

TRACES OF TRAVEL.

DOWN THE TIBER.

An Interesting Sketch by Charles Warren Stoddard, on the Roman Campaign.

Only to think of steaming down the classic Tiber in a little tub that has seen its best days; only to dream of going to sea in a bowl,—that is what it really amounted to,—nothing more, nothing less. The boat in question was once upon a time one of those slim, swift iron Thames boats, that whiz under the great Victoria Embankment like vicious water-wasps. This particular wasp having grown grey and decrepit, was banished from the Thames and sent into exile; and now she steams up and down the "golden Tiber" at very uncertain intervals, and it always seems little short of a miracle when she gets back to port again without let or hindrance. Her voyages are voted holidays of the first class; not to have survived at least one of them is to have lived in vain.

On a certain occasion about two hundred of us—landsmen all, with a sprinkling of wives in summer dress, and of children in something a little short of that—gathered on the narrow deck of the wingless and stringless Wasp, bound for Porto d'Anzio, at the mouth of the Tiber. There was something very jolly in the anticipation of our two hours' voyage between the narrow banks of the winding stream, followed by a brief cruise in the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean, and a return to the Porto of hoary memories. We were quite content to stand for six or eight hours, under the circumstances—there were not seats enough to go half way round. We were quite content, I repeat, under the circumstances; for the Italian dawn is a delicious revelation, and we were to set forth after sunrise.

Down under the river-bank, in the lower edge of Rome, the Wasp, laden to the water's edge, fumed and fretted with a vigor worthy of her youthful days. Everybody was in the best of spirits; everybody always is—to begin with. Sea-going friends shook wine-flasks and ominous and almost edible-looking packages in the faces of stay-at-home friends who came to say a fond farewell upon the deck. A little colony of stranger idlers watched us in silence from the opposite shore. The Tiber is so narrow at that point we might have held a conversation with them, had we been so disposed; some few enthusiasts could hardly refrain from so doing, the excitement of a new departure so intoxicates a fellow. But blame them not; they merely wished to share their gayety with the whole wide world.

A fleet of barges, each with one great sail closely furled, and a long, slim ribbon-like streamer at the masthead meandering in the breeze, added much to the picturesqueness of the scene; it must be confessed we were not picturesque ourselves. Yet it was a dead and alive picture, after all; the Tiber is so excessively ugly to look upon; its waters as sluggish and as muddy as those of a California river, but with no gold-dust mingling with them; narrow, tortuous, flowing always between low, flat banks; full of strange, mysterious currents, and dimpled with a thousand little whirlpools; it is almost of a color with its banks; it looks not unlike lava, or a mud flow boiling and borrowing its dreary way to the sea. He who cried, "Help me, Cassius, or I sink!" must have been a poor swimmer, or the river was flooded at the time; for there are plenty of modern Romans who swim it twice or thrice every summer's day and make no note of it.

Off at last! The shore-line was cast off; everybody cried "Addio!" The Wasp drifted out into the stream, swung slowly round; and when her bow was pointed right between the two yellow banks, the wheels began to whirl, the boat to quiver and rock gently in the tide; and, aided by the current, we passed rapidly beyond a bend in the river, and straightway forgot all about old Rome.

On either side of us the muddy banks were thinly shaded with trees. Now and again a country house, with its gray, prison-like walls, was visible. Peasants drove antique looking cattle with marvelously wide horns. Sometimes we passed a yoke of Roman buffaloes—the most uncouth-looking beasts imaginable; they were lazily dragging great loads of frag-

rant new-mown hay. The scent of it came to us like a breath of honey, mingled with a fair proportion of dust as white as lime.

The banks of the river grew lower and more barren. We could look for miles across the level campagna, already burnt brown in the summer sun. A family of goats or a wolfish-looking sheep dog sometimes strayed down to the shore to stare at us. The trees were gone; even the low brush that flourishes in some parts of the great prairie land of Italy was wanting here. There was nothing visible but the short sweep of the river ahead of us and behind us, cut off at both ends by a sharp and sudden turn. Beyond us there was no mysterious country, no hidden vale lying within the shadow of a bluff; no rocks, no ruins—in short, no surprise of any sort in store for us poor voyagers. Even the sea we were so rapidly approaching gave no token; and the solitary watch-towers, those solemn monuments of the past that stand by the river-bank above the Roman walls—even these were wanting here. The gay youths who disported themselves so conspicuously at the beginning of the cruise and seemed so like old travellers, began to wilt under the thin, fluttering awning and the fervid sun; and the blustering fellow who, when he leaped upon the low bulwarks and swung his legs overboard with a very decided air, impressed us as one having been born at sea, and rocked in the cradle of the deep for the greater part of his life, and nowhere so much at home as in the teeth of the tempest,—even this brave and nonchalant individual drew in his extremities; for the sun was scorching his shins. We all grew hot and uneasy and silent, or a little peevish, while the world went by in two seemingly interminable slices of utterly uninteresting landscape—one on each side of us.

Thus passed two mortal hours,—two mortal hours that, to a certain extent, have become immortal; for we shall never, never forget them. But at the expiration of these two hours, with one accord, we sniffed the salt fragrance of the neighboring sea. We had, somehow, lost interest in the classic stream; we were thirsting for a sight of the blue waters into which we were shortly to be plunged. The sun was hotter than ever; it was a living flame overhead; the wind—the oppressive sirocco—was rising; a blast from a furnace, and with it we all proceeded to wither as the flowers of the field. This weird African visitor—the bane of Italy, that carries with it a kind of blinding light that burns one's eyeballs, as if it were freighted with desert dust; this nerve-killer, this consumer of the blood, that crosses the sea with such fiendish energy that it sweeps clouds of small African quail into the waves, and even deposits some of them on the Italian coast,—this was our unwelcome companion.

