

ROME

*An affinity, to the soil
of Rome, ruins, roots and hard
earth from which emerges a
sturdy Roman tree.*

The artist is an active dreamer; his dreams are ever seeking their affinity to the outer world. To those who have no such tendencies he seems unreasonable: his moods strange, his decisions incomprehensible. It is quite evident that I belong to this artist order of human beings for in the course of my life I have never done what is commonly called a wise thing. This is perhaps the reason why it was impossible for me to remain for any length of time preoccupied with the uncertainties of the future, and why the dreamer within me suddenly decided that the Odyssey of my artist's life should begin in Rome.

The long melancholy stretches of an Appian Way; the ruins whose death throes are prolonged by the fall of each crumbling stone; the earth thick-set with sharp, bone-like relics of its unburied past, brushing the pilgrim's feet; all these, in some unevolved and uncomfortable way found their affinity within the structure of my mind.

Objectively, Rome meant only a name to me. One day, without preliminary plans, but with a third class ticket, a valise, and very little money in my pocket, I found myself bound for that city.

I had never travelled third class before. The crowded compartment; the long, sleepless night; my thin self on the hard benches; all form part of an experience I shall never forget. My fatigue was such that long before the end of the journey I had lost all sense of direction, and what was far worse, my ticket.

Arriving late at night in Rome, I was surrounded only by angry and vociferous railroad officials demanding my ticket. They all searched for it in

vain. Finally they allowed me to enter an hotel omnibus, which was, as by some miracle, still waiting for me at the station. Already seated inside was an angry English lady. In my excitement I explained to her in French that I had lost my ticket. She snapped back that I ought to have known better.

On arriving at the hotel the manager, finding that his visitor was a young girl travelling alone, began making advances. He was so persistent that it was only by menacing him with a small mother-of-pearl handled pistol which had been given to me by my brother's doctor, that I got him to leave the room. When he retreated I found that there was no key to the door; for the rest of the night I sat up in order to watch it.

Finally the morning came bringing reassurance and I decided to undress and take a much needed rest. On opening my valise, strange articles of toilet fell out. There had been an exchange of bags when the omnibus was unloaded. Unable to stand more I flung myself fully dressed on the bed and fell asleep. A few hours later I was wakened by the cameriera who came to bring me back not only my valise but also the lost ticket.

I then decided to leave the hotel at once and seek out a "Pension." As I passed through the corridor the English lady came up to me and apologized for having been so unsympathetic the night before. She had taken me for a French girl, but having found out her mistake she wanted to offer any help I might need. I thanked her, but I knew that in the future there would be no asking for help whatever happened -- it was not my way.

I stayed at the Pension until I had chosen -- and not too judiciously -- a studio in the Via Sistina. It was on the ground floor at the end of a very dark corridor which for no apparent reason smelt of roses. When I agreed to take the place I was unaware that the passage was left unlighted at night; the long walk through its vault-like dampness, guided only by the flicker of a small wax taper, subsequently proved no pleasant experience.

The studio itself was the usual bare room; and opening into it was a kind of alcove where wedged in between high, windowless walls, was a large bed that looked dirty. I always used to hesitate before getting into it, and then curl myself up in order to escape as much as possible the disagreeable surroundings.

On the day I chose the studio I visited the manager in his office. He was young and most obliging, but as I was about to leave the room he got up, and to my surprise, began expressing in passionate terms the pleasure he felt at my having chosen the studio on the ground floor. His own rooms, he explained, gave on to the same garden, and he could easily manage to climb into my room at night to visit me.

I left the office without showing any signs of having understood him but later, although the studio was often hot and stuffy, I carefully kept my window closed at night.

Judging Italian men silly I carefully avoided making friends with them. Yet I was entirely free from prejudice and had none of the hypocrisy of the Anglo-Saxons who generally show strong antagonism to all sins other than their own. But it was one thing to be unprejudiced and another to be the object of attention of a seemingly sex-starved population. The importunate guide or beggar was a pleasant person indeed compared to the hungry male who sidled up to one on the streets, and with steel-like fingers tried to pinch what ought to have been the fat part of the body, but which was, in my case, as thin as the rest. But fat or thin one was young and that was sufficient. I soon learned that a pleasant walk alone was impossible. The male was always present, following or waiting. If one happened to stand still an instant.

All this, however, is but a sidelight on what was merely disagreeable. The real struggles of my artist's life were yet to come.