

An Italian Institution

Elizabeth Gaskell

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When the traveller, only a few years ago, entered Naples from the sea, he was struck by the circumstance that as he handed the boatman his fare, a man suddenly appeared, who looked on at the payment, and then, receiving a certain small part of it, went his way without a word. The same ceremony, with a different individual for the actor, occurred as the traveller paid his cab-fare to the hotel, and paid the porter who took down his luggage; and, doubtless, had he been able to see it, he would have recognised a similar agency at work when he discharged the bill of his landlord. The "servitore di piazza," who accompanied him to the Opera, was met by one of these mysterious figures. Even down to the itinerant orange-vendor, or the fabricator of cooling drinks on the Chiaja, all were visited, all were alike subject to this strange supervision. If, tempted by the curiosity natural on such a theme, the stranger asked for an explanation, he was told, with a significance which implied that further elucidation was better avoided, "La Camorra."

What does La Camorra mean? Etymologically, it is not easy to say. The word would seem to have come from a Spanish origin; as the practice which it commemorates, lovers of Italy are fain to believe, was also derived from Spain. It is, to use the simplest of all illustrations, a system of black-mail, so extended and organised as to apply to every walk in life, and every condition of human industry. From the affluent merchant with his argosies on the seas, to the humblest "faquino" on the Molo all are its victims. From the minister in his cabinet, or the professor in his chair, down to him who asks alms at the door of the church, or the very galley-slave whose chains clank as he moves in his weary labour all pay their quota in this iniquitous exaction, and all recognise in its infliction the existence of a system which no Bourbon government ever yet dared to grapple with, and of the success in mastering which, of the present rulers of South Italy, I am very far indeed from confident.

Corruptions of a government are very speedily propagated through every class, and for a long series of years the sway of the Neapolitan Bourbons has been little else than an organised intimidation. Every one was under the influence of terror, and the dread of being "denounced" was universal. The oppressed were not slow to learn the lesson of the oppressors; and thus grew up crops of secret societies, which, ostensibly organised for self-protection, soon became agents of the most oppressive and cruel tyranny. Of these the Camorra was the chief, representing within its limits all that Thuggee is to the Bengalese, Whiteboyism to the Irish, and the old Highland system of black-mail to the natives of the north of Scotland.

Had the working of the association contemplated nothing beyond the exaction of a tax, without assuming, or affecting to assume, some relative obligations, it is likely enough that it might have been long since resisted. La Camorra was, however, ingenious enough to pretend to a paternal care for its followers, and it at least provided that they should not be robbed or pillaged by any other agency than its own. For this purpose, a careful selection of those who were to carry out its edicts was necessary, and admission into the order was only obtained after due and unquestionable proofs of courage and boldness. In fact, the first task usually proposed to an aspirant for the Camorra was an assassination; and, if he shrank from the task, to ensure secrecy his own life always paid the penalty.

The society consisted of a number of distinct groups or knots, under the guidance of a chief the Capo di Camorra, as he was called who treasured the revenues that were brought in, and distributed the payments to the followers with an admirable fairness and regularity. These sums, collected in the most minute fractions from every fashion

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and form of human industry, and even by levying toll upon the gains of mendicancy, rose to very considerable amounts, and were sensibly felt in the diminished revenues of the state, which they in a measure anticipated and supplanted.

