

# STREGHERIA



CHARLES GODFREY LELAND

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# INTRODUCTION

THERE is in Northern Italy a mountain district known as La Romagna Toscana, the inhabitants of which speak a rude form of the Bolognese dialect. These Romagnoli are manifestly a very ancient race, and appear to have preserved traditions and observances little changed from an incredibly early time. It has been a question of late years whether the Bolognese are of Etrurian origin, and it seems to have been generally decided that they are not. With this I have nothing whatever to do. They were probably there before the Etruscans. But the latter at one time held all Italy, and it is very likely that they left in remote districts those traces of their culture to which this book refers. The name Romagna is applied to their district because it once formed part of the Papal or Roman dominion, and it is not to be confounded with La Romagna proper. Roughly speaking, the region to which I refer may be described as lying between Forli and Ravenna. Among these people, *stregeria*, or witchcraft--or, as I have heard it called, "la

vecchia religione" (or "the old religion")--exists to a degree which would even astonish many Italians. This *stregeria*, or old religion, is something more than a sorcery, and something less than a faith. It consists in remains of a mythology of spirits, the principal of whom preserve the names and attributes of the old Etruscan gods, such as Tinia, or Jupiter, Faflon, or Bacchus, and Teramo (in Etruscan Turms), or Mercury. With these there still exist, in a few memories, the most ancient Roman rural deities, such as Silvanus, Palus, Pan, and the Fauns. To all of these invocations or prayers in rude metrical form are still addressed, or are at least preserved, and there are many stories current regarding them. All of these names, with their attributes, descriptions of spirits or gods, invocations and legends, will be found in this work.

Closely allied to the belief in these old deities, is a vast mass of curious tradition, such as that there is a spirit of every element or thing created, as for instance of every plant and mineral, and a guardian or leading spirit of all animals; or, as in the case of silkworms, two--one good and one evil. Also that sorcerers and witches are sometimes born again in their descendants; that all kinds of goblins, brownies, red-caps and three-inch mannikins, haunt forests, rocks, ruined towers, firesides and kitchens,



or cellars, where they alternately madden or delight the maids--in short, all of that quaint company of familiar spirits which are boldly claimed as being of Northern birth by German archæologists, but which investigation indicates to have been thoroughly at home in Italy while Rome was as yet young, or, it may be, unbuilt. Whether this "lore" be Teutonic or Italian, or due to a common Aryan or Asian origin, or whether, as the new school teaches, it "grewed" of itself, like Topsy, spontaneously and sporadically everywhere, I will not pretend to determine; suffice to say that I shall be satisfied should my collection prove to be of any value to those who take it on themselves to settle the higher question.

Connected in turn with these beliefs in folletti, or minor spirits, and their attendant observances and traditions, are vast numbers of magical cures with appropriate incantations, spells, and ceremonies, to attract love, to remove all evil influences or bring certain things to pass; to win in gaming, to evoke spirits, to insure good crops or a traveller's happy return, and to effect divination or deviltry in many curious ways--all being ancient, as shown by allusions in classical writers to whom these spells were known. And I believe that in some cases what I have gathered and given will possibly be found to supply much that is missing in earlier authors--sit verbo

venia.

Many peasants in the Romagna Toscana are familiar with scores of these spells, but the skilled repetition and execution of them is in the hands of certain cryptic witches, and a few obscure wizards who belong to mystic families, in which the occult art is preserved from generation to generation, under jealous fear of priests, cultured people, and all powers that be, just as gypsies and tramps deeply distrust everything that is not "on the road," or all "honest folk," so that it is no exaggeration to declare that "travellers" have no confidence or faith in the truth of any man, until they have caught him telling a few lies. As it indeed befell me myself once in Bath, where it was declared in a large gypsy encampment that I must be either Romany or of Romany blood, because I was the biggest liar they had ever met--the lie in this case having been an arrogant and boastful, yet true, assertion on my part, that though penniless at the moment to stand treat, I had, at home, twenty-four gold sovereigns, eighteen shillings in silver, and twopence in bronze. "And I don't believe," added the gypsy, "that he had a d----d sixpence to his name. But he's all right." So these travellers on the darkened road of sorcery soon recognised in the holder of the Black Stone of the Voodoo, the pupil of the Red Indian medaolin, and the

