

Wanderings around Naples
Part 1 – Piedigrotta or The Game is Afoot
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Having rather fraudulently enjoyed the company of the many erudite scholars of the John Meade Falkner Society, I must immediately confess that I am not a John Meade Falkner (JMF) scholar. I have published a dozen books, scores of monographs and hundreds of journal articles, and given lectures all over the world, on my chosen specialisations: Arthur Conan Doyle and Umberto Eco. My Doylean researches have, however, frequently identified links between Doyle and many other luminaries of the literary world. This is true of JMF in connection with *The Lost Stradivarius*, as will be seen.

This is the first of a series of articles which is intended to explore the Italian locations mentioned by Sophia Maltravers and William Gaskell in *The Lost Stradivarius*. There is, however, the well-known problem of some of the internal datings of *The Lost Stradivarius*. I have reproduced a 1900 postcard map of Naples which will serve for all three major periods of *The Lost Stradivarius* (1740s, 1840s and 1890s), as the basic structure of Naples has remained reasonably constant, although most of the earlier blank spaces have now been filled in. This map could still be used today. (**See back cover of the Journal**)

Sophia, accompanied by her maid and by Parnham, hired a ‘travelling coach’ in London for the whole of the journey to Posilipo (1), and ‘posted’ direct from Calais to Naples, changing their horses and drivers each day and taking the shortest route, via Marseilles, Genoa and Rome. They stayed at their final posting stage, in Aversa, on the night of 6th September. For the final day of travel, the group was almost certainly accompanied for the whole day by the mentioned post boy, who helped the carriage to get through the city of Naples and on to ‘The Villa de Angelis’, where they arrived in the early hours of 8th September. As was customary with visitors who stayed in Naples for some time (a month in this case), the carriage driver and the post boy would have taken a short rest and then quickly returned to Aversa with the unburdened horses. The ‘travelling carriage’ would either have been left at the ‘Villa de Angelis’ until the horses were recalled for the journey home, or hired out. It might

be noted that the group must have returned to England in the 'travelling coach', as part of a posting arrangement. The group of five (plus a post boy for the first part of the journey) could not have travelled to England in John's 'landau', as it would not have been possible to suspend a hammock in such a lightweight vehicle, with six people on board.

We can now consider how Sophia and her group reached the Western side of Naples and there found, well after midnight, huge crowds of people. Sophia mentions that they travelled through the centre of the city. The carriage would have approached Naples on the main road from Aversa, and that road can be seen forming a square loop in the top-right (North-East) corner of the map of Naples (rear cover). As can be seen, after Italian Unification the road was known as the Strada Cavour (it is now the Via Don Bosco, honouring a modern Saint rather than a politician). The road ran from the city outskirts to the Archaeological Museum. From there the carriage would have turned due South to pass through the Piazza Municipio del Plebiscito, and then continued on to the coastal road near the Castello del'Ovo. The carriage would then have turned Westwards, along the coast, following the road named Partenope, to reach the Piazza Vittorio.

From that Piazza, there were three, close, almost parallel thoroughfares heading towards and from the Western edge of Naples. These were: Via Francesco Caracciolo (adjacent to the edge of the Bay of Naples); the pedestrianised, grassy and tree-lined Municipal Park; and the Riviera di Chiara. At the Eastern end of these three thoroughfares there was the Santa Maria Vittoria church, built in 1572 to commemorate the 1571 Battle of Lepanto ("The Last Crusade"). At the Western end of these three thoroughfares there was the Santa Maria of the Piedigrotta Church. This slightly curving, roughly oblong area, about 1.25 miles in length, was the main area for those celebrating the Piedigrotta Festival, often with hundreds of thousands of people involved. This is what confronted Sophia and her party, in that they had to traverse from one church to the other, in order to reach the roads leading to the Posilipo Peninsula and to the 'Villa de Angelis'.

The Festival of the Piedigrotta, which reached its peak of popularity during the 19th Century, was held in an area which has been linked to mystical activities since Roman times. This annual Festival ran from 7th to the 8th of



The view from the low, Northern end of Monte Posilipo (above Virgil's Tomb). Note the dark curve of the Municipal Park in the centre of the drawing, with the Festival promenading roads on either side of it. The Castello del'Ovo can be seen projecting into the Bay of Naples, with Vesuvius smoking on the horizon. (2)

September, and so socially important was it that the marriage contracts for the poor required the man to take his wife to this festival (or to a similar if smaller one in the nearby hills in the Spring), every year.