When we came at last to the mouth of the Tiber one thing was evident: the Wasp would have a tough time of it wrestling with such waves as had come up to buffet the sirocco; but we had paid for a passage to Porto d'Anzio, so the captain held the bow of the little craft to wind and wave, and we literally pitched in. It was a *festa* day; we were bent on having a good time at Porto d'Anzio, just around the corner from the mouth of the Tiber. The Porto is rather seldom visited; our advent was likely to go down to posterity with the local history. Meanwhile the sea heaved, and the Wasp heaved with it, but not always in season to escape a small deluge that was making the flush deck uncomfortably damp. Women grew pale and miserable; children cried aloud; men looked hopelessly about and wondered whither we were bound.

The golden Tiber shoots its muddy flood into the sapphire depths of the Mediterranean, and, with a reserve worthy of so great a celebrity, refuses to mingle its "gold" with any such a sea,—or is it the sea that eschews the Tiber, preferring to keep its pellucid waters salt and clear? At any rate, there is a spot in the sea where the amber wall of the river lies against the crystal wall of the sea, and not one drop seems to mingle with another.

Man is not a fly; no more is woman. When the Wasp stood on her head—as she did at intervals—we, the unlucky two hundred, sifted like sand down into the bows of her. When she was reversed, we sought a change, and in so doing stood not upon the order of our going, but went in every which way. Feas in



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an agitated bladder, corn in a hot corn-popper,—indeed, many things in this varied life resemble the predicament we were in.

But why linger upon this point? A wail of despair went up from various quarters of the vessel. The captain delivered a brief and spirited address. He said it was evidently unwise to go any farther to sea than could be helped; he would therefore refund two-thirds of the passage money, and at once endeavour to return. He held himself responsible for our lives, and consequently he would "bout ship" and seek safety in retreat. This spirit of benevolence impressed us favorably, as we wobbled about in the tumultuous wave, expecting every moment to founder. We turned as soon as possible and headed for the shore. Any port in a storm, you know, even if it isn't D'Anzio.

Once more we sought the classic Tiber, but when about to enter it we turned too short a corner. A sea struck us amidships, the sirocco scooped up our flighty awning, we went over on our beam ends, and the last hour was at hand. From beneath the cart-load of men, women, and children, where I had sought shelter from the elements, I saw our captain wringing his hands and tearing his hair. He wildly implored us to return to our places and retain them, as we hoped for safety. But we didn't hope for safety—we were quite beyond that,—and so we didn't return to our places; we simply lay in the lee-scuppers as if it were a pleasant and a proper thing to do, while our poor lop-sided Wasp winged its unhappy way back to smooth water, looking as forlorn and discomfited as if all the sting had gone out of it.

The steamer came to a halt at Fiermicino, a spot desolate beyond expression. Here there was a halt of four hours,—the captain insisted that the boat "needed rest." In the heat and the wind two hundred souls bemoaned a fate that merely prolonged their agony. Ostia was but two miles distant,—ancient Ostia, which was once a port of great importance; where the Apostles themselves are believed to have established a church; where St. Monica, the mother of St. Augustine, died. This was too much for me: I left the one hundred and ninety-nine to return at their pleasure, as sought the sketchy ruins of Ostia.

How little there is to be seen in these ruins, even the best of them! Sunshine kills them; without faith they are "nothing to nobody." The memories of the dreary spot are many. It was hither that *Eneas* hastened, charmed by the loveliness of the land. He "descried a spacious grove, through which Tiberinus, the god of the pleasant river Tiber, with rapid whirls and quantities of sand, discolored, bursts forward into the sea. All around and overhead various birds, accustomed to the banks and channel of the river, charmed the skies with their songs and fluttered up and down the grove."

O Virgil! If you could only see it now, would the fine frenzy of your rolling eye conjure up such poetic pictures as you were wont to paint? Alas, no birds now! No river-god, no groves; nothing but beggars and bull-frogs.

St. Angus first landed here, in Italy, with his sainted mother. It was here also that St. Ignatius, the disciple of St. John, debarked when he came from Antioch to be massacred in the Florian Amphitheatre. To Ostia Marius fled when overcome by the troops of Scylla. Ostia was the summer watering-place of Roman emperors. On this same Tiber they moored their splendid barges; and when they sailed, the whole country was decked for their delight.

It is but two miles to Castle Fusano, in the midst of its forest of pine. From the desolation of Ostia to the solemn beauty of this spot the transition is al-

most heavenly. Here was the site of Pliny's Laurentine villa, now covered by a more modern castle that looks as if it might be enchanted. Surely one should sleep a century in such a place. There is a moan as of far-away seas in the tree tops, and plentiful shade and seclusion. Shall I end with a page out of these old note-books,—an impression penned on the spot? Here it is:

I am in no haste to quit Castle Fusano. Why should I be? I have taken my oath to quit Rome, and I must first wean myself from it. Here I shall stay until I see my path clear to some new shrine, even though I am in danger of being devoured by *ennui* and mosquitos. Beyond this pinewood there are long, low sand-hills lying between it and the sea; they stretch southward even to the Pontine marshes, and all the music of the water is blown over them, and all the glimmer of the wave is hid from view. Imagine a moonlight night in a place like this! There is a sighing in the air so vague one knows not whether it be voice of wave or wood; it is the two in harmony. In every breath you breathe the incense of the sea; and while you meditate your thoughts recur to the still flowing Tiber; and the royal spirits of the past, thronged in their cloud-like barges, drift slowly in solemn procession down the current of the sacred stream.—*In the Ave Maria.*

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