

## AN INCIDENT AT ROME

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BY MISS C. M. SEDGWICK

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During a sojourn of some months at Rome, Lady C---- kindly offered to take me in her droski to Tusculum, a drive, as nearly as I can recall the distance, of some dozen miles. Accordingly, on one of those days, (of which we have often a counterpart in our autumnal months,) when the sky is of its deepest blue, and so serene that the eye seems to penetrate depths never before revealed, we passed the gate of St. John Lateran and entered on the Appian Way. Most

“Things by season seasoned are,

To their right praise and true perfection.”

But to the Roman campagna change of season brings no change. In the spring when, elsewhere, there is a general resurrection of vegetable life – a joyous beginning of the procession of the year – this unchanging aspect of the campagna is most solemn. When all the rest of Italy, as far as nature is concerned, has the beauty, gladness and promise of youth, is in truth a paradise regained, there are here no springing corn, no budding vine-stalks, no opening blossoms, scarcely a bird’s note. Nature, elsewhere so active, so plastic, so full of hope, is here monumental – a record of the inexorable past.

But though there be no look of cheerful habitancy, there is a solemn beauty. You can scarcely turn your eye without a strong emotion, without involuntarily uttering a name that is a charmed word. “There is Soracte!” “There is Tivoli!” “There is the country of the Sabines!” “There are the beautiful Alban Hills!” Behind you is Rome with its natural elevations, its splendid domes, towers and obelisks, its brooding pines, and sad cypresses – surely the most picturesque, the most suggestive of cities. The vast solitudes around you are filled with records of Rome and its magnificent life-time; broken aqueducts sometimes extending for a quarter of a mile, and then standing in fragments of three or four, or perhaps a single arch. On every side are monuments and tombs, by which the poor tenants hoped to perpetuate their names. The high sepulchral grass waves around them, the stones are a blank, or if the name be preserved – as in the still nearly perfect tomb of Cecilia Metella – it is but a name, all the rest is left to conjecture.

Lady C---- had resided several winters at Rome, and was perfectly familiar with its antiquities, and generous in her communications, and so delightfully did the time pass away that we hardly seemed to have emerged from the Porta San Giovanni when we drove into the little town of Frascati. The landlord appeared at the carriage door, with the usual smiles and potency of an Italian host, and answering the ready “Yes – yes – my lady!” to all Lady C’s demands, (the chief one being a parlor with a pleasant prospect,) he ushered us into the house and up a dirty

stairway, and opened the door and windows of a little parlor, exclaiming, "*Ecco, ecco, mi ladi, ecco una bella veduta!*" We rushed to the window, expecting a beautiful view of the campagna, but instead of that we could see nothing but the villainous little piazza we had just left, with the usual accompaniments of an Italian *place*, beggars and an idle rabble. Lady C. smiled, and turning to me said, "The house affords nothing better, or he would have given it to us," and bowing to our host as if she were quite satisfied, he took her orders and left us to ourselves.

"At what are you smiling?" she said to me.

"At your *un-English* way of proceeding, my dear Lady C. Pardon my impertinence, but it would have seemed to me more nationally characteristic if you had broken out upon our host for attempting to impose this piazza on you for a beautiful prospect."

"But it is to his eye. You are right, my friend. I have lived long enough abroad to get rid of a few prejudices, and some inconvenient and very unwise English habits. I do not now conclude that a thing is of course wrong because it is not in our Island fashion; and I am just learning to endure with good temper what I cannot cure, and to find out that every country, I might almost say every creature, has a bright side, at which we may look and thank God. Truly I am often ashamed of my snarling, barking, arrogant countrymen."

I was charmed with the candor of Lady C's concession, but being well aware that such a concession is much of the nature of a personal humiliation, I turned the subject by asking Lady C. if she had been frequently at Frascati?

"Often." she said, and the last time she was there was rather memorable, and she proceeded to relate the following story, some part of which I had heard from our consul at Naples. Three years before, letters had been received at Rome, and in those Italian cities most frequented by the English, requesting inquiries to be set foot for a certain Murray Bathurst, a young Englishman, who had come to the Continent early in the preceding spring, intending to make the tour of Italy chiefly on foot. His mother, a widow, had received letters from him as late as October. He was then on his return from Naples to Rome, purposing to embark at Civita Vecchia for Marseilles. The mother's letters expressed the misery of her suspense and anxiety so touchingly that many persons became interested in her behalf. Her letters were enforced by others from persons of note. I remember Lady C. mentioned Wordsworth or Southey's name. This adventitious aid could scarcely have been necessary to stimulate benevo-

