

Margaret Gardiner  
contessa di Blessington  
(1789-1849)

## The Idler in Italy

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**Arona** – The colossal statue of St. Carlo Borromeo is well palced on the summit of a hill above the town of Arona, and seen at a distance has a very imposing effect. The Saint is represented holding a book in one hand, while the other is extended in benediction; employements allegoraical enough of his mission on earth, which was to enlighten and to bless. The statue looks grim and monstrous when approached, appearing, like other great men, to most advantage at a distance. I declined the proposal made by our *cicerone*, of ascending to the interior of the saint, having little curiosity to study the anatomy of his nose, or to look from the casaments of his eyes, a ceremony generally undergone by most travellers.

The view form the base of the statue is very fine, and could this brazen giant, this “copper captain”, see, he might be well pleased with the prospect selected for him.

On the steeple of one of the churches is an image of the Redeemer on the cross; wich, unlike any that I have hitherto observed, is covered by a robe. The church of St. Mary has a piece

of sculpture representing the nativity, evidently the work of a very remote age, and highly interesting as a specimen of the revival of the art.

Arona is a prosperous town; its dockyard appears to afford employment to several hands, and its little port was filled with boats. The people are healthy-looking and well clad, and a spirit of active industry seems to animate them.

**Laveno** – We have spent a delicious day in viewing the Borromean islands, and never did finer weather for such an expedition. Not a breeze ruffled the smooth and pellucid water; which, like a vast mirror, was spread forth, reflecting on its tranquil bosom the azure heavens above, and the shadows of the mighty Alps that bound them. How striking is the contrast afforded by these stupendous mountains, the work of the Almighty, and the palace and gardens, the work of art, that rise up from the crystal waters! Terrace ranges above terrace, crowned with orange and lemon trees, intermingled with the most rare and odorous shrubs and plants, from which marble statues are seen peeping forth amid the bright foliage. They look like the dwellings of fair queens, so gay and fantastic is their aspect; which, in spite of the artificial appearance of the whole, is nevertheless charming.

I ventured to make this remark to one of our party, and was answered that, in his opinion, the lake resembled a vast plateau of looking-glass, with a rich epergne laden that struck me as peculiarly just.

The palace of Isola Bella is spacious, and richly decorated, but the taste displayed in it is meretricious; and one turns with impatience from the contemplation of its finery, to admire the largest and most beautiful laurels I ever saw, and which are said to be indigenous.

Isola Madre has been less dressed by art than Isola Bella, and therefore pleased me more; but Isola Piscatore [sic], with its population of fishermen, surrounded by nets and boats, the implements of their profession, and destitute not only of all luxury but of what are deemed the common necessities of life, offers such a contrast to Isola Bella and its luxurious dwellings and gardens, as

to bring painfully before the sojourners in the latter, the different destinies of the rich and the poor.

I have not enough of the epicurean philosophy in me to be able to enjoy the superfluities of wealth within sight of those denied all, save the scanty food obtained by a precarious trade, without feeling my pleasures disturbed by the view of their privation. Hence, were I the proprietor of the Borromeoan Isles, I would render the Isola Piscatore a less dreary spot, and the poverty of its inhabitants should not disturb my enjoyment.

I might, perhaps, offer a curious problem for a casuist to solve, whether the pain excited by the view of the poverty of others, as contrast sometimes imparts to our enjoyments, is most produced by selfishness. The sophist might argue, that the displeasure of beholding poverty arises not so much from a generous pity for the objects of it, as from the *egoïsme* with which we are prone to turn from all that interrupts our gratification; and that those who taste their luxuries with a keener relish from seeing the privations of the unfortunate, are scarcely more abounding in selfishness. Nevertheless, the selfishness of the former may lead him to relieve the poverty, the sight of which disturbs his pleasures; while those of the latter being uninterrupted, he will be little disposed to remove the cause of the contrast, the effect of which gives a zest to his enjoyment. Consequently, the selfishness of the former is to be preferred, as producing advantage to others.

Having now established my case, almost as unintelligibly as sophists generally maintain their arguments, I will retire to my couch, to which a heaviness of the eyes, and stupidity of the intellect, warn me to have recourse. What a delicious day have I passed, floating over the unruffled water, our boat breaking the beautiful images reflected on its bosom: as a near approach to anticipated pleasures dispels the airy fabrics by Hope reared, and which dissolve when touched!