gypsy rye (and one who had, moreover, his pocket always full of fetishes in little red bags)--a man who was worthy of confidence--none the less so since he was not ungenerous of pounds of coffee, small bottles of rum, cigars, and other minor requisites which greatly promote conviviality and mutual understanding in wisdom. Among these priestesses of the hidden spell an elder dame has generally in hand some younger girl whom she instructs, firstly in the art of bewitching or injuring enemies, and secondly in the more important processes of annulling or unbinding the spells of others, or causing mutual love and conferring luck. And here I may observe that many of the items given in this book are so jealously guarded as secrets, that, as I was assured, unless one was in the confidence of those who possess such lore, he might seek it in vain. Also that a great portion has become so nearly extinct that it is now in articulo mortis, vel in extremis, while other details are however still generally known.

An interesting and very curious portion of my book consists of a number of Occult remedies, still preserved from remote antiquity among the mountain peasantry. Marcellus Burdigalensis, court physician to the Emperor Honorius made a collection, in the fourth century, of one hundred magical cures for disorders, such as were

current in his time among the rural classes. He gathered them, as he informs us in a work entitled *De Medicamentis Empiricis, "ab agrestibus et plebeis"* ("from rustics and common people"). The collection has been edited by Jacob Grimm in a work entitled *Über Marcellus Burdigalensis*, Berlin, 1849. These "charms" were very ancient even in the time of Marcellus, and, like most early Roman magic, were probably of Tuscan or Etrurian origin. Of these one hundred sorceries I have found about one-half still in current use, or at least known. As given by Marcellus they are often imperfect, many incantations being wanting. Some of these I have been able to supply, and I think that no critical reader, who will compare all that I have collected, will doubt that these Italian formulas contain at least the spirit of antique originals.

In addition to this I have included a number of curious tales, anecdotes, and instances, many of which are identical with, or allied to, much which is narrated by Ovid, Virgil, Pliny, Cato, Varro, and others--the result of it all being that a careful comparison of the whole can hardly fail to convince us that the peasantry of the Romagna Toscana, who have lived with little change since prehistoric times, have preserved, through Etruscan, Latin, and Christian rule, a primæval

Shamanism or a rude animism--that is, worship of spirits--and a very simple system of sorcery which can hardly fail to deeply interest every student of ethnology.

The result of my researches has been the collection of such a number of magic formulas, tales, and poems as would have exceeded reasonable limits, both as to pages and my readers' patience, had I published them all. What I have given will, I believe, be of very great interest to all students of classical lore of every kind, and extremely curious as illustrating the survival to the present day of "the Gods in Exile " in a far more literal manner, and on a much more extensive scale than Heine ever dreamed of. And I think that it will be found to illustrate many minor questions. Thus, for example, Müller in his great work on the Etruscans could hardly have doubted that the Lases were the same as the Lares, had he known that the spirits of ancestors are still called in the Romagna, Lasii, Lasi, or Ilasii.

I must here express my great obligations and gratitude to my friend, Professor--now Senator--D. Comparetti, of Florence, who not only placed his admirable library at my disposal, but also aided me materially by "advice, cautions, and criticism." Also to his son-in-law, Professor

Milani, the Director of the Archæological and Etruscan Museum, and who, as an Etruscan antiquary is, I believe, second to none. I would here direct attention to his great forthcoming work, *Le Divinitè e la religione degli Etrusci* ("On the Deities and religion of the Etruscans which is a complete account of all which is known on the subject.

