides by symmetrical lemon-houses. On the central axis of the garden, the wall has a wide opening between columns, and on each side an arched recess, equidistant between the lemon-houses and the central opening. Within the latter is one of those huge grottoes¹ which for two centuries or more were the delight of Italian garden-architects. The roof is decorated with masks and arabesques in coloured shell-work, and in the niches of the tufa of which the background is formed are strange groups of life-sized animals, a camel, a monkey, a stag with real antlers, a wild boar with real tusks, and various small animals and birds, some made of coloured marbles which correspond with their natural tints; while beneath these groups are basins of pink-and-white marble, carved with sea-creatures and resting on dolphins. Humour is the quality which soonest loses its savour, and it is often difficult to understand the grotesque side of the old garden-architecture; but the curious delight in the representations of animals, real or fantastic, probably arose from the general interest in those strange wild beasts of which the travellers of the Renaissance brought home such fabulous descriptions. As to

¹ "Geschichte des Barockstils in Italien."

the general use of the grotto in Italian gardens, it is a natural development of the need for shade and coolness, and when the long-disused waterworks were playing, and cool streams gushed over quivering beds of fern into the marble tanks, these retreats must have formed a delicious contrast to the outer glare of the garden.

At Petraia the gardens are less elaborate in plan than at Castello, and are, in fact, noted chiefly for a fountain brought from that villa. This fountain, the most beautiful of Il Tribolo's works, is surmounted by the famous Venus-like figure of a woman wringing out her hair, now generally attributed to Giovanni da Bologna. Like the other Florentine villas of this quarter, where water is more abundant, Petraia has a great oblong *vasca*, or tank, beneath its upper terrace; while the house itself, a simple structure of the old-fashioned Tuscan type, built about an inner quadrangle, is remarkable for its very beautiful tower, which, as Herr Gurlitt² suggests, was doubtless inspired by the tower of the Palazzo Vecchio.

According to Zocchi's charming etching, the ducal villa of Poggio Imperiale, on a hillside to the south of Florence, still preserved, in the eighteenth century, its simple and characteristic Tuscan façade. This was concealed by the Grand Duke Peter Leopold behind a heavy pillared front, to which the rusticated porticoes were added later; and externally nothing remains as it was save the ilex and cypress avenue, now a public highway,

² *Villa*, in Italian, signifies not the house alone, but the house and pleasure-grounds.

which ascends to the villa from the Porta Romana, and the semicircular entrance-court with its guardian statues on mighty pedestals.

Poggio Imperiale was for too long the favourite residence of the grand-ducal Medici, and of their successors of Lorraine, not to suffer many changes, and to lose, one by one, all its most typical features. Within there is a fine court surrounded by an open arcade, probably due to Giulio Parigi, who, at the end of the sixteenth century, completed the alterations of the villa according to the plans of Giuliano da Sangallo; and the vast suites of rooms are interesting to the student of decoration, since they are adorned, probably by French artists, with exquisite carvings and *stucchi* of the Louis XV and Louis XVI periods. But the grounds have kept little besides their general plan. At the back, the villa opens directly on a large level pleasure-garden, with enclosing walls and a central basin surrounded by statues; but the geometrical parterres have been turned into a lawn. To the right of this level space, a few steps lead down to a long terrace planted with ilexes, whence there is a fine view over Florence—an unusual arrangement, as the *bosco* was generally above, not below, the flower-garden.

If, owing to circumstances, the more famous pleasure-grounds of Florence have lost much of their antique charm, she has happily preserved a garden of another sort which possesses to an unusual degree the flavour of the past. This is the villa of the Gamberaia at Settignano. Till its recent purchase, the Gamberaia

had for many years been let out in lodgings for the summer, and it doubtless owes to this obscure fate the complete preservation of its garden-plan. Before the recent alterations made in its gardens, it was doubly interesting from its unchanged condition, and from the fact that, even in Italy, where small and irregular pieces of ground were so often utilized with marvellous skill, it was probably the most perfect example of the art of producing a great effect on a small scale.

