

## ROMAN RETROSPECTS

‘IN perpetual quiet, Oxford, I believe, is the only city that resembles Rome,’ wrote Aubrey de Vere in the Spring of 1839, words that sound strangely in 1933. Even the Rome of Leo XIII was strangely noisy to those who remembered the dignified peaceful Rome of Pius IX before 20th September, 1870. All artists, many of them foreigners and Protestants, deplored and denounced the change that followed the invasion, among them Augustus Hare, Ruskin, and countless others, including Gregorovius, who hated the Temporal Power and yet thus scathed, in a letter of 1885, its destroyers.

‘The violent transformation which Rome has undergone affords me no pleasure; the city appears to me like a carpet of ancient date, which during the process of beating goes to pieces amid clouds of dust. All the traces of my past life have been obliterated, destroyed, and built over; and the majestic city of former days has been superseded by the tumult of modern life, which is still seeking definite shape, but will hardly succeed in attaining it for a generation to come.’<sup>1</sup>

Few have left us such beautiful pictures of the latter days of Papal Rome as Mrs. Mary Crawford Fraser, and her brother Marion, who shows us a river scene now hard to imagine, so utterly has it vanished.

‘It was found that he (Temistocle) frequented the **society** of other Neapolitans, and especially that he was in the habit of going from time to time to the Ripa Grande, the port of the Tiber, where he seemed to have numerous acquaintances among the Neapolitan boatmen who constantly came up the coast in their *martingane*—heavy, sea-going, lateen-rigged vessels, bringing cargoes of oranges and lemons to the Roman market.’

But Rome before Italy entered the war at the end of May, 1915, was relatively to the Rome of 1927, when I next saw the city, and still more to the Rome of 1933, a city of dignity and quiet. Even then there were electric

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<sup>1</sup> *English Hist. Rev.*, Oct. 1892, p. 702.

<sup>2</sup> F, Marion Crawford, Saracinesca.

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trams, but very few motors indeed, and as for motor omnibuses, if I remember rightly there was one, fitly nicknamed *il pericolo giallo*.

To one who had lived in before-the-war Rome the transformation (dating, I am told, from 1916) observable in 1927 and still more to-day is sharply painful. The choral wave of Angelus bells passing thrice a day over the Holy City is accompanied by a truly infernal din of motor-horns nearly drowning all human sounds. And in no other place known to me is the din so insanely horrible. Paris is quiet in comparison, and London and Birmingham.

I find in a note made by me on 24th May, 1912:

‘Nightingales sing in the daytime here as at night: they are quite common just outside Rome, tho’ I don’t think they come quite in. Saw siskins lately.’

It was my privilege to number among my English friends in Rome an old lady who died a holy death in the spring of 1914. Many times she spoke to me of the state of the world, and her fears for the future. Shortly before her death she told me her conviction that the present state of things could not last. ‘There comes a moment when Our Lord says *Basta*.’ That moment came barely four months later. Her husband had lived nearly all his life in Rome, and bore an historical English name. They lived above an hotel whose upper windows commanded the Torre delle Milizie (we may hand over to the higher critics without regret the legend of Nero’s watching from its summit a thousand years ere it was built, the fire he had kindled), Trajan’s column, the Palatine, and a glimpse of the shining plains that stretch away to the old kingdom of the Rutulians and the landing-place of the Troyfolk, and those forest fringes of the Latin shore, so utterly unknown to the modern tourist though reaching to within twenty miles of Rome, forests that ever haunted me with longing to explore their depths. That fine traveller, but very prejudiced historian Gregorovius, knew and described them: it is a pity his *Latian Summer*

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is *so* little known. Indeed, I once reached the gateway of Castel Fusano only to be turned back by a *bersagliere*, who came cycling up to the locked iron gate in answer to the bell to inform us that nothing but a permit from the Quirinal could give any access to the royal hunting estate. It is beautifully described also in Augustus Hare's *Days near Rome* in words that whet my longing to explore it, whenever I read them over. Even in 1933 it may be, if any place in Italy is so happy, uninfested with motors. To me that unexplored forest by that lonely shore so near the great city has the appealing romance of 'footless far-off places,' of the trackless woods that ward the upper Amazon, the giant cliffs that guard the crown of Chomolungma, terrific man-defying wilderness of precipice and snow and whirlwind.

