# "TUSCAN SONGS"

BY EVANGELINE WILBOUR BLASHFIELD

THOSE who have had the pleasure of reading Miss Alexander's "Story of Ida" will readily understand how admirably fitted she is to interpret the charm of humble Tuscan life.

The same directness of manner and loving comprehension of her subject which characterized that study of a simple and beautiful life are to be found in her selections from and translations of the popular poetry of Tuscany.

The songs and hymns once so common in the hill towns about Florence are fast disappearing. The clang of the electric tram has silenced the rustic muse who has sung for so many centuries, and the peasant who used to celebrate his sweetheart in tender *rispetti* now reads the socialist newspaper in the village *caffè*. The *contadino* is perhaps beginning to think; he has certainly ceased to sing, and students of Italian popular poetry, as well as those who like pretty verses, will be grateful to Miss Alexander for preserving in this dainty *hortus siccus* the humble field flowers of a soil so rich in many forms of beauty.

The poems are taken from many different sources, from Tigri's *Canti popolari toscani*, from the little roughly printed books still sold in Lucca on St. Zita's day, from the aged *improvvisatrice* Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani, and from the lips of the peasants.

Many of these songs date from the fifteenth century, when Politian heard and imitated them as he journeyed through Montepulciano and Acquapendente; their memory still lingers in the Tuscan hills, where many melodies that are now considered modern are but the echo of the old songs handed down from the *quattrocento*. In not a few of these verses the influence of the older poets, images and expressions inspired by the *Divina Commedia* or the *Canzoniere* are easily traced, for in Italy of the early Renaissance *contadino* and laureled singer lived on terms of mutual understanding. It is a nice question, and one over which scholars have squabbled, to decide whether Politian and Lorenzo de' Medici when they left the groves of the Academy and the stately villa gardens to wander through the fields in search of inspiration, did not find there more than they brought. Poetical forms and images are fortunately transferable property and whatever grace of diction the scholars brought to their frank imitation of bucolic poetry is now the heirloom of the peasant.

Miss Alexander's collection of popular poetry consists of love-songs, hymns, religious idylls, the rhymed narrative of the life and miracles of Santa Zita, the sainted servant-maid and patroness of Lucca, and some letters in verse by Angelo, the son of the poetess Beatrice.

The motive of all these poems, sacred and profane, is love: love for a suffering Lord in the evening prayers before the crucifix, in the pathetic little Christmas hymns, in the idylls of the Samaritan woman and the Madonna and the gipsy; love of suffering humanity in the naïve recital of the petty miracles of Santa Zita; and lastly, love between man and woman—love despairing, hoping, raging, pleading, sorrowing, and triumphant in the *rispetti*.