The villa stands nobly on a ridge overlooking the village of Settignano and the wide-spread valley of the Arno. The house is small yet impressive. Though presumably built as late as 1610, it shows few concessions to the baroque style already prevalent in other parts of Italy, and is yet equally removed from the classic or Palladian manner which held its own so long in the Venetian country. The Gamberaia is distinctly Tuscan, and its projecting eaves, heavily coigned angles and windows set far apart on massive consoles, show its direct descent from the severe and sober school of sixteenth-century architects who produced such noble examples of the great Tuscan villa as I Collazzi and Fonte all' Ertà. Nevertheless, so well proportioned is its elevation that there is no sense of heaviness, and the solidity of the main building is relieved by a kind of flying arcade at each end, one of which connects the house with its chapel, while the other, by means of a spiral stairway in a pier of the arcade, leads from the first floor to what was once the old fish-pond and herb-garden. This garden, an oblong piece of ground, a few years ago

had in its centre a round fish-pond, surrounded by symmetrical plots planted with roses and vegetables, and in general design had probably been little changed since the construction of the villa. It has now been remodelled on an elaborate plan, which has the disadvantage of being unrelated in style to its surroundings, but fortunately no other change has been made in the plan and planting of the grounds.

Before the façade of the house a grassy terrace bounded by a low wall, set alternately with stone vases and solemn-looking stone dogs, overhangs the vineyards and fields, which, as in all unaltered Tuscan country places, come up close to the house. Behind the villa, and running parallel with it, is a long grass alley or bowling-green, flanked for part of its length by a lofty retaining-wall set with statues, and for the remainder by high hedges which divide it on one side from the fish-pond garden and on the other from the farm. The green is closed at one end by a grotto of coloured pebbles and shells, with nymphs and shepherds in niches about a fountain. This grotto is overhung by the grove of ancient cypresses for which the Gamberaia is noted. At its opposite end the bowling-green terminates in a balustrade whence one looks down on the Arno and across to the hills on the southern side of the valley.

The retaining-wall which runs parallel with the back of the house sustains a terrace planted with cypress and ilex. This terraced wood above the house is very typical of Italian gardens: good examples may be seen at Castello and at the Villa Medici

in Rome. These patches of shade, however small, are planted irregularly, like a wild wood, with stone seats under the dense ilex boughs, and a statue placed here and there in a deep niche of foliage. Just opposite the central doorway of the house the retaining-wall is broken, and an iron gate leads to a slit of a garden, hardly more than twenty feet wide, on a level with the bowling-green. This narrow strip ends also in a grotto-like fountain with statues, and on each side balustraded flights of steps lead to the upper level on which the ilex-grove is planted. This grove, however, occupies only one portion of the terrace. On the other side of the cleft formed by the little grotto-garden, the corresponding terrace, formerly laid out as a vegetable-garden, is backed by the low façade of the lemon-house, or *stanzzone*, which is an adjunct of every Italian villa. Here the lemon and orange trees, the camellias and other semi-tender shrubs, are stored in winter, to be set out in May in their red earthen jars on the stone slabs which border the walks of all old Italian gardens.

The plan of the Gamberaia has been described thus in detail because it combines in an astonishingly small space, yet without the least sense of overcrowding, almost every typical excellence of the old Italian garden: free circulation of sunlight and air about the house; abundance of water; easy access to dense shade; sheltered walks with different points of view; variety of effect produced by the skilful use of different levels; and, finally, breadth and simplicity of composition.

Here, also, may be noted in its fullest expression that principle

of old gardening which the modern "landscapist" has most completely unlearned, namely, the value of subdivision of spaces. Whereas the modern gardener's one idea of producing an effect of space is to annihilate his boundaries, and not only to merge into one another the necessary divisions of the garden, but also to blend this vague whole with the landscape, the old garden-architect proceeded on the opposite principle, arguing that, as the garden is but the prolongation of the house, and as a house containing a single huge room would be less interesting and less serviceable than one divided according to the varied requirements of its inmates, so a garden which is merely one huge outdoor room is also less interesting and less serviceable than one which has its logical divisions. Utility was doubtless not the only consideration which produced this careful portioning off of the garden. Æsthetic impressions were considered, and the effect of passing from the sunny fruit-garden to the dense grove, thence to the wide-reaching view, and again to the sheltered privacy of the pleached walk or the mossy coolness of the grotto—all this was taken into account by a race of artists who studied the contrast of æsthetic emotions as keenly as they did the juxtaposition of dark cypress and pale lemon-tree, of deep shade and level sunlight. But the real value of the old Italian garden-plan is that logic and beauty meet in it, as they should in all sound architectural work. Each quarter of the garden was placed where convenience required, and was made accessible from all the others by the most direct and rational means; and from this intelligent method of

planning the most varying effects of unexpectedness and beauty were obtained.