Rome has known a number of barbarian invasions and conquests, and the present invasion by the hordes of machines and their slaves is in some ways the most searching of them all, because it conquers without bloodshed and has at present alas! so many friends within the gate. **And** yet they seem to forebode that they have but a short time. Their very violence bewrays them. However, it gave me a shiver to hear a fellow-pilgrim (blissfully ignorant of its history) express admiration of the appalling Monument, to make room for which the monastic buildings of the Ara Coeli, one of Rome's dearest treasures, were swept away. The Rome of Pius **IX**, before the fatal 30th September, has still its grateful rememberers whose words make me 'mourn the irrevocable past,' as though I had seen the home of my childhood pulled down by some vulgar upstart who should proceed to blister the site and surroundings with an 'efficient' bungalow. To me the Rome of 1911-14, the Rome of Pius X, seems in retrospect as that of Pius **IX** did to Marion Crawford returning to Rome in the middle eighties.

'**He** who was born and bred in the Rome of twenty years ago comes back after a long absence to wander as a stranger in streets he never knew, among houses unfamiliar to him, **amidst** a population whose speech sounds strange in his ears, **He** roams

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the city from the Tiber to the Vatican, finding himself now and then before some building once familiar in another aspect, losing himself perpetually in unprofitable wastes made more monotonous than the sandy desert by the modern builder's art. Where once he lingered in old days to glance at the river, or to dream of days yet older and long gone, scarce conscious of the beggar at his elbow and hardly seeing the half-dozen workmen who laboured at their trades almost in the middle of the public way—where all was once aged and silent and melancholy and full of the elder memories—there, at that very corner, he is hustled and jostled by an eager crowd, thrust to the wall by huge, grinding, creaking carts, threatened with the modern death by the wheel of the modern omnibus, deafened by the yells of the modern newsvendors, robbed, very likely, by the light fingers of the modern inhabitant.'

To think that all this was written in 1887, a time well within my own memory, although I was not to see Rome until twenty-four years later! The Rome of 1914 and early 1915 was still the Rome of the *carozza* and the creaking carts that followed the immemorial ways to the city laden with corn and wine and oil and stone and gravel, I can hear them now in memory descending the road by Monte Porzio in the small hours of the morning.

Happy for Marion Crawford that he never even foreboded the Rome of 1933.

'And yet he feels that Rome must be Rome still. He stands aloof and gazes at the sight; the capital of modern Italy sinks like a vision into the earth out of which it was called up, and the capital of the world rises once more, unchanged, unchanging and unchangeable, before the wanderer's eyes. The greater moments of greater times are there still, majestic and unmoved, the larger signs of a larger age stand out clear and sharp; the tomb of Hadrian frowns on the yellow stream, the heavy hemisphere of the Pantheon turns its single opening to the sky, the enormous dome of the world's cathedral looks silently down upon the sepulchre of the world's masters.

'Then the sun sets and the wanderer goes down again through the chilly evening air to the city below, to find it less modern than he had thought. He has found what he sought and he knows that the real will outlast the false, that the stone will outlive the stucco and that the builder of to-day is but a builder of card-houses beside the architects who made Rome.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> F. Marion Crawford, *Don Orsino*.

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Ten thousand times more appealing is the spell of old Papal Rome to me than the Versailles of Louis XVI or even the patriarchal simplicity of Savoy and Chambéry in the younger days of Joseph de Maistre, most appealing of all perhaps as it nears its violent ending.

‘ Yet e’en in that world’s beginning rose a murmur now and again,  
Of the midward time and the fading and the last of the latter days,  
And the entering in of the terror and the death of the People’s Praise.’

Among pictures of the Italy of those swiftly receding days, I know **few** so happy as the memories of Father John Morris, S.J., given in the *Month* in April, May, July and August, 1890. Beautiful too are the glimpses given in the diaries of John Hungerford Pollen of the Rome and the Italy of 1854, where he met, among others, Wiseman, Richard Doyle. Father Herbert Vaughan (later Cardinal), Mrs. Craven, Overbeck, Cornelius, Padre Marchi, Antonelli, Manning and Wynne. ‘Pollen’s journal is full of allusions to these and to others as well: to delightful rambles with his old friends and new over the Campagna, visits of long study to the walls of Rome, Christian and Pagan, as well as to such sights as Prince Piombini driving with consummate skill a team of sixteen horses to Sant’ Antonio . . . and he loved the devout poor, crowding to early Mass, and the simple peasant of the Campagna “piping his advent greeting before the picture of the Madonna” and the splendid symbolism of the functions into which he could now enter, heart, mind, and imagination, bearing therein his own intimate and proper part.’<sup>4</sup>

That is the Italy that still lingers at Genazzano, Subiaco and other happily remote places, in contrast with the great modern-policed industrial cities such as Milan, where one might ask with some reason the question asked by Rogers in his rather too blank verse:

‘ Am I in Italy?’

H. E. G. ROPE.

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Pollen, *John H. Pollen*.