The congregation De S. Iscone consists of lawyers, who undertake to plead the causes of the poor gratis, and furnish all the expenses necessary to carry their suits through the courts with effect. To be entitled to the assistance and support of this association, no recommendation or introduction is required; the person applying has only to prove his poverty, and give in a full and fair statement of his case.

Congregazione della Croce, composed principally of nobility, to relieve the poor and imprisoned, and particularly to bury the bodies of such distressed and forsaken persons when dead...

The Congregation of Nobles for the Relief of the Bashful Poor. The object of this association is to discover and relieve such industrious persons as are reduced to poverty by misfortune, and have too much spirit, or too much modesty, to solicit public assistance...

All these confraternities have halls, churches and hospitals.

[144] The lazzaroni, poorest of the poor, in 1820; from Italy by Lady Morgan.

Their poverty scarcely leaves them a home to shelter in; and their climate renders a domicile rather a luxury, than a necessity. The roof that screens them from the inclemency of the night, is the only roof they seek or know. The refuse of the people, with their common name of Lazzaroni, require not even this: – a bench, or a boat, pillows their slumber, and the sky is their canopy, except in those transient and violent gusts of bad weather to which Naples is subject; when the portico of a palace, or the colonnade of a church, affords them all the temporary shelter they require.

The weather was occasionally very severe while we were at Naples; and it frequently happened, that on returning late from the opera, or from Soirées, we found the filthy portico of our old palace strewn with Lazzaroni. Some lay upon the earth, others were flung over a cask, or gathered round a brazier of hot embers, just sufficiently bright to glare upon their marked and grotesque features. Nothing could be more courteous or cordial than their manner: they all jumped up to make way for us, welcomed us home, wished us a good night’s rest; and one or two of them, who had got up some English phrases, applied them at
random, by way of being particularly polite . . .

The Mola on these occasions [Sundays] generally presented several circles, each two or three deep; they were composed of the lowest orders and the Lazzaroni; sometimes seated on wooden benches, sometimes on the ground, according to the price paid to some peripatetic philosopher, or reader, who occupied the centre, and who read aloud – Tasso or Mastrillo, stories from ‘La Bibbia’, or legends of much less edifying character. The image of one of these academicians will not readily escape my memory, as it never failed, during the Sundays of successive weeks, to fix my eye: he was a short square grotesque figure, with a face moulded on the model of the French polichinelle – all nose, chin, and bushy eyebrows; he wore an immense wig, a large but torn cocked hat, the jacket, or the fragments of a jacket, of an Italian courier, and a pair of bright yellow buckskin small-clothes, from the cast-off wardrobe of some English grooms. He was without shoes or stockings; his spectacles were immense; and he held a filthy tattered Tasso in one hand, and a stick or wand in the other, which he moved with great dignity and variety of gesture. For every line he recited he gave a commentary of his own, that might fill a page: sometimes pathetic, sometimes humorous, and always with an air so proudly oracular, as to excite the strongest disposition to laughter. Such however was not the effect produced on his auditors: never were countenances more concentrated, or more intensely expressive of the deepest interest – eyebrows were knit, lips distended, cheeks glowed, and heads shook, at the feats and fêtes of the ‘Goffredo’ and the ‘Rinaldo’, against whom, in vain,

‘S’armò d’Asia e di Libia il popol misto.’

Some half-rise in their emotion – others uttered a deep ejaculation; and the murmured ‘Braavo!’ circulated with all the restrained emotion of those who feared to interrupt, by their applause, strains that commanded the most enthusiastic admiration! . . .

The two ‘gram’ that purchased their daily ration of macaroni, the two more that went for ice-water and a puppet-show, were surely and easily earned; and a little surplus of ingenuity and industry procured a few yards of canvass, which made up their whole wardrobe (a shirt and trousers), allowing even something for the superfluity of their red-worsted sash and cap. These wants supplied, nothing remained but the delicious far niente – the lounge in the sun or the shade – the laugh raised indiscriminately at friend or foe – a prayer offered at a shrine – or curses given to the scrivano [police magistrate], who multiplies some crime which poverty cannot redeem by a bribe . . .

[145] The high spirits of the Neapolitan working-classes in 1823; from the Countess of Blessington’s The Idler in Italy.