As regards truthfulness or authenticity, I must observe that the persons from whom these items were obtained were in every instance far too illiterate to comprehend my real object in collecting. They were ignorant of everything classical to a degree which is supposed to be quite unusual in Italy. I have read many times lists of the names of Roman deities without having one recognised, till all at once I would be called on to stop--generally at an Etruscan name--there would be a minute's reflection, and then the result given. It was the same with regard to accounts of superstitions, tales, or other lore--they were very often not recognised at all, or else they would be recalled with very material alterations. Had there been deceit in the case, there would have been of course a prompt "yes" to everything. But in most cases my informants gave me no answer at the time, but went to consult with other witches, or delayed to write to friends in La Romagna. Thus it often happened that I was from weeks to years in collecting certain items. The real

pioneer in folk-lore like this, has always a most ungrateful task. He has to overcome difficulties of which few readers have any conception, and must struggle with the imperfect language, memories, and intelligences of ignorant old people who have half-forgotten traditions, or of more ignorant younger ones who have only half learned them. Now I have been, as regards all this, as exact as circumstances permitted, and should any urge that nihil est, quod cura et diligentia perfici haud possit, I can only reply that in this work I exhausted mine. And it is unfortunately true that in collecting folk-lore, as in translation, the feeblest critic can pick out no end, of errors as he will, or show how he could have bettered it, in reviewing the very best books on the subject--which is one great cause in this our day why many of the best books are never written. For truly there is not much money to be made thereby, and if discredit be added thereunto, one can only say as the Scotch "meenister" did to his wife: "If ye have nae fortune, and nae grace, God knows I have got but a sair bairstain in ye."

It should be observed that all these superstitions, observances, legends, names, and attributes of spirits are at present far from being generally known. Much of the lore was originally confined to the strege, or witches--who are few and far between--as constituting secrets of

their unlawful profession. Again, of late, the younger generation have ceased to take any interest in such matters, and as regards the names of certain spirits., it is with difficulty that a few old people, or even one here and there, can be found who remember them. Mindful of this, I took great pains to verify by every means in my power the authenticity of what I have given, especially the names and attributes of spirits or gods. My most intelligent collector did her best to aid by referring to more than one *vecchia*, or old woman. An intelligent young *contadino* was specially employed at this work. He went on market days when the peasantry came down in numbers from the mountains, and asked the old women and men from different places, if they knew this or that spirit. He was eminently successful in verifying nearly all the names which I have here given. But he declared that he found it very difficult as regarded some of them, firstly, because only a very few old people knew the names which I was specially desirous of confirming, such as those of *Tinia*, *Faflon*, and *Téramó*, and that, secondly, these people were very averse to communicating what they knew, because such subjects are *scongiurati*, or prohibited by the priests. Adhering closely to the letters of his instructions, he however not only obtained the verifications, but induced a number of old peasants to write certificates, or *fogliettini*, as to what they had affirmed. These, written on strips of writing-paper of



different colours, have a curious effect, looking something like testimonials of character of the ancient deities, as if the latter were seeking situations or charity. The following are specimens of these documents:--

"The Lasii are spirits of our ancestors, and are known at Santa Sofia.

"AUGUSTO FIERRARI.

"March, 1891."

"Fafflond (Faflon) or Fardel is the spirit of wine. He is known at Politeo (i.e., Portico).

"OTTAVIO MAGRINI."

"Tigna, the great spirit of lightning, has been generally known here in Dovadola from ancient times.

"V. DEL' VIVO."

"Teramo is the spirit of merchants, thieves and messengers. He is known at San Benedetto, where the deeds of this spirit have been related for many years.

"TITO FORCONI.

"March, 1891."

Enrico Rossi testifies of Mania della Notte--the nightmare--that, "She was remembered once by many, but now it is a long time since any one at Galeata has spoken of her." I have more of these certificates; suffice it to say that the youth, aided by his father and friends, succeeded in abundantly verifying all the names, save three or four. I should say, however, that these agents were exceptionally well qualified for the task, there being a very wise woman--in fact two--in the family. In some few cases they varied the orthography of the names. Thus "Peppino" declares in a letter that the correct name of Faflon is Faflo, and that the Lasii are Ilasie. What I would say is that I took all the pains in my power to

verify the truth as to the actual existence of the names and attributes of these spirits, as well as of the other subjects of folk-lore given in this work.