While the Bourbon government tolerated this gross abuse as exercised among the humble classes of its subjects, it also availed itself of the Camorra as a means of intimidation or vengeance, and gave up the whole discipline of its prisons to this infamous sect. Here it was, in reality, that the Camorra ruled supreme. The newly-admitted prisoner had but to pass the threshold of his cell, to feel himself in its toils. The first demand usually made was for a contribution to the lamp in honour of the Virgin, over the door; for the Camorra is strictly religious, and would not think of dedicating a locality to its vices without assuring itself of the friendly protection of a chosen saint. The privilege to possess money, to buy food or eat it, to smoke, drink, gamble, or sing, was taxed; and the faintest show of resistance was met by the knife. Indeed, he who determined to resent the dictation of the Camorra soon saw that he must place life on the issue. If, aided by a stout heart and strong hand, he conquered his adversary, he was himself at once affiliated into the society, and was recognised by its members as worthy of the order. In this way a priest, who sturdily resented an attempt to extort money from him, and who, in the struggle that ensued, fatally wounded his antagonist, was presented with a powerful stick by an unknown hand, and handsomely complimented on the courage by which he had distinguished himself. Though the Camorra, therefore, declared its protective care of all beneath its rules, it never vindicated the fate of those who defended themselves ill; nay, it took measures always to mark that courage was the first of gifts, and that he who was unequal to his own defence could not be relied upon to protect others. Success, too, was exalted to the position of a test, and no extenuating circumstances, no plausibilities, could absolve him who failed. There was an obvious policy in this. The system depended entirely upon intimidation; and it was, above all things, necessary that the opinion should prevail that its victims never escaped. So widespread and general was this impression, that every secret vengeance, every dark and untracked crime, was unhesitatingly referred to the "Camorristi." With such an unrelenting persistence were they wont to track and hunt down their victims, that men have been known to commit crimes, and get consigned to prison, for no other object than to be fellow-prisoners with one whom they had doomed to destruction.

Outside the limits of their own sect, the Camorristi pretended to be, and in some respects were, the friends of order; that is, they lent a willing aid to the police to track out all malefactors who were not Camorristi. They were ever ready to suppress riot in the streets, to arrange disputes that grew up at play, and to arbitrate between contending gamblers. They assumed at times, too, the functions of benevolence, and took upon them the care of the suffering or of those wounded by the accidents of street-warfare.

Of the modes in which they contributed to establish something like discipline in the prisons the police-reports are full. The mean and cowardly jailers relied upon them almost exclusively for the maintenance of order; and whenever, from any chance outbreak among the prisoners, some feat of personal daring would be called for, it was at the hands of a Camorristo it would be required. When it is borne in mind that the Camorra was thus regarded and recognised by the state, it need be little wondered at that its exactions were submitted to with patient obedience by the poor, unprotected and undefended as they were.

A market-gardener at one of the city gates was lately congratulated that the odious imposts of the Camorra were no more, and that he had no longer to groan under the insolent tyranny of this robber association. His answer was, "So much the worse. The Camorra demanded his mulct, it is true, but gave us protection in return. It watched after our property in the streets, and suffered none to defraud us. If we have lost one robber, we have gained thirty." And so, through every industry that the poorest live by, was the Camorra recognised. It was the ever-present help to every form of human wretchedness, indicating just as disease will sometimes indicate the remedy how a people might be cared for and guided and protected, their lives assured, their property defended, had the government that ruled them been only more eager for the good of those under its sway than for a demoralisation and abasement which made them easier to control, and fitter tools of despotism.

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In the lottery, the Camorra played a distinguished part, the news of the successful numbers being transmitted hither and thither by the fraternity with a speed and exactitude that the telegraph itself never rivalled. To the poor and unlettered man, awaiting his fate at some remote village, and not trusting to public sources of information, it is scarcely credible what a boon was the intelligence brought by some Camorristo, who even could lighten the load of heavy fortune by assurances of better luck in store, or some explanation as to the peculiar causes which were then so adverse to his benefit.

As the lowest venture in the state lottery is four carlini, or about a franc and a half, on the Saturday, the last day of the venture, it is rare for the poor Neapolitan who has played during the entire week to find a single grain in his pocket. With, however, the very smallest coin he can scrape out of it, he repairs to the office of some secret Camorristo, and by his intervention is able to associate himself with others as poor and as speculative as himself, and by whose conjoint efforts the requisite sum is made up. If the venture should win, the Camorristo distributes the gain with a marvellous probity and accuracy; when a failure is announced, not the slightest shadow of a doubt ever obtains as to the fairness and credit to the Camorristo who proclaims it.