It was said above that lawns are unsuited to the Italian soil and climate, but it must not be thought that the Italian gardeners did not appreciate the value of turf. They used it, but sparingly, knowing that it required great care and was not a characteristic of the soil. The bowling-green of the Gamberaia shows how well the beauty of a long stretch of greensward was understood; and at the Villa Capponi, at Arcetri, on the other side of Florence, there is a fine oblong of old turf adjoining the house, said to be the only surviving fragment of the original garden. These bits of sward were always used near the house, where their full value could be enjoyed, and were set like jewels in clipped hedges or statue-crowned walls. Though doubtless intended chiefly for games, they were certainly valued for their æsthetic effect, for in many Italian gardens steep grass alleys flanked by walls of beech or ilex are seen ascending a hillside to the temple or statue which forms the crowning ornament of the grounds. In Florence a good example of this *tapis vert*, of which Le Nôtre afterward made such admirable use in the moist climate of France, is seen at the Villa Danti, on the Arno near Campiobbi.

Close to the ducal villas of Castello lies a country-seat possessing much of the intimate charm which they lack. This is Prince Corsini's villa, the finest example of a baroque country house near Florence. The old villa, of which the typical Tuscan elevation may still be seen at the back, was remodelled during the

latter half of the seventeenth century, probably by Antonio Ferri, who built the state saloon and staircase of the Palazzo Corsini on the Lungarno. The Villa Corsini lies in the plain, like Castello, and has before it the usual walled semicircle. The front of the villa is frankly baroque, a two-storied elevation with windows divided by a meagre order, and a stately central gable flanked by balustrades surmounted by vases. The whole treatment is interesting, as showing the manner in which the seventeenth-century architect overlaid a plain Tuscan structure with florid ornament; and the effect, if open to criticism, is at once gay and stately.

The house is built about a quadrangle enclosed in an open arcade on columns. Opposite the porte-cochère is a doorway opening on a broad space bounded by a balustrade with statues. An ilex avenue extends beyond this space, on the axis of the doorway. At one end of the house is the oblong walled garden, with its box-edged flower-beds grouped in an intricate geometrical pattern about a central fountain. Corresponding with this garden, at the opposite end of the house, is a dense ilex-grove with an alley leading down the centre to a beautiful fountain, a tank surmounted by a kind of voluted pediment, into which the water falls from a large ilex-shaded tank on a higher level. Here again the vineyards and olive-orchards come up close to the formal grounds, the ilex-grove being divided from the *podere* by a line of cypresses instead of a wall.

Not far from the Gamberaia, on the hillside of San Gervasio,

stands another country house which preserves only faint traces of its old gardens, but which, architecturally, is too interesting to be overlooked. This is the villa of Fonte all' Erta. Originally a long building of the villa-farmhouse order, with chapel, offices and outhouses connected with the main house, it was transformed in the sixteenth century, probably by Ammanati, into one of the stateliest country houses near Florence. A splendid rusticated loggia, approached by a double flight of steps, forms an angle of the main house, and either then or later the spacious open court, around three sides of which the villa is built, was roofed over and turned into a great central saloon like those of the Venetian and Milanese villas. This two-storied saloon is the finest and most appropriate feature of the interior planning of Italian villas, but it seems never to have been as popular in Tuscany as it was farther north or south. The Tuscan villas, for the most part, are smaller and less pretentious in style than those erected in other parts of Italy, and only in exceptional instances did the architect free himself from the traditional plan of the old farmhouse-villa around its open court. A fine example of this arcaded court may be seen at Petraia, the Medicean villa near Castello. At Fonte all' Erta the former court faced toward what was once an old flower-garden, raised a few feet above the grass terrace which runs the length of the façade. Behind this garden, and adjoining the back of the villa, is the old evergreen grove; but the formal surroundings of the house have disappeared.