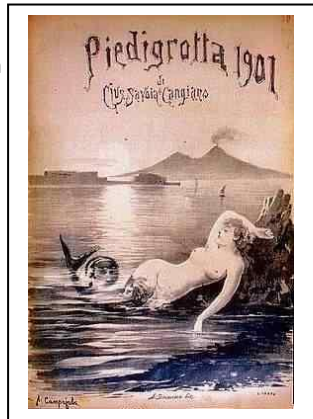
People promenaded, sat in the park or on the seashore, replenished themselves from the many food and drink stalls, and watched the parading of highly decorated wagons depicting all sorts of scenes. In 2007, one wagon carried a huge representation of Mt Vesuvius. It caught fire and provided an opportunity for the Neapolitan Fire Brigade to add some extra excitement to the festivities! People listened or sang or danced to the music (with most Neapolitans preferring the near-trance-inducing Tarantella, rather than the Gagliarda). The most important element of the Festival, after 1830, was a competition for new songs, creating what is now known as the Neapolitan Canzone style, with the winners earning lots of money from selling sheet music. The 1898 winner was 'O sole mio', and more than one million copies were sold during the next year. In 1960, Elvis sang a modified version of this (entitled It's Now or Never) and sold more than a million record copies! Serious opera singers, such as Enrico Caruso, began to add these popular songs to the ends of their main performances.

The winner in 1880 was Funiculi Funiculà, with the song celebrating the opening of the funicular railway on Mt Vesuvius.

The Festival, the Church and the area are named after the original pedestrian (piedi) tunnel (grotta) which was cut through Mt Posilipo to provide a level, straight route to reach the coast road to Pozzuoli on the Western side of the mountain, in Roman times. The earliest tunnel was merely a cleared series of cracks in the Posilipo ridge.



(3) Left: The earliest Piedigrotta



(4) Right: 1901 Festival Poster

Larger tunnels were soon cut through the solid rock to allow chariots to pass through the mountain. Two of them were later rebuilt to allow steam and then electric trams to pass through. The tunnels have had to be re-cut many times, because of the way that land and sea levels have changed in the area popularly known as 'Piedigrotta' over the centuries. This area is also filled with legends about mystically powered people and creatures, and it was claimed that Virgil (known locally as The Wizard) cut the original tunnel using magical powers, and there is an edifice which is claimed to be his tomb, adjacent to one of the tunnels. The question has been raised as to whether this Festival was a religious event or a secular one. There are claims that it existed in pre-Christian times, using religious practices brought to Naples from Egypt. The Festival did not exist continuously, but there were celebrations in Mediaeval times, and its popularity reached a peak in the 19th Century. One of the many Pagan elements is the supposed presence of Sirens in the sea adjacent to 'Piedigrotta', who tempted seamen into a watery grave. The 1901 Festival Poster highlighted this with its Festival Poster, together with the claim that Virgil had hidden a magical

egg in the foundations of the Castello del'Ovo, which is outlined against Vesuvius, and which protected the people of Naples. We have a link here to William Gaskell's misquoted and misattributed lines: "Cease, stranger, cease those witching notes, / The art of siren choirs". (5) There are many other such links to be discussed in connection with locations in Falkner's 'Naples', as part of this series of articles.

Notes

1. In maps of the area in the 19th Century there are at least six different ways of spelling 'Posilipo', with Baedeker giving two on one page in its 1890 edition. The current spelling is 'Posillipo', but I have retained Falkner's version to avoid confusion.
2. S Russell Forbes, *Rambles in Naples – An Archaeological and Historical Guide*, T Nelson and Sons, 1893, frontispiece.
3. S Russell Forbes, *op cit*, page 99. In addition to the mythical presence of Virgil in the area, as "The Wizard", some readers might suspect the presence of a more modern mythical character, "Dr Who", who seems to have parked his Tardis in the grotto!
4. 1901 Festival Poster. PLW Collection.
5. See Edward Wilson's superb discussion of this poem and its relevance to pagan topics: Falkner J M, *The Lost Stradivarius*, World's Classics, Oxford, 1991. Pages xviii-xix, and Note 163 on p 189. Most of the original source material for that note is now readily available on the internet.
6. Rear Cover. Map. 1900 Postcard. PLW Collection. The carriage journey though Naples, begins Top Right, and travels roughly diagonally to Bottom Left. In the 'Piedigrotta' area we have: From left to right: The Northern end of Mt Posilipo, New Grotto, Old Grotto (closed), The Tomb of Virgil, The Santa Maria di Piedigrotta church (at the bottom-left of the cross roads), and the dark green Municipal Park.