There is another difficulty or contradiction to be noted. Many superstitions and observances are recorded as if they were still in familiar current use, or well known, which are in reality almost forgotten; while others again are tolerably familiar to the multitude. I have often spoken of things as living which are rapidly becoming obsolete because my informants did so, after the fashion of old people--*ut est à nobis pauloantè commemoratum*. I have been told that these stories and rites are perishing very rapidly, that twenty years ago an incredibly vast and curious collection of them could have been made, and that ten years hence it will probably be impossible to find the names of the old deities, or more than a mere fragment of what I have preserved, and that a great deal has perished or vanished from among the people even since I first began to collect it. For all of this I crave due allowance. I have also to request it for what may strike some readers as a defect. A great deal of this folk-lore came from persons who had learned it long ago, and who, consciously or unconsciously, had often only a dim recollection of a song or incantation, and so, voluntarily or involuntarily, repeated it, perhaps imperfectly, just as

it would have been done among the contadini, who are by no means accurate in such matters, and yet are endowed with a great gift for improvising, That the motive or tradition existed in every case, and that its sense is preserved, I am sure. I simply urge that I have collected and published as well as I could, doing my best to select from a terribly mixed and confused mass of material, and that I can do no more. Further sifting must be done by those better qualified than I am.

What will seem strange to many readers is that so many of the incantations and other portions of narrative which I have given in measure or rhyme, are in the original quite devoid of both, and seem to be mere prose. I call special attention to this, because it has been to me a special difficulty. What I have heard sung to airs, so that it sounded melodiously, I have rendered in something like poetic form what is called *cantare alla contadinesca* ("singing country fashion") means to sing prose in a peculiar kind of chant. To illustrate this I may mention that there is one very popular little song:--

Ma guerda la Rusena  
A fazeda a la finestra,"

which has not either in Romagnolo nor in Italian a trace of rhyme or rhythm, and which, as it was given to me in writing, seemed much more prosaic than are the majority of the incantations, or poems, in this work.

I am indebted to Senator COMPARETTI, of Florence, for pointing out to me the fact that this would strike many readers as a fault, and I have therefore devoted to it a special explanation. But I also owe to his extensive knowledge the remark that it is not less true that in many countries, as for instance the Slavonian, we see popular incantations now passing rapidly from poetry into mere prose. For this is the first stage of decay, and it is natural enough that those who have acquired folk-lore in this uncertain, half-changed, shifting form should give it again imperfectly. When the next generation comes it will be altogether lost, and then perhaps antiquaries would be thankful for such books, even if they were as full of defects as this of mine. Of which it may be observed that those who insist that all which is collected and published shall be absolutely and unquestionably faultless as regards every detail, while they certainly secure for themselves the gold all smelted and certified for them to manufacture or coin, exclude from commerce all ore or alloyed metal from which more

skilful metallurgists may extract even greater values. I do not by saying this offer an apology for carelessness, or worse, but a hint that by exacting too much we may lose a great deal, as did the ancient Greeks who threw away as refuse from the mines of Laurium a vast amount of precious metal which modern science has turned to great profit.

But I have what I think is a good reason for giving translations of so many incantations and songs in measure and rhyme. There is a remark by Heine to the effect that many people think that when they have caught a butterfly, put a pin through it, and preserved it with some chemical, that they really have a perfect specimen; and it is in this spirit that many study folk-lore. But that is not a butterfly at all. For to such a "flying flower," as the Chinese call it, there belongs the exquisite fluttering in sunshine, the living grace of its moving wings, and lines of flight-curves within curves, as in a living arabesque of motion--from shade to sunlight among summer flowers." One of these contadina songs, as sung with melody and expression, is a living butterfly, but when written down--with a pen through it--it has lost its life. And as rhyme and measure to a degree restore this, I have thought that by giving these songs such form I have come somewhat nearer to the spirit of the originals. I could also have

given in every instance the Romagnolo-Bolognese, but this my limits positively forbid. Many, perhaps most, of my readers will understand Italian, but very few Romagnolo or Bolognese. As regards the very bad quality of the Italian, every reader will understand that I have given it with very little correction.