The most splendid and stately villa in the neighbourhood of

Florence stands among the hills a few miles beyond the Certosa of Val d'Ema, and looks from its lofty ridge across the plain toward Pistoia and the Apennines. This villa, called Ai Collazzi (now Bombicci), from the wooded hills which surround it, was built for the Dini family in the sixteenth century, and, as tradition avers, by no less a hand than Michelangelo's. He is known to have been a close friend of the Dini, and is likely to have worked for them; and if, as some experts think, certain details of the design, as well as the actual construction of the villa, are due to Santi di Tito, it is impossible not to feel that its general conception must have originated with a greater artist.

The Villa Bombicci has in fact the Michelangelesque quality: the austerity, the breadth, the peculiar majesty which he imparted to his slightest creations. The house is built about three sides of a raised stone-flagged terrace, the enclosing elevation consisting of a two-storied open arcade roofed by widely projecting eaves. The wings are solid, with the exception of the sides toward the arcade, and the windows, with their heavy pediments and consoles, are set far apart in true Tuscan fashion. A majestic double flight of steps, flanked by shield-bearing lions, leads up to the terrace about which the house is built. Within is a high central saloon opening at the back on a stone *perron*, with another double flight of steps which descend in a curve to the garden. On this side of the house there is, on the upper floor, an open loggia of great beauty, consisting of three arches divided by slender coupled shafts. Very fine, also, is the arched

and rusticated doorway surmounted by a stone escutcheon.

The villa is approached by a cypress avenue which leads straight to the open space before the house. The ridge on which the latter is built is so narrow, and the land falls away so rapidly, that there could never have been much opportunity for the development of garden-architecture; but though all is now Anglicized, it is easy to trace the original plan: in front, the open space supported by a high retaining-wall, on one side of the house the grove of cypress and ilex, and at the back, where there was complete privacy, the small *giardino segreto*, or hedged garden, with its parterres, benches and statues.

The purpose of this book is to describe the Italian villa in relation to its grounds, and many villas which have lost their old surroundings must therefore be omitted; but near Florence there is one old garden which has always lacked its villa, yet which cannot be overlooked in a study of Italian garden-craft. Even those most familiar with the fascinations of Italian gardens will associate a peculiar thrill with their first sight of the Villa³ Campi. Laid out by one of the Pucci family, probably toward the end of the sixteenth century, it lies beyond Lastra-Signa, above the Arno, about ten miles from Florence. It is not easy to reach, for so long is it since any one has lived in the melancholy *villino* of Villa Campi that even in the streets of Lastra, the little walled town by the Arno, a guide is hard to find. But at last one is told

³ This grotto and its sculptures are the work of Il Tribolo, who also built the aqueduct bringing thither the waters of the Arno and the Mugnone.

to follow a steep country road among vines and olives, past two or three charming houses buried in ilex-groves, till the way ends in a lane which leads up to a gateway surmounted by statues. Ascending thence by a long avenue of cypresses, one reaches the level hilltop on which the house should have stood. Two pavilions connected by a high wall face the broad open terrace, whence there is a far-spreading view over the Arno valley: doubtless the main building was to have been placed between them. But now the place lies enveloped in a mysterious silence. The foot falls noiselessly on the grass carpeting of the alleys, the water is hushed in pools and fountains, and broken statues peer out startingly from their niches of unclipped foliage. From the open space in front of the pavilions, long avenues radiate, descending and encircling the hillside, walled with cypress and ilex, and leading to *rond-points* set with groups of statuary, and to balustraded terraces overhanging the valley. The plan is vast and complicated, and appears to have embraced the whole hillside, which, contrary to the usual frugal Tuscan plan, was to have been converted into a formal park with vistas, quincunxes and fountains.

Entering a gate in the wall between the pavilions, one comes on the terraced flower-gardens, and here the same grandeur of conception is seen. The upper terrace preserves traces of its formal parterres and box-hedges. Thence flights of steps lead down to a long bowling-green between hedges, like that at the Gamberaia. A farther descent reveals another terrace-garden,

with clipped hedges, statues and fountains; and thence sloping alleys radiate down to stone-edged pools with reclining river-gods in the mysterious shade of the ilex-groves. Statues are everywhere: in the upper gardens, nymphs, satyrs, shepherds, and the cheerful fauna of the open pleasance; at the end of the shadowy glades, solemn figures of Titanic gods, couched above their pools or reared aloft on mighty pedestals. Even the opposite hillside must have been included in the original scheme of this vast garden, for it still shows, on the central axis between the pavilions, a *tapis vert* between cypresses, doubtless intended to lead up to some great stone Hercules under a crowning arch.

