

Wanderings around Naples
Part 2 – An Evening in Napoli
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I recall struggling to follow Sophia's directions in Chapter 14 when I first read *The Lost Stradivarius*, and I became even more confused when I subsequently tried to follow those directions on the ground when I next visited Naples. I will here try, once again, to follow Sophia's directions, but I seriously consider that Falkner was unaware of the potentially illogical nature of the directions which he wrote, and that he seems to have been ignorant of some of the basic facts about the Old City area of Naples. Quotation locations will use the pagination and line numbers of the Oxford World Classics edition. My emphasis of key elements of quotations will be italicised. All of the major locations mentioned in this presentation are shown on the attached two maps, but you can easily find larger scale maps on the internet.

A. 114.28 "... he desired to drive *into the city.*" This is an intention, stated by John, for the next day's excursion.

B. 115.9. Sophia mentions that the landau passed down the hill from The Villa de Angelis, although she would actually have had to travel uphill initially, probably with all but John walking, to enable the horses to cope with the short but steep grade leading up to the crest of the Posilipo Peninsula. They would then have taken the crest road, descending to the sea in the Piedigrotta area, and then following the coastal road to the Castle of the Egg.

C. 115.11. "... skirted the sea, and so *into the town.*" Sophia does not seem to differentiate between 'town' and 'city', or between 'old town' and 'old city'. The landau has now left the area of the Castle of the Egg and is in the 'town', according to Sophia. She has not, however, entered the Old Town or Old City. Raffaele knows the route that he is to follow (see 116.8-14 below). The next choice for the driver is between two large (or principle) roads: one leading North-Westwards along the coast road, and one leading Northwards, across the Piazza Plebiscito, to the wide Via

Toledo. The coast road does not travel towards the Old City, but the Via Toledo does lead to a major junction which leads to the Old City.

D. 115.13. "... we were passing through one of the *principal streets* ..." The Via Toledo was, and still is, a principle street. It is a wide road, now lined with glamorous shops, and the area on the right of the road is an expensive, open area, with the attractive Galleria Umberto 1. The area to the left, however, is a major contrast to that on the right, as will be seen.

E. 115.29-31. Sophia then says that they "... had penetrated apparently *into the heart of the town* ...". It is not clear why the word 'apparently' is included, but what is clear is that Sophia really did not know her way around Naples. What is certain, to anyone with a basic knowledge of Napoli, is that they had not yet penetrated "...into *the heart of the town* ...". The term 'penetrated', however, is perfect for what the driver must have done. He must have turned left, through a narrow entrance in the Western wall of the Via Toledo, into a different world of squalor, hunger and danger. This was what is referred to as the Quartieri Spagnoli (Spanish Quarter) adjoining the Quartieri Montecalvario. The apartments and other buildings often rose five-storeys into the skies, and they were grouped extremely closely together, with only small gaps between groups of buildings, with extremely narrow roads between each block, and with the sun never reaching the ground in many areas. Maps show how closely the buildings were crowded, with the area looking, on a map, like a giant chessboard.

F. 115-116.29-31. Sophia emphasized the situation: "The streets grew narrower and more densely thronged; the houses were more dirty and tumble-down, and the appearance of the people themselves suggested that we had reached some of *the lower quarters of the city*." They had, indeed.

G. 116.5-8. Sophia writes: "Here we passed through a further network of small streets of the name of which I took no note, and found ourselves *at last* in a very dark and narrow lane called the *Via del Giardino*. The "... at last ..." makes it sound as if it was a long way to the house from within the Spanish Quarter, but the 'Via del Giardino' is in the middle level of the Quarter. It would also have been best for the landau to have stayed on the wide Via Toledo until they reached the entrance into the 'Via del Giardino'.

There are no wide, two-storey buildings in the Vico Giardinetto, but there is a five-storey building with a wide, church-like door, which suggests that it was similar to that described by Sophia. You can “walk by stages” down the whole of Vico Giardinetto on Google Maps and make your choice. Just feed in “Vico Giardinetto Naples Italy”. If you are not sure how to do this, just ask a loitering youuff! It is well worth the effort, to see the ‘real’ place. Falkner would have been amazed.



A Parallel Examination

The problem which Sophia has is that she does not know much about the huge differences which exist between different parts of Naples – old and new. Most of the English residents in Naples lived well away from the Old Town, ideally on the coast, like Falkner, E W Hornung, Norman Douglas and Oscar Wilde, with all four residing at the end of the Posilipo Peninsula. When Arthur Conan Doyle stayed with his brother-in-law in the villa where Falkner had lived, he found that none of the local Brits invited him to their homes. This was because the tyrannical Greek editor of *Il Corriere di Napoli*, Mathilde Serao, had mistaken Doyle for Wilde (the builds were similar), and the latter’s decadent reputation was well-known.

The Lost Stradivarius works well for most of the time, in spite of Sophia’s geographical errors, but some of the arcane and erudite references which Falkner makes towards the end of the book would certainly work better with awareness of the differences between Old City (Neapolis) and Victorian suburban life styles. I will, accordingly, give some information on the Old City.