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lence. No adventitious aid would ever be in requisition if there were more of the human race like a certain little woman in Boston, who hearing an alarm given of a child being run over, rushed forward to rescue it with such signs of distress that a passer by asked, "Is it your child?" "No," she replied, "but *it is somebody's child.*" Diligent inquiries were made of the police, and the books of our consuls at the different cities examined. The result was that Murray Bathurst was traced from Milan to Naples, back to Rome, and thence to Civita Vecchia. His entrance from Rome into that most forlorn of all travelers' depots was duly registered, and there all clew was

lost. In vain were the registers of all the steamers and of every craft that left the port examined – there was no trace of him. It must have been the same Murray Bathurst that was noted elsewhere; for his tall, slender, un-English person, his large dark melancholy eyes, his pale complexion, and tangled long dark hair, were all so notable as to be recorded in the reports of the police. Many letters were written to the mother giving this unsatisfactory information, and expressive of condolence and regret that no more could be learned of the lost young man. In a little time the topic became trite, then was forgotten, and mother and son sunk into the oblivion of past things.

A year ran away, when one morning, just as Lady C. was sitting down to her solitary breakfast in the ---- palace, Mrs. Bathurst was announced. The name and its association had passed from Lady C's memory. Mrs. Bathurst presented a letter of introduction, and said – “My apology for troubling you is that you are the only person in Rome whom I have ever seen before, and of whose interest and sympathy I feel assured.”

Lady C. was perplexed, but on glancing at the letter she expressed, I have no doubt with the graceful courtesy that characterized her, her readiness to serve Mrs. Bathurst in any mode she would suggest – “But where and when,” she asked, “have I had the pleasure of meeting you?”

“It is quite as natural that you should forget as that I should remember it – the meeting was accidental, but the place may serve to recall it to you. Do you remember, seventeen years ago, meeting a young woman in the widow's weeds with a little boy, whose beauty I believe first attracted you, wandering about the Druidical remains at Stonehenge?”

“Perfectly – perfectly – and now, though certainly somewhat changed by time – more probably by recent sorrow – I recall your countenance. And that lovely boy, I am quite sure I should know him again. I never have forgotten his extraordinary look of curiosity and investigation as he wandered about amidst those stupendous ruins, nor the intelligent wonder with which he listened to our speculations.”

“And do you remember the subsequent evening we passed together at the inn, when our conversation turned on the antiquities of Italy, and you gave us some account of your then recent visit to Rome, and showed us many drawings in your port-folio, and gave my poor boy a beautiful sketch of one to the temples of Pæstum?”

“Yes, oh yes! and I remember being exceedingly surprised, and pleased, with the child's extraordinary acquaintance with subjects of which few children of his age had ever heard.”

“Ah, it was then my pride, my fatal pride to instruct him on these subjects, which had always interested myself, and which had occupied much of my poor husband's life. I developed prematurely, and most unwisely, his taste, and so concentrated his mind on the study of antiquities, that it became a passion. I was gratified by the development of what appeared to me extraordinary genius. Thus I fed the flame that was to consume my poor boy. I found too late that it was impossible to restore his mind to the interests natural, and of course healthy, to youth. My fortune was narrow. I lived with the most rigid economy to supply him with the means of education. He went to Oxford, where he acquitted himself honorably in all the prescribed studies. These were mere task work, except so far as the classics related to his favorite pursuits. His task

done, he wasted his health in midnight antiquarian research. At the close of his college career we went into Devonshire at the invitation of my brother-in-law, Sidney Bathurst, to pass the winter.” At this point of her story Mrs. Bathurst paused, reluctant to indulge in the egotism of going into particulars not immediately connected with her loss, though greatly aggravating the calamity; but Lady C., full of sympathy, and not without curiosity, begging her not to omit any particular, she proceeded. “Sydney Bathurst had repaired the fallen fortunes of his family by a long residence in India. His mind was thoroughly *mercantilized*. He had rather a contempt for all young men, and such a thorough conviction of the unproductiveness of all learning, that my son’s pursuits did not shock him so much as I had feared. His only child, Clara Bathurst, was after his own heart, practical, cheerful even to gayety, careless of the past and future, and reflecting the present brightly as a mirror does sunshine. I soon perceived that her father’s design in inviting us was to give the young people an opportunity of falling in love. He naturally wished to transmit his fortune to one of his own name and family, and I – I trust without a covetous spirit – conscious that my son had no talent for acquitting fortune, was delighted with the prospect of his obtaining, with an amiable wife, the means of indulging his taste. Nothing – I am convinced of it – nothing goes right where fortune *is* the basis of a matrimonial project. Marriage is the Lord’s temple – the money-changers may not enter it with impunity. I must do myself the justice to say that fortune was not my primary object. I watched the indications of the young people’s affections with intense interest. There were few points of sympathy between them. My son seemed hardly to notice his cousin; at times, indeed, gleams from her sunny spirit entered his heart, but as if through a crack – no light was diffused there. With Clara the case was quite different. Affection is a woman’s atmosphere. We are flexible and clinging in our natures, and we attach ourselves to the nearest object. We lived in retirement. My