Deficient in tragic and dramatic elements, these poems are unsurpassed by

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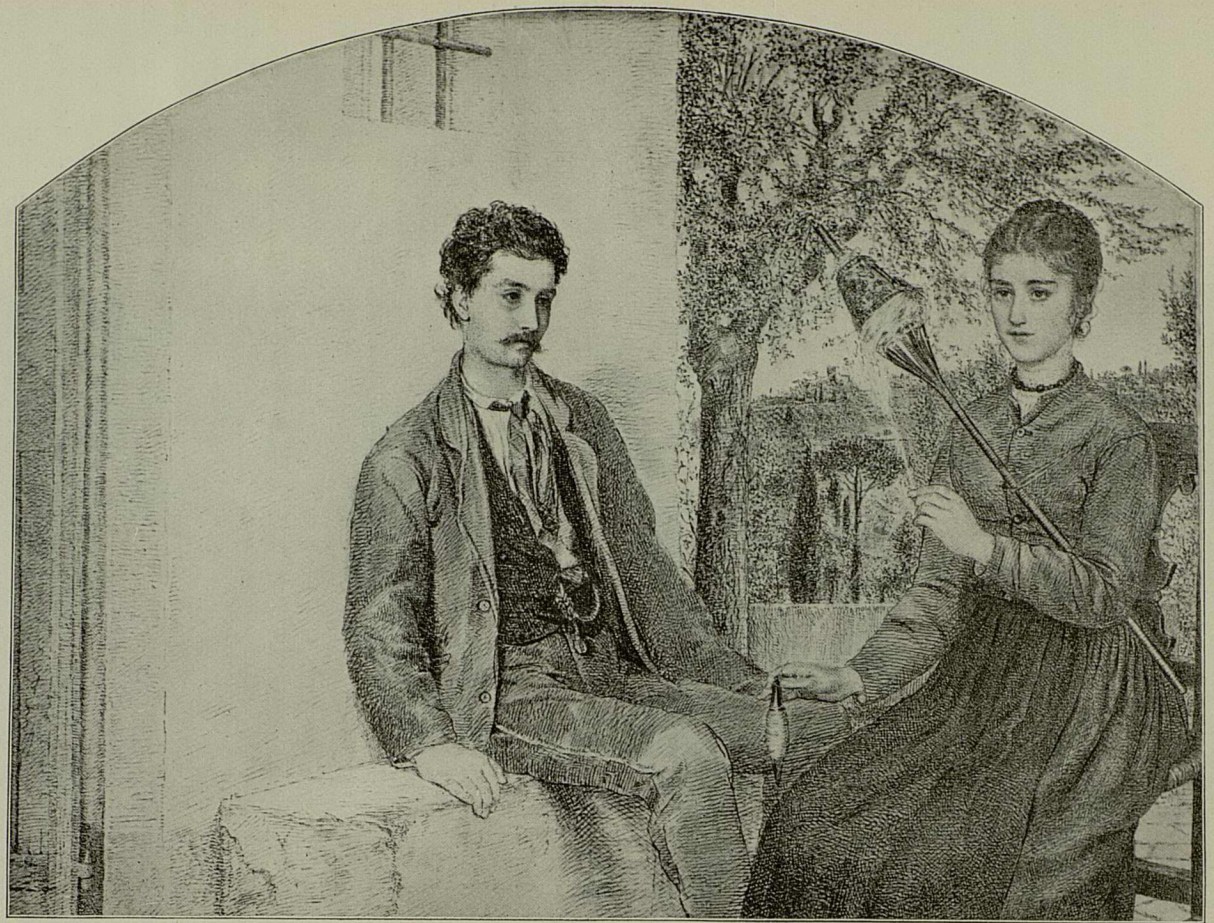
TUSCAN SONGS. By Francesca Alexander. With 108 photogravure illustrations from drawings by the author. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. Large quarto.



From "Tuscan Songs."



RISPETTI

[From a photogravure plate]

any popular poetry in the expression of personal emotion and in the interpretation of every phase of passion ; the Italian peasant was past master in the *Ars Amoris*.

Two of the *rispetti* (a peculiar form of verse consisting of four or six lines with alternate rhymes and one or more couplets called the *ripresa*) have already been well translated by Symonds ; viz., the Lily and the Prayer of a poor Lover to a noble Lady, but their charm evaporates in even a fine rendering into English. They are *vini nostrani*, the light country wines whose delicate flavor is lost by transportation, vivid field flowers which droop in the hand that plucks them ever so gently. The translator has treated them respectfully, even lovingly, though it is impossible to render in English phrase the terms of playfulness, affection, and familiarity with which the Italian addressed the holiest personages and even Divinity itself. Such an expression as *bambino inzuccherato* applied to the Christ child is a stumbling-block to the translator and yet just such expressions are characteristic of Italian religious poetry ever since the days of St. Francis and Jacopone da Todi.

Miss Alexander has framed the poems in a simple decorative setting of wild flowers ; catkins, daffodils, the blood-red tulip that Browning loved, the iris which blooms perennially in stone on the Florentine shield, those field flowers which in early spring are carried down from the hillsides in great sheaves to the Strozzi palace. She has also copied the music of some of the songs, plaintive little chants, something akin to the monotonous *melopœia* of Sicily and Spain and she has ornamented her pages daintily with *majuscules* and miniatures. No nun working for the glory of God and her convent, no pious *scriptorius* saying a prayer before each illuminated capital letter, could have given a manuscript more patient and loving care.

The illustrations show fidelity to nature, a rare capacity for feeling and interpreting the romantic side of village life, sensitiveness to beauty, a Flemish love of detail with sobriety in the *use* of detail, and types that are drawn from living models, with however, a touch of asceticism in the selection of the models. There is an abuse of vertical lines in these figures, a stiffness in their attitudes —their heads are too big, their chests and shoulders are too narrow ; but in spite of these shortcomings there is, combined with the influence of the primitive Florentine painters, so much of direct modern realism that one or two of the drawings, notably the "*Parlami, Parlami, Bocchin d'Amore,*" recall Dagnan-Bouveret. Best of all they are *Italianissimi ;* to look them over is to feel a sharp pang of the nostalgia which is the price we pay for loving Italy.