I will not, however, be understood as going to the very extreme limits of humility and apology as regards these poems. A great many are in themselves strikingly beautiful, original, and imbued with a classic and often delicately appropriate spirit--as in those to Pan and Faflon--and the women from whom they were derived could absolutely have no more invented them than they could have invented the flying-machine of the future or settled "the great national Italian problem" of flaying peasants without hurting them, or eating a cake and having it. This is simply true, and as not a line or letter of them came ever so indirectly from me, the question is simply, how could women, so illiterate as to hardly understand what they repeated, have invented it all--much more, how could they have woven into them, as is done in most cases, the most classical and appropriate allusions, characteristics, and colour? Of all of which I can truly say, that if my informants really manufactured these incantations, the interest and value of my book is

thereby augmented a hundredfold, as being the most remarkable *pièce de manufacture* ever presented to the public.

What will strike many readers as strange is that there should have existed to the present day--though it is now rapidly disappearing--in a Roman Catholic country, an ancient heathen religion of sorcery, from earliest Tuscan times. That such a survival under such a stratum is not without parallel, I have shown by an incident, which is thus described in my *Gypsy Sorcery*:--

"It has been discovered of late years in India, that during thousands of years of Brahminic, Buddhistic and Mahometan rule, there always existed among the people a rude Shamanism, or worship of spirits and stones, eked out with coarse sorcery, which formed a distinct religion by itself, and which came to light as soon as British government removed religious oppression. This religion consisted of placing small rocks after the fashion of Stonehenge and other 'Druidic' monuments, and in other rites of the most primitive kind. And it is very evident that the oldest religions everywhere are founded on such a faith."



But I was much more astonished to find that in Tuscany, the most enlightened portion of Italy, under all Roman rule an old pagan faith, or something like it, has existed to a most extraordinary degree. For it is really not a mere chance survival of superstitions here and there, as in England or France, but a complete system, as this work will abundantly prove. A few years ago Count ANGELO DE GUBERNATIS informed Mr. GLADSTONE, in conversation, that there was actually among the Tuscan peasantry ten times as much heathenism as Catholicism. I repeated this remark to a woman whom I employed to collect folk-lore, and her reply was: "Certainly, there is ten times more faith in la vecchia religione" ("the old religion"). "For the peasants have recourse to the priests and the saints on great occasions, but they use magic all the time for everything."

At another time when I expressed my astonishment that a certain girl who had grown up in the country was utterly ignorant of the name of a single spirit, and could recall nothing relating to witchcraft, she became scornful, and then excited, exclaiming:--

"And how should such a stupid fool, who is afraid of the

priests and saints, know anything? I call myself a Catholic--oh, yes--and I wear a medal to prove it"--here she, in excitement, pulled from her bosom a saint's medal--"but I believe in none of it all. You know what I believe."

"Si; la vecchia religione" ("the old faith"), I answered, by which faith I meant that strange, diluted old Etrusco-Roman sorcery which is set forth in this book. Magic was her real religion.

Much of this magic is mixed up with Catholic rites and saints, but these in their turn were very often of heathen origin. Some saints such as Antony, Simeon, and Elisha, appear as absolutely sorcerers or goblins, and are addressed with ancient heathen ceremonies in cellars with magical incantations. The belief in folletti, a generic term for goblins, and other familiar spirits, has not sunk as yet to the "fairy-tale" level of beings only mentioned for entertainment--as in Grimm's Tales--they enter into popular belief as a part of the religion, and are invoked in good faith. There is actually in Tuscany a culture or worship of fetishes which are not Catholic, i.e., of strange stones and many curious relics.