The tax of the Camorra was not, however, limited to the vices of the poor man. An agent of the sect was to be seen at fashionable gaming-tables, and at the doors of houses of private play, exacting his "tenth," the recognised mulct, with a regularity that showed how the "institution" was regarded.

As, in that open-air life popular in the south, a party have been amusing themselves with a game at cards before their own door of an evening, an agent of the Camorra has suddenly appeared to claim his dividend. Though assured that they are playing for nothing, it avails not; he regrets the circumstance with politeness, but reasserts his claim, and with success; for all are aware that, however luck may vacillate at play, he who resists the Camorra defies fate and fortune.

The very fact that the Camorra had never connected itself with politics rendered it a useful agent in the hands of a corrupt and tyrannical government. The severities which the Liberal party well knew they had to expect from the state were, however, as nothing, compared to the atrocities in store, if the Camorra should be loosened upon them. It was by dark hints at such a day of reckoning that Ferdinand held in check those who would not have feared to adventure their fortune in a contest with all the force of government. It was also by appealing to this sect that the king professed to enjoy that popularity among his subjects, by which he replied to the energetic protests of France and England.

"Ask the Neapolitans how they feel towards me!" said he to M. Bresson, the French minister, who had, in writing home to his court, to own that the lowest rabble of Naples entertained for the king a devotion that was marvellous. In fact, the only offences which never could be pardoned under the Bourbon dynasty, were those against the state. The terrible crimes which rend society in twain; the fearful acts which make men almost despair of humanity; were all more or less mercifully dealt with. Talarico, for instance, the assassin of a dozen people, was banished to a pleasant and salubrious island, pensioned, and set at liberty. The world knows the story of Poerio and his companions in the terrible scenes of '49. The lowest populace sided entirely with the monarchy, and this show of popular sympathy offered to strangers one of the most puzzling and difficult problems of the day. Minister after minister wrote home to their several courts, "We cannot deny, as little can we explain, the marvellous popularity the king enjoys."

"Which of your masters," said the king, on one day of a court-reception, to the assembled ambassadors "which of your masters can go amongst his people with more confidence than I can? Come down with me into the street, and see whether I am loved by my people!"

At length, the Liberal party found means to open negotiations with the leaders of the Camorra. They were not very promising, it is true, and vouched little for the patriotic aspirations of these sectaries, who only saw in the prospect of a revolution a question of their own material benefit. The Camorristi talked big; spoke of their

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numbers, their courage, and so forth; but did nothing beyond excite the fears of the royalists, who really dreaded them with a most disproportionate terror. At length, the prefect of police determined on the bold step of arresting the Camorristi, and banishing them to Ischia; and out of this imprisonment they grew, as fellow-sufferers with Poerio and Spaventa, to regard themselves as political martyrs and patriots. Liberated on Garibaldi's entrance into Naples, their first act was to attack all the agents of the police, and destroy all the documents of that office. They were, in twenty-four hours, the masters of the capital. It was in this contingency that Liborio Romano bethought himself of enlisting these men in the cause of, order and law. On one side was a baffled, enraged, and dishonoured soldiery, ready for pillage, and eager to cover their shame by acts of outrage and violence; on the other were the helpless, unarmed, and trembling citizens. The old police was disbanded; the National Guard not yet organised; the priestly party only waiting for opportunity to renew the atrocious scenes of ten years before. They had even hired stores to receive the pillage! It was, it is said, at the suggestions of an old Bourbon adherent, a general, that Liborio Romano took this daring step. "Do as we did in times of danger; fall back on the mob," was the counsel. Blame him as one may, the Camorra saved Naples!