The more I see of the Neapolitans, the better I like them. I have not detected among the individuals of the lower class that have fallen in my way, a single instance of the rapacity so generally, and I am inclined to think so unjustly, attributed to them by strangers. Their politeness has nothing in it of servility; and their good humour is neither coarse nor boisterous. The gardeners, and their wives and families, appertaining to the Palazzo Belvedere, seem actuated by an unceasing desire to please us. Fresh flowers are sent in by them, every morning, for the apartments; the finest figs, and grapes, are offered for our acceptance; and smiling faces and courteous enquiries about the health of every individual of the family meet us, whenever we encounter any of them. They sing, and not inharmoniously, while at work in the garden; occasionally duos and trios, and at other times, one begins a song descriptive of rural occupations, and his companions answer it. There is something inexpressibly charming to me, in these wild airs; but perhaps they owe much of the attraction to the delicious atmosphere in which I hear them, which disposes the mind to be pleased. No night passes in which these good people, joined by the custode and his family, do not dance the tarantella in the court yard, to the music of their own voices, accompanied by the tambour de basque. Old and young all join in this national dance, with a gaiety it is quite exhilarating to witness . . .

The streets of Naples present daily the appearance of a fête. The animation and gay dresses of the lower classes of the people, and the crowds who flock about, convey this impression. Nowhere does the stream of life seem to flow so rapidly as here;
not like the dense and turbid flood that rushes along Fleet Street
and the Strand in London; but a current that sparkles while
hurrying on. The lower classes of Naples observe no medium
between the slumber of exhaustion and the fever of excitement;
and, to my thinking, expend more of vitality in one day than the
same class in our colder regions do in three. They are never calm
or quiet. Their conversation, no matter on what topic, is carried
on with an animation and gesticulation unknown to us. Their
friendly salutations might, by a stranger, be mistaken for the
commencement of a quarrel, so vehement and loud are their
exclamations, and their disagreements are conducted with a
fiery wrath which reminds one that they belong to a land in
whose volcanic nature they strongly participate. Quickly ex-
cited to anger, they are as quickly propitiated; and are not prone
to indulge rancorous feelings.

It is fortunate that this sensitive people are not, like ours,
disposed to habits of intoxication. Lemonade here is sought with
the same avidity that ardent spirits are in England; and this
cooling beverage, joined to the universal use of macaroni, is
happily calculated to allay the fire of their temperaments.

[146] Carnival in Naples; from The Idler in Italy by the
Countess of Blessington.

The Neapolitans, high and low, rich and poor, enter into the
spirit of the carnival, with a reckless love of pleasure and zest,
that appertains only to children in other countries. Even the old
seem to enjoy the general hilarity produced by the hetero-
geneous mélange of Neptunes, Hercules, Cupids, shepherdesses,
sailors, Spanish grandees, and a hundred other absurd masks.
Innumerable carriages, filled with these votaries of pleasure,
pass and repass in the Strada Toledo, playing their antics, and
hurling at the persons they encounter, showers of bon-bons and
bouquets of flowers. The dress of English sailors seems to be a
favourite one with the maskers at the carnival, for we saw several
worn by persons whose equipages indicated that they were of the
aristocracy. The lower class substitute a composition of plaster
of Paris for bon-bons, and often throw them with a violence that
occasions accidents. Large are the sums expended by the gay
Neapolitan gallants, in the purchase of the most delicate bon-
bons and fragrant bouquets, which they throw into the carriages
or windows, where they recognize their female acquaintances. A
party of the noblese a year ago, during the carnival, passed
through the Strada Toledo, in a ship, placed on wheels, and
fired from the guns at each side, volleys of bon-bons. Never were
broadsides so amicably received, or so agreeably remembered,
for they still form the topic of conversation, whenever a carnival
is mentioned.

[147] The King of Thieves; from The Story of my Life by
Augustus Hare.

While we were at Naples [in 1858] my mother lost her gold
watch. We believed it to have been stolen as we were entering
the Museo Borbonico, and gave notice to the police. They said
they could do nothing unless we went to the King of the Thieves,
who could easily get it back for us; it would be necessary to make
terms with him. So a ragazzo (or young rascal) was sent to
guide us through one of the labyrinthian alleys on the hill of St
Elmo to a house where we were presented to the King of
Thieves. He mentioned his terms, which we agreed to, and he
then said, 'If the watch has been stolen anywhere within twelve
miles round Naples, you shall have it in twenty-hour hours.'
Meanwhile the watch was found by one of the custodes of the
Museo at the bottom of that bronze vase in which you are
supposed to hear the roaring of the sea; my mother had been
stooping down to listen, and the watch had fallen in.

[148] Neapolitan life before 1860; from Naples: a Palimp-
sest by Peter Gunn.

(Peter Gunn was born in Melbourne in 1914. Naples: a
Palimpsest, published in 1961, is probably the best general study
of the city – an Italian translation appeared in 1971.)

These were the last great days of Neapolitan society; members of
the diplomatic corps and distinguished foreign visitors and