But there is, withal, as I have remarked, a great deal of mystery and secrecy observed in all this cult. It has its professors: men, but mostly women, who collect charms and spells, and teach them to one another, and hold meetings; that is, there is a kind of college of witches and wizards, which, for many good reasons, eludes observation. It was my chance to become acquainted in Florence with the fortune-teller referred to, who was initiated in these secrets, and whose memory was stocked to an extraordinary and exceptional degree with not only magical formulas but songs and tales. Such familiarity with folk-lore and sorcery as I possess, resulted in confidence--the end being that I succeeded in penetrating this obscure and strange forest inhabited by witches and shadows, faded gods and forgotten goblins of the olden time, where folk-lore of every kind abounded to such excess that, as this book shows, I in time had more thereof than I could publish. To do this I went to strange places and made strange acquaintance, so that if the reader will kindly imagine something much out of common life, and often wild and really weird--i.e., prophetic--when fortune-telling was on the cards, as the dramatic accompaniment of every charm and legend in this book, he will but do it justice. To collect volumes of folk-lore among very reticent Red Indians, and reserved Romanys is not unknown to me, but the extracting

witchcraft from Italian *strega* far surpasses it. "I too was among the shadows."

There are many people, even Italians, who will say, "It is very remarkable that we never heard of any association of witches nor met with any of all this mythology or lore--we who know the people so well." just the same might have been said of almost every respectable white native of Philadelphia when I was there a few years ago, as to the Voodoo sorcerers, who, silent and unseen, conjured and worked in darkness among the coloured people of that city. What did any of us know about even our own black servants in their homes? And the class which corresponds to the Voodoo acts in Tuscany, in opposition--unlike the American--to a powerful national religion which till of late ruled by the strong hand, and it fears everybody.

The extraordinary tenacity and earnestness with which the peasant Tuscans have clung to these fragments of their old faith is quite in accordance with their ancient character. Livy said of them they were "a race which excelled all in devotion to religious rites and in the art of cultivating them" (v. I. 6). But as KARL OTTFRIED MÜLLER remarks in *Die Etrusker*--a work which has

been of great use to me--"while the Greeks expressed their religious feelings with boldness in varied forms . . . the Tusker (Tuscans) blended them in the most intimate manner with every domestic practical interest. Tuscan divination was consequently the most characteristic trait of the nation and the Hauptpunkt, or beginning of their intellectual action and education." And this spirit still survives. Among all the wars and convulsions of Italy the peasants of Tuscany have remained the same race. Englishmen and Frenchmen are the result of modern mixtures of peoples, but the Italians, like HAWTHORNE'S Marble Faun, are absolutely ancient, if not prehistoric. There are families in Italy who find their family names in Etrurian monuments on their estates. And CICERO, TACITUS, LIVY, VIRGIL, and many more, testify that all their divination and religious observances were drawn from and based on Etruscan authority. "This," says MÜLLER, "was shared by the common people. There were in Italy schools, like those of the Jewish prophets and Gallic Druids, in which the system was thoroughly taught." And there is the last relic of these still existing among the Tuscan "witches." In later times the Chaldæan sorcerers took the upper hand in Rome with their astrology, but the Etruscan augures were still authorities, so late as the fifth century, A.D., since they were consulted at the birth of CLAUDIUS. In 408, they protected Narnia by invoking lightning against the Goths

(MÜLLER).

The Etruscan books of magic were common among the Romans. In Cicero's time (Cic. de Div. i. 33), there were many of them. I have been assured that there is in existence a manuscript collection of charms and spells such as are now in use--in fact it was promised me as a gift, but I have not succeeded in obtaining it. I have, however, a large MS. of this kind which was written for me from collection and memory, which I have used in writing this book. It is true that all I have is only the last sparks, or dead ashes, and coals of the ancient fire, but it is worth something.

I have freely illustrated my collection with instances drawn from reading, and have added to it certain tales, or stories, which have very curious connections with classic lore and superstitions. There are also a few records of certain plants, showing how the belief that many herbs and flowers have an indwelling fairy, and are in fact fairies themselves, still survives, with a degree of personification which has long since disappeared in most other European countries. There has been much collection of plant-lore of late years by many writers, but I am not aware that any one has observed this faith in the