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son had no competitor. He was gentle in his manners, refined, graceful – handsome. He had the reputation of learning and talent.

“Clara became quiet and thoughtful. She took to reading, and, poor girl! at last came to poring over the huge old books in which my son buried himself. She seemed winding herself into a sort of chrysalis condition, in the hope of a transition to come.

“The winter passed away without change to Murray. One idea absorbed him. Early in the spring he asked a private audience of his uncle, and when Mr. Sydney Bathurst was prepared to hear a disclosure harmonizing with his favorite project, my son modestly imparted his desire to come to Italy, his longing to explore the Etruscan remains whose riches were just then developing. He perceived his uncle’s astonishment, disappointment and displeasure, and he intimated that though poor he was independent. His purpose was to travel on foot, and he had ascertained by inquiries and calculation that the half of his annual allowance would pay for his meat, drink, and lodging, which should be all of the simplest.

“‘And how’, his uncle asked contemptuously, ‘was his rummaging and groping about the dusty old underground ruins of Italy fit him for any manly career? When was he to set about getting his living?’

“My son replied that what others called a living was superfluity to him, that he would not exchange his favorite pursuits for all England’s wealth – for himself he had no favor to ask but to be let alone; but that it would be an inexpressible comfort if, during the six months of his absence, he might leave me in my present happy situation – in the society of his cousin, whom he was sure I loved next to himself.

“‘The only sensible thing he said,’ exclaimed my brother-in-law, when he repeated to me the conversation, ‘Such folly is incomprehensible. But there is no use in interfering. Let him go his own way and take the consequence. Bread and water regimen in perspective is well enough, but, my word for it, he will be tired of it and Italy and its rubbish before six months are past.’

‘I will not go into more particulars of our conversation. I naturally defended my poor son, but I felt that Mr. Bathurst’s objections were sound. It ended in my acquiescing in Murray’s carrying out the plan he had made, and encountering the hardships he contemned, in the hope they would prove the best medicine for his diseased mind. But I was to learn that a mental, like a physical, condition which has been cherished and fortified by education cannot be changed by medicine. My son left us. Poor Clara, like Undine, had found a soul in the development of her affections. Her gayety was gone. So long as my son continued to write to us she read every thing she could lay her hands upon connected with the scene of his travels and the researches that particularly interested him. Since then she had read nothing. For a time she fell into a deep melancholy. From this she was roused, in part by my earnest entreaties, but more by the force of her own conscience. She is now a sort of lay sister of charity to the neighborhood, and she finds, as the wretched have always done, the surest solace for her own misfortunes in softening the miseries of others.’”

So far Lady C. had told me Mrs. Bathurst’s story as she recalled it in her own words. Six months had elapsed since young Bathurst had been seen at Civita Vecchia. Mrs. Bathurst had come to Italy in the hope that she might obtain some clew that had escaped the less interested search of strangers. Her brother-in-law had supplied her amply with the means of traveling, and she had resolved never to abandon the pursuit while the least ray of hope remained. The circumstances on which she mainly rested her belief that nothing fatal had happened to her son were, that as he was of the Roman Catholic faith – that as he spoke Italian like a native, and as his complexion and features were much more like the Italian than his own northern race, he might for years wander about the less frequented parts of Italy without incurring the suspicion that he was a foreigner. She conjectured that on arriving at Civita Vecchia he had yielded to an unconquerable reluctance to leaving Italy. She had no very definite idea of what had since been his fate. She alternated between hope and despair without any reason but the condition of feeling she happened to be in. The source whence young Bathurst had derived his antiquarian enthusiasm was soon quite obvious to Lady C. The only mode of drawing Mrs. Bathurst from her sorrowful maternal anxieties was to plunge her into some obscure, unintelligible ruin in Rome. She preferred the dim Thermæ of Titus, Caracalla’s baths, or Sallust’s garden, to St. Peter’s, and

the fragments of the palaces of the Cæsars to all the glories of the Vatican. But there were times when she was so steeped in grief, so near despair, that she seemed on the verge of insanity: and it was one evening after trying in vain to rouse and soothe her that Lady C. proposed a drive to Tusculum the next day. They accordingly set forth the next morning, and the mother seemed to be drawn away from her personal sorrows on this monumental road, for who, it is natural to ask here, can escape the common destiny of man “made to mourn?”