The Old City is based on settlements created by the Greeks (accompanied by some Egyptians), and later by some Romans, on the three, major, near-parallel roads which head roughly from East to West, and which form the

basis of the Old City. Each of these three roads has a piazza with a tall spire, and they are known as the Votive Spires (or Plague Columns), and they were hoped to prevent further outbreaks of plague, like that of 1656. The Old City area is closed off in the East by the Corso Garibaldi and to the West by the Via Toledo. The main road is known as “Spaccanapoli”, meaning “Napoli-Splitter”, as it splits the area. That name is applied to the whole, straight, 1.25 miles length of this narrow road, but that road is itself divided into seven separate stretches, with each stretch having its own name. We will consider here only one small area: the Piazza San Domenico Maggiore (PSDM), with its wealth of historical interest, including famous churchmen, artists and murderers.



The Nilo Area

Firstly, however, we will deal with the question of the centre of the Old City. It is about 120 yards from the PSDM, in the tiny Piazzetta Nilo, where there is a statue of a Nile river god which was brought to Napoli in the time of Nero, by a group of Alexandrians (see “P.TA NILO”) on map. It is known, officially, as “Cuòrpo` e Napule” in Neapolitan (“The Body of Naples”). The river god disappeared for many centuries, but it was later found, albeit with no head (this was replaced). It was stolen again, recently, but the good old Carabinieri Art Squad found it in a shop in Austria!



The PSDM is illustrated below, as seen from the Via Benedetto Croce (which is part of Spaccanopoli). You can find other photographs from different spots around the piazza, on Google maps, and some of them can be rotated through 360° and elevated. (see Note b).



1. The Spire is one of the three Votive Spires or Plague Columns. Construction started immediately after the 1656 Plague, but work was suspended in 1680. It was not completed until 1737 – this is Italy!
2. The bottom left building is the 14th Century Palazzo Petrucci, which now contains private accommodation. Several rooms on the first floor (including a large music room), belong to the Neapolitan Crime Fiction Club (“The Pit and the Pendulum”). In 2006 Jane and I lectured in Naples on the occasion of this splendid club publishing the first Neapolitan translation of a Sherlock Holmes story, “The Red Circle”, which involves Naples. There are four floors on this building, but there is a clear separate layer beyond the first floor, and the historians suggest that the only original element of the exterior is the huge entrance portal. Petrucci was decapitated for being on the wrong side during The Baron’s Revolt in 1485.
3. The large building is the side of the San Domenico Maggiore. Amongst the luminaries who lived in the annexed monastery was St Thomas Aquinas, and my own hero and subject of study (via the late Umberto Eco, for whom I was asked to write a chapter of a book to commemorate his 70th birthday), Giordano Bruno. My love of Italian scholarship grows with such gestures as when a new bookshop was opened in Rome, next to the statue marking the spot where Bruno was ‘incinerated’, the owners chose the name of ‘Fahrenheit 451’ for the shop!
4. The right, lower corner building is the Palazzo Sangro di Sansevero. In 1590, Prince Carlo Gesualdo killed his wife, Maria d’Avolos, and her young lover, Don Fabrizio Carafa. Tradition says that the ghost of Maria haunts the Palace. The portal of the house is highly ornate, and I must try to get a good print of the family crest, to compare with that of Adrian Temple.
5. Between the church and the Palazzo Sangro di Sansevero, there is a narrow passage which leads to the Chapel of Santo Maria della Pietà. It houses the famous Veiled Christ, sculpted by Giuseppe Sanmartino, which is, alone, worth travelling to Naples to see. Many theories have been generated as to how the sculptor produced the effect whereby the viewer seems to be able to see the stone veils around Christ’s body. Sanmartino has been accused of selling his soul to the Devil in exchange for the secret, and he is sometimes referred to as being the Wizard in the area of the island of la Gaiola at the end of the Posilipo Peninsula.

The next part of this series of commentaries will be concerned with the foreign cemeteries which are possibly linked to *The Lost Stradivarius*, with some recent changes to the situation in Naples.

Notes.

a. I have had problems in obtaining some copyright clearances, and the only photo of the Piazza that we can use does not show the whole Piazza. There is, however, a 360° panoramic camera view of the Piazza for those who can use this.

b. Go to www.google.co.uk/maps and type in the search box: Complesso Monumentale Di San Domenico Maggiore
Select the link. When the photos appear, choose the one with the Spire and the white circular arrow symbol.

c. I have been asked by two members to recommend a guide book for the Falkner-relevant areas in *The Lost Stradivarius*. I have obtained several modern guides to Naples over the decades, and my favourite is the *DK Eyewitness Travel – Naples & The Amalfi Coast*. I also enjoy reading the Victorian *Baedeker's Italy – From the Alps to Naples*. Apart from the old prices, and the ugly new estates, it is amazing how little has changed. The outlines of the Spanish Quarter seem not to have changed at all. Here are some Baedeker tips: "Cabs. In case of altercations, apply to the nearest policeman (yellow buttons, and number on cap)." Under 'Sights' they have: "The city itself may be seen in three days". Change "days" to "lifetimes"!!