Emboldened by his success, Liborio Romano now organised them into a sort of regular police-force, under their own chiefs; and, marvellous to say, for the first month or two the experiment would seem to have succeeded. Crime of all sorts diminished, and especially theft. Armed simply with staves, and only distinguished by a tricolour cockade, they very soon obtained by their boldness and courage an amount of influence far greater than that enjoyed by the late police. But stranger than their bravery was their honesty: innumerable are the facts on record of their self-denial in temptation, and their rigid integrity; and there is no doubt that they mainly contributed to that new-born enthusiasm for Garibaldi, whose greatest triumph ever was to evoke from popular masses whatever was good, or great, or hopeful, in their natures.

"See what such a people may become when the causes of their demoralisation are removed. Look at the virtues these men exhibit, and say, is theirs a nation to be despaired of?" was the language on every side.

The first enthusiasm over, however, the Camorristi seemed to revert to their old instincts. They were not bandits nor galley-slaves; but they were men of strong frames, violent passions, long-accustomed to lead lives of unrestrained license, and to see themselves universally dreaded. Without ceasing to be a police, then, they introduced into their discipline all the oppressions and exactions of the Camorra. Their first care was to take all smuggling under their especial protection. Under the Bourbon dynasty, contraband had long ceased to find any shame attach to its exercise. The most respectable merchants defrauded the government, without a particle of remorse, and without any sense of dishonour. The frauds were arranged between the chiefs of the Camorra and the officers of the customs, and a regular tariff was established about one-fourth of that ruled by the state. On the arrival of Garibaldi, however, the Camorristi, no longer content with half-measures, assumed all contraband as their own especial perquisites. A certain Salvatore de Crescenza, a well-known Camorristo, took the port-dues under his peculiar care; and from forty-thousand ducats, which was the daily receipt, the dues of Naples fell to short of one thousand!

A no less celebrated leader, Pasquale Menotte, took charge of the "octroi" at the gates. No sooner did a waggon arrive laden with wine, or meat, or any excisable articles, than the Camorristi presented themselves, arms in hand, to the customs officials, and crying out, "Let it pass it is for Garibaldi!" The order was instantly obeyed, and the tax was paid to the Camorra in the very presence of the officers of the government. Strangest of all, the tax now imposed was a mere fraction less than that imposed by the state; and so complete was the intermediation, that the people actually preferred to hand the sum to the Camorristi rather than to the servants of the government. It may be imagined to what an extent this fraud was practised, when the receipts of all the gates of the city in one day, realised only twenty-five soldi about twopence of our money!

Spaventa, a fellow-sufferer with Poerio, a man of daring boldness and consummate craft, was the prefect of police he resolved on a step of no mean courage. He arrested one hundred Camorristi on a single night; dissolved the whole "Guardia Celladina," as it was called; and established in its stead a guard of public safety, over whose

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organisation he had for some time sedulously and carefully watched. It has been alleged that Spaventa used but little discrimination in his act of repression; that some tried patriots and brave followers of Garibaldi were included among those of less fame and more damaged reputations; but it was a moment of great peril, and admitted of little time for selection. The resources of the state were being preyed upon on all sides. Peculation was in high places as well as in low; and a letter to the formidable Camorristi was certain to take effect.

The government by this act severed itself at once and for ever from all connexion with the Camorra. Every day has widened the breach, and every day sees the powers of the state more stringently exercised towards those who declare that they are an institution of the land, and that they are determined to hold their own against the present government as they did against the last. Thus the Camorra has in latter times undergone four distinct mutations. Under the reign of Ferdinand the Second, it acted as the secret police; under his son Francis, it became the ally of the Liberals; beneath the revolution it performed the functions of a police; and now, under Victor Emmanuel, it declares itself persecuted, and pronounces for the return of the Bourbons.

Profiting by the facilities which a state of siege confers upon a governor, General La Marmora made a most vigorous onslaught on the Camorra. Vast numbers have already been arrested, and the jails of even Florence and Turin are filled with these southern depredators. The more active the measures taken, the more does the extent of the disease manifest itself; the Camorra is now found to have penetrated the public service in every direction, to abound in the ranks of the army, sad to have its followers in the navy.