

Fragrant Glimpses of Italy

by Madge Macbeth

THERE is something sad about visiting Italy for the first time. Certain cities, galleries, churches, vistas may "grow upon one," but the penetrating pleasure of first impressions can never come again. One will know what to expect of the Blue Grotto, Venice by night, moonlight on the Coliseum, dawn enriching the marble lace-work of the Leaning Tower. Thrills, like lightning, rarely strike emotions twice in the same place.

We glided into Rome just ahead of the shadows that closed heavily round the station before our luggage emerged from the terrible confusion. It was Holy Thursday and appalling crowds overflowed the platforms, surged across the tracks and narrowly escaped extinction as oncoming trains bore down upon them. There are no stop-blocks in the station at Rome. An engine's progress into the heart of the waiting rooms is discouraged by spreading sand over the rails!

Everyone seemed to be shouting directions that no one followed. Porters carrying cruel heaps of luggage on their backs stood helpless in the dense throngs. But a gala note was in the air. All the world was out to make a Roman holiday. "See Rome and die"—soon became not an ancient counsel but a living threat. After visiting even a few of the hundreds of churches, fountains, relics and monuments that adorn the city, the flame of life seems to flicker and grow dim. Frescoes and centuries blur; domes waver above necks that bid fair to crack; statuary appears sinister and terrible, and mosaics actually brand themselves upon the lids of the eye.

Despite which, the cathedral habit grows, and there is no better season for visiting these magnificent mediaeval temples than during the Easter festivals. Every shrine and tomb lies buried beneath banks of flowers. Great booths of blossoms stand before every church. Children scarcely able to toddle pursue one along the streets, begging a few *centesimo* in exchange for (rather wilted) wild-flowers. Driving back from the catacombs, some young boys threw handfuls of tulips and

Marigolds into my carriage. (I mention this, because in Italy one rarely gets anything for nothing!)

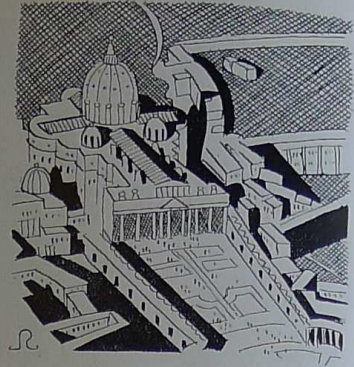
In Rome, particularly, names learned in childhood, creep out of their obscurity and become glorious realities. The Palatine Hill unfolds a picture of the ancient city, of whose legendary origin one is constantly reminded by representations of Romulus and Remus enjoying the nourishment provided by the friendly wolf.

Indeed, just beside the *Tabularium* on the Capitoline Hill, a live (though languid) animal is caged—a unique monument to the founders of the city. In an adjoining prison, there sleeps an eagle. Like the glory of the Rome it symbolizes, this bird is faded. Even the Easter crowds stirred no flutter of interest in its feathered breast. From the *Tabularium*, one looks out upon the Forum, where developed the life and most picturesque period of the Republic. The Coliseum and Pantheon provide a hub, as it were, from which the glory of ancient Rome radiates in every direction; the Vatican is literally a world in itself; while churches, monuments and relics bridge the sacred past and make the New Testament a record of but yesterday.

Even centuries ago, Rome was known as the eternal city. It is the supreme illustration of "the length of days." It stands for greatness, wealth, colonization, law, liberty, beauty, heroism and splendor; for meanness, squalor, conquest, domination, tyranny, vice, cruelty and human wreckage. Much of it is built on the bones of slaves. The ashes of martyrs film its crumbling walls. A population of two million dwindled to seventeen thousand, rising slowly again to half the original number.

Impressions? A white city, a city of marble, which, said my guide in Pisa, is cheaper than bread! Before the war, two hundred pounds cost about twenty lira. To-day, the price has doubled. Rome is a city of palaces, down whose walls rivers of Wisteria flow. Beneath, dark alleys trickle, and human beings like fish, dart from

Mayfair, July, 1927



side to side, in a frantic effort to avoid motors and carriages. Many of the streets are paved by the Romans with small square blocks diagonally laid. There are miles of cobbles. Walking over them on a warm day, brings spiritual advancement, one hopes in inverse ratio to the physical pain. Infinitely preferable is it, to drive behind a pair of black horses, and in the shadow of a coachman wearing a cassock and a high silk hat. . . . Rome is a city whose every vista is intriguing; whose every narrow street is blocked with a statue, a fountain or an obelisk—and blue sky. One morning, I came upon a steep flight of steps surmounted by a church whose cross stood sharp and clear against the sunshine. On the steps were gathered clusters of people in quaint costume. All about were booths of flowers and gay umbrellas. This was the Piazza di Spagna—the rendezvous of artists and models. The former wanting the latter—or vice versa—repair to the district and an engagement is made. Simple and effective. Much more picturesque than our habit of telephoning. But then life in Italy is simple; indeed, quite primitive. Nearby stands a building which in 1730 was the Hotel de Roland, afterwards the Hotel Mary Stuart, where Casanova (who married the proprietor's daughter) lived. On one side of the steps may be seen a house with a tablet which reads, "The young English Poet John Keats died in this house on the 24th of January, 1821, aged 26." It is a memorial to both Shelley and Keats, acquired by their admirers in England and America. "They sleep in the English cemetery and are rarely neglected, for visitors buy flowers from vendors at the gates and lay their tribute on these two most famous of the many well-known graves.



The guide, whose English was more quaint than intelligible, remarked to me, "Gosh, eh?"



"Oh, no," said the man, producing a pair of small scales, "the large ones are sold by the pound."