They drove into the little town of Frascati, and stopped at this same inn where Lady C. and myself were now discussing our cold chicken. The piazza was as thronged and noisy then as now, as these places always are in Italy, and most noisy in the meanest, poorest, lowest-fallen towns. As the ladies alighted screaming guides and clamorous beggars thronged about them. Mrs. Bathurst hurried into the inn. Lady C., more accustomed to the disagreeable juxtaposition of fleas, dirt and importunity, quietly stopped to make her bargain with a guide, and give, as is her custom, a small sum to the landlord to be dispensed to the poorest poor. Her eye was attracted by a lean and miserable man who stood behind the crowd, and apart from it, and who, pale, emaciated and haggard, with a threadbare cloak closely drawn around him, and seeming most of all to need charity, was apparently unobservant and unconcerned.

“My friend,” said Lady C. to the landlord, and

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pointing to the man who had attracted her eye, “see to that poor wretch getting the largest share of my charity, and here,” she added, again opening her ever willing purse, “here is something more – get him a warm under-garment – he is shivering at this moment,”

“Ah, madame,” replied mine host, “he is well cared for; his senses are a little astray, and of such, you know, the Holy Virgin has special care. He wanders about from morning till night, and when, at evening, he comes into Frascati, there is not a churl in the town that would not give him a bed and lodging, though he never asks for either. He is innocent and quiet enough, poor fellow!”

“Has he no family – no relatives among you?” asked Lady C – but she received no reply – another carriage had drawn up, and the landlord with the ready civility of his craft was opening its door.

“Come with me to the other side of the house,” said Lady C. to Mrs. Bathurst, whom she found in a little back parlor overlooking the court. “Come with me and see a pensioner of the Holy Virgin – as our host assures me he is – a creature steeped in poverty, but without suffering, and with an aspect that having once looked upon you never can forget.” Before she had finished her sentence Lady C. was at the window of “*la belle veduta*,” overlooking the piazza. The throng of beggars was at the heels of the newly arrived gentry, and Lady C. looked about, for some time in vain, for the subject of her compassion. “Ah, there he goes!” she said, espying him. “Is there not a careless, objectless desolation in his very movement?”

“I do not see that he differs from the other beggars, except that he stoops, and has a less noble air than many of them.”

“My dear Mrs. Bathurst! But you do not see his face, and therefore cannot judge – poor fellow, he is taking to the sunny steps of the church like the rest of them, and there is languidly laying himself down to his best repose.”

After cold chicken and a bottle of wine at Frascati, the ladies proceeded on foot to Tusculum, preferring to be discommoded by a walk, somewhat too long, to the perpetual annoyance of clamorous yelling donkey drivers. After having gone up the long hill to Tusculum, they turned into the Ruffuiella, Lucien Bonaparte’s villa, and finding little to attract them in its formal adornments, they soon left it. As they turned toward the gate Lady C. exclaimed, “There is my poor friend again! he has taken the road to Tusculum; I hope we may cross his path there, I want you to see his face, if I do not mistake, it has a story, and a sad one.”

“I am ashamed to confess to you,” replied Mrs. Bathurst, “how little curiosity I feel about him; how little I am touched by all the misery I see here. My whole sentient being is resolved into one distressful feeling. At times, indeed, I am roused from it, and the thought that I am in Italy, sends a thrill of pleasure through my frame. Even here, in Tusculum, at this highest point of excitement, where, under ordinary circumstances, the very stones would burn my feet, my sorrow comes back upon me like a thunder-bolt.”

“Drive it away now, if possible,” said Lady C. “It is worth your while, I assure you, to possess your mind in this place – here is a cicerone who will give a name, right or wrong, whenever we ask for it. He told me the other day, in good faith, that the ciceroni all take their name from Cicero, who, in his day, showed the marvelous fine things here to strangers! I asked the fellow who this Cicero was, and he answered, *un gran maestro*, who taught little boys all the languages in the world, besides reading, writing, and arithmetic! \* [\*See Rome in the 19<sup>th</sup> century] A fair specimen of the veritable information of these gentry.”