But it is not the size of the Campi gardens which makes them so remarkable; it is the subtle beauty of their planning, to which time and neglect have added the requisite touch of poetry. Never perhaps have natural advantages been utilized with so little perceptible straining after effect, yet with so complete a sense of the needful adjustment between landscape and architecture. One feels that these long avenues and statued terraces were meant to lead up to a "stately pleasure-house"; yet so little are they out of harmony with the surrounding scene that nature has gradually taken them back to herself, has turned them into a haunted grove in which the statues seem like sylvan gods fallen asleep in their native shade.

There are other Florentine villas which preserve traces of their old gardens. The beautiful Villa Palmieri has kept its terrace-architecture, Lappoggi its fine double stairway, the Villa

Danti its grass-walk leading to a giant on the hilltop, and Castel Pulci its stately façade with a sky-line of statues and the long cypress avenue shown in Zocchi's print; even Pratolino, so cruelly devastated, still preserves Giovanni da Bologna's colossal figure of the Apennines. But where so much of greater value remains to be described, space fails to linger over these fragments which, romantic and charming as they are, can but faintly suggest, amid their altered surroundings, the vanished garden-plans of which they formed a part.

II

SIENESE VILLAS

In the order of age, the first country-seat near Siena which claims attention is the fortress-villa of Belcaro.

Frequent mention is made of the castle of Belcaro in early chronicles and documents, and it seems to have been a place of some importance as far back as the eleventh century. It stands on a hilltop clothed with oak and ilex in the beautiful wooded country to the west of Siena, and from its ancient walls one looks forth over the plain to the hill-set city and its distant circle of mountains. It was perhaps for the sake of this enchanting prospect that Baldassare Peruzzi, to whom the transformation of Belcaro is ascribed, left these crenellated walls untouched, and contented himself with adorning the inner court of the castle with a delicate mask of Renaissance architecture. A large bare villa of no architectural pretensions was added to the mediæval buildings, and Peruzzi worked within the enclosed quadrangle thus formed.

A handsome architectural screen of brick and marble with a central gateway leads from a stone-paved court to a garden of about the same dimensions, at the back of which is an arcaded loggia, also of brick and marble, exquisitely light and graceful in proportion, and frescoed in the Raphaelesque manner with

medallions and arabesques, fruit-garlands and brightly plumed birds. Adjoining this loggia is a small brick chapel, simple but elegant in design, with a frescoed interior also ascribed to Peruzzi, and still beautiful under its crude repainting. The garden itself is the real *hortus inclusus* of the mediæval chronicler: a small patch of ground enclosed in the fortress walls, with boxed-edged plots, a central well and clipped shrubs. It is interesting as a reminder of what the mediæval garden within the castle must have been, and its setting of Renaissance architecture makes it look like one of those little marble-walled pleasancess, full of fruit and flowers, in the backgrounds of Gozzoli or Lorenzo di Credi.

Several miles beyond Belcaro, in a pleasant valley among oak-wooded hills, lies the Marchese Chigi's estate of Cetinale. A huge clipped ilex, one of the few examples of Dutch topiary work in Italy, stands at the angle of the road which leads to the gates. Across the highway, facing the courtyard entrance, is another gate, guarded by statues and leading to a long *tapis vert* which ascends between double rows of square-topped ilexes to a statue on the crest of the opposite slope. The villa looks out on this perspective, facing it across an oblong courtyard flanked by low outbuildings. The main house, said to have been built (or more probably rebuilt) in 1680 by Carlo Fontana for Flavio Chigi, nephew of Pope Alexander VII, is so small and modest of aspect that one is surprised to learn that it was one of the celebrated pleasure-houses of its day. It must be remembered, however, that with the exception of the great houses built near Rome by the

Princes of the Church, and the country-seats of such reigning families as the Medici, the Italian villa was almost invariably a small and simple building, the noble proprietor having usually preferred to devote his wealth and time to the embellishment of his gardens.