The ladies proceeded under the conduct of their guide, to survey the broken walls called “*la Scuola di ciceroni*,” as some learned expounders conjecture from the philosophical academy, the institution of which at his own house, in Tusculum, is mentioned in one of Cicero’s letters.

Mrs. Bathurst’s antiquarian enthusiasm began to kindle, her eye dilated, and her pale cheek glowed. In a happy oblivion, for the moment, of her personal anxieties, she left Lady C. seated on the broken fragment of a column almost overgrown by weeds and grass, and followed her talking guide, to look at the reticulated walls of a row of houses, at a disinterred Roman pavement, and among a mass of ruins at the *gradus* of an amphitheater. While she was thus occupied, the poor pensioner of the Virgin emerged from a tangled thicket near Lady C., bearing and bending over a large flat stone, which he had hardly strength to carry, and with his eye riveted to it as if he were perusing it, he sat down on the ground apparently without observing her, near Lady C’s feet. The hair, as he studiously bent over the stone, hung in tangled masses over his face, so as to hide all but its outline. At this moment Lady C. heard Mrs. Bathurst approaching from behind. She pointed to the man, and signified to her not to disturb him. The guide misinterpreting her action, said “Fear nothing, my lady, he’s an innocent madman, who passes his time wandering about these ruins, digging and groping – half the world are somewhat in his way – the Virgin muddles their brains and sends them here to spend their money in poor

old Italy. By St. Peter!” he continued, going close to the antiquary and bending over him, “he has found something worth while this time. What is it, my good fellow?”

The crazed man, after scraping away the plaster and rubbish that adhered to the stone, had found what he sought, an inscription, defaced, and so far obliterated that no mortal could make it out, but this in no sort abated his joy – it was an inscription made by hands that had mouldered for centuries. Whether it now or ever signified any thing he cared not. He clapped his hands, and as if for the first time conscious of the presence of others, he shook back his hair, and turned his eyes toward the ladies for sympathy – sympathy, the first and last want of human nature. His eyes met theirs – met Mrs. Bathurst’s – his mother’s. He did not move, but from the gush of blood over the

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deathlike paleness of his cheek, and a slight tremor that suddenly pervaded his whole frame, it was evident he recognized her, and that he felt at the same moment his changed and strange condition. The mother knew her son at a glance, and exclaiming, “Murray!” sprung to him and enclosed him in her arms. A shout burst from him so loud and so protracted, that it seemed as if it must shiver his frame – his mother recoiled and sunk fainting in Lady C’s arms.

The story of the unfortunate antiquarian has been already too long and too particular, and I shall only briefly add what remains to be told. A perfect stupor succeeded to Murray Bathurst’s recognition of his mother, and his first consciousness of his wretched condition. A fever ensued – medical attendants – tender nursing most remedial, the comforts from which he had long been estranged, nature and youth all combined to do the work of restoration. With the return of reason, came a horror of the passion that had led him astray, and he became as impatient as he had been reluctant to leave Italy. He remembered that after reaching Civita Vecchia, he felt like a lover tearing himself from the object of his passion. His feet seemed to grow to the rich dust of Italy. Day after day he delayed taking the passage. After wandering about late one night, he remembered awaking in the morning with a high fever, and from that time his memory became more and more obscure. He had dim recollections of being transported from one place to another, of missing, one after another, his articles of dress – of dreams of hunger and thirst – and of finding jugs of water and bread by his bedside – finally, all became a blank, till he awoke in his mother’s arms. Mrs. Bathurst, fearful of a relapse into his old habits of mind, lost no time in leaving Italy. She had since kept Lady C. informed of the progress of her son’s cure, which she now believed to be radical. He had the good sense to avoid all books related to his disastrous passion, and every thing associated with it. His uncle had received him with open arms, comforting himself with the verification of his prognostics for the past trials of his nephew, and saying somewhat coarsely, that to be sure the hair of the same dog would cure the bite, if you ate hide and all.

A more fitting mistress than Italy had taken possession of the young man’s imagination, and health and cheerfulness were in her train. The last letter communicated the marriage of the



cousins – and now Mrs. Bathurst said they could look back with tranquil minds, to that “beautiful region” where

“A spirit hangs o’er towns and farms,  
Statues and temples, and memorial tombs.”