The house at Cetinale is so charming, with its stately double flight of steps leading up to the first floor, and its monumental doorway opening on a central *salone*, that it may well be ascribed to the architect of San Marcello in Rome, and of Prince Lichtenstein's "Garden Palace" in Vienna. The plan of using the low-studded ground floor for offices, wine-cellar and store-rooms, while the living-rooms are all above-stairs, shows the hand of an architect trained in the Roman school. All the Tuscan and mid-Italian villas open on a level with their gardens, while about Rome the country houses, at least on one side, have beneath the living-rooms a ground floor generally used for the storage of wine and oil.

But the glory of Cetinale is its park. Behind the villa a long grass-walk as wide as the house extends between high walls to a fantastic gateway, with statues in ivy-clad niches, and a curious crowning motive terminating in obelisks and balls. Beyond this the turf-walk continues again to a raised semicircular terrace, surrounded by a wall adorned with busts and enclosed in clipped ilexes. This terrace abuts on the ilex-clothed hillside which bounds the valley. A gateway leads directly into these wild romantic woods, and a steep irregular flight of stone steps is seen

ascending the wooded slope to a tiny building on the crest of the hill. This ascent is called the Scala Santa, and the building to which it leads is a hermitage adorned with circular niches set in the form of a cross, each niche containing the bust of a saint. The hermitage being directly on the axis of the villa, one looks out from the latter down the admirable perspective of the *tapis vert* and up the Scala Santa to the little house at its summit. It is interesting to note that this effect of distance and grandeur is produced at small cost and in the simplest manner; for the grass-walk with its semicircular end forms the whole extent of the Cetinale garden. The olive-orchards and corn-fields of the farm come up to the boundary walls of the walk, and the wood is left as nature planted it. Fontana, if it was indeed he who laid out this simple but admirable plan, was wise enough to profit by the natural advantage of the great forest of oak and ilex which clothes this part of the country, and to realize that only the broadest and simplest lines would be in harmony with so noble a background.

As charming in its way, though less romantic and original, is the Marchese Chigi's other seat of Vicobello, a mile or two beyond the Porta Ovale, on the other side of Siena. Vicobello lies in an open villa-studded country in complete contrast to the wooded hills about Cetinale. The villa is placed on a long narrow ridge of land, falling away abruptly at the back and front. A straight entrance avenue runs parallel to the outer walls of the outbuildings, which form the boundary of the court, the latter being entered through a vaulted porte-cochère. Facing this

entrance (as at Cetinale) is a handsome gateway guarded by statues and set in a semicircular wall. Passing through this gate, one descends to a series of terraces planted with straight rows of the square-topped ilexes so characteristic of the Sienese gardens. These densely shaded terraces descend to a level stretch of sward (perhaps an old bowling-green) bordered by a wall of clipped ilexes, at the foot of the hill on which the villa stands.

On entering the forecourt, one faces the villa, a dignified oblong building of simple Renaissance architecture, ascribed in the local guide-book to Baldassare Peruzzi, and certainly of earlier construction than the house at Cetinale. On the left, a gate in a high wall leads to a walled garden, bounded by a long lemon-house which continues the line of the outbuildings on the court. Opposite, a corresponding gateway opens into the *bosco* which is the indispensable adjunct of the Italian country house. On the other side of the villa are two long terraces, one beneath the other, corresponding in dimensions with the court, and flanked on each hand by walled terrace-gardens, descending on one side from the grove, on the other from the upper garden adjoining the court. The plan, which is as elaborate and minutely divided as that of Cetinale is spacious and simple, shows an equally sure appreciation of natural conditions, and of the distinction between a *villa suburbana* and a country estate. The walls of the upper garden are espaliered with fruit-trees, and the box-edged flower-plots are probably laid out much as they were in the eighteenth century. All the architectural details are beautiful, especially a

well in the court, set in the wall between Ionic columns, and a charming garden-house at the end of the upper garden, in the form of an open archway faced with Doric pilasters, before a semicircular recess with a marble seat. The descending walled gardens, with their different levels, give opportunity for many charming architectural effects—busts in niches, curving steps, and well-placed vases and statues; and the whole treatment of Vicobello is remarkable for the discretion and sureness of taste with which these ornamental touches are added. There is no excess of decoration, no crowding of effects, and the garden-plan is in perfect keeping with the simple stateliness of the house.

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