



LEFT: The Bridge of St. Angelo, with the dome of St. Peter's in the distance

## WINTER IN ROME

by James Bertram

ITALY has so long been a goal for European travellers, that it seems almost the inevitable finale to a continental tour. Yet the old thrill remains: how many Northerners since Goethe, moving down from the dark pines and the mountains, have felt that sudden impact of the sun and of the Mediterranean! Suddenly the air is clearer, the light is different; colour rushes upon you like the voluble, exaggerated drama of the Italian tongue. You are in Italy; and in a moment you feel drop off all the uneasy constraints and the nagging puritan conscience of Northern Europe.

Is this just a romantic fantasy, in these post-war years when the celebrated *verismo* of Italian films has made us all acutely aware of the hunger and frustration of a defeated people? I do not think so, for something in the quality of Italian life defies rubble and augury alike. There is that strong persuasive sense of family and community, of a religion that is human and social, and gathers the most incongruous groups of café-loungers into a midnight service at St. Mark's; that awareness of art and the past that brings unselfconscious peasants into Santa Croce or the great picture galleries of Florence, and rebuilds the bridge-heads of the Ponte Vecchio in a most persuasive architectural compromise between old and new. Post-war Italy has problems enough: a people cannot live on sun and art, even with American Aid. But the sun helps, and art, like religion, has its consolation.

And so to Rome, where all roads lead at last. Too many roads seemed leading there at the year's end, when I stood for nearly six hours glued against the window of a third-class corridor, in a train jam-packed with troops on New Year leave. Amazing how, in such circumstances, the attendants with their hot coffee or fruit and mineral water managed to work their way back and forth, fighting every inch of the way and remaining somehow in a good humour—I shall never hear an Italian say "*Permesso!*" without remembering that Rome express. I shared my window with an officer of the Carabinieri, who had gallantly given up his seat to a most ungrateful female; we burst into

Roman history at the sight of Lake Trasimene, and exchanged such small amenities as we possessed—I would offer a piece of chocolate, five minutes later he would respond with a crumpled Italian cigarette; I would offer half a banana, he would return the compliment with half a lemon. And all the time—*noblesse oblige*—he remained most uncomfortably erect, as if at his post in Herculaneum.

From the gleaming new Rome Termini station—surely one of the most successful of modern Italian buildings—we drove to our *pensione* near the Pincian Gate, where the Borghese gardens lap over to the terrace with its superb views of St. Peter's and the Janiculum. I had never been in Rome before; and had been warned about its winter winds. But we were lucky enough to have two weeks of sunshine—and Rome needs sunshine: it picks out the yellow lights in the local building stone, makes rainbows in the innumerable fountains, and lies like a benediction over the domes and belfries of this city of churches.

I suppose any traveller in Rome for the first time goes first of all to the Forum, and then to St. Peter's. And this is very easily done, for the circular trams that are such a boon to the saving tourist very neatly drop you off at these and other primary destinations. I must say a word in praise of Rome's trams and buses—though crowded, they are remarkably friendly and faithful, and once you have memorised the rather intricate system of lettering, you can go almost anywhere in the city for a few pence. There are even special buses that will take you to any of the main quarters after the opera—and since this may finish as late as 2.0 a.m., that is a real boon. And in the public transport of Rome you meet the most amazing mixture of people—priests and students talking all the languages, and a medley of types and costumes that really seems to prove this is more than a national capital.

And Rome itself—does it live up to its proud boast of "Capital of the World"? I must confess there were moments when I wondered if Clough

This has a pardonable touch of exasperation; and indeed the Rome of the mid-nineteenth century must have been incredibly cluttered up, with the old classical sites a wilderness, and Oudinot's guns proceeding to batter the walls and bombard the Trastevere. A hundred years later, Rome is indeed an imperial city—at least in its show places. We have Mussolini to thank for much of that, and the antiquities are now splendidly visible, through a shifting cloud of famished cats. It is perhaps a slightly decadent taste that stages grand opera out of doors in the ruined Baths of Caracalla, and the streamlined new buildings of the University City and the Foro Italico may not be to everyone's taste. But the Tiber now at last runs between firmly fixed banks, and the new *Via di Conciliazione* that leads from Sant' Angelo to St. Peter's gives a dignified and worthy approach to that magnificent rounded piazza.

I am sure I am not alone in finding St. Peter's—apart from the piazza and the dome—a disappointment, and even the Cathedral of *San Giovanni in Laterano* cold and pretentious. But what



STATUE of Garibaldi on Gianicolo Hill, Rome

glorious surprises there are in finding the interior of *Santa Maria Maggiore*, for instance, behind that unpromising facade; or lovely little Renaissance churches like San Marco; or the Cosmatesque cloister in the Lateran, so much purer and more genuinely pious than tortured marble or bronze! I suppose the truth is that tastes have changed; educated by the Sitwells and others, we now can enjoy baroque exteriors, and the great majority of Roman churches are baroque. But interiors are another matter, at least for those who have not grown up with them. Beyond a doubt the most impressive of all Rome's churches is the one that is older than its Christian altars—the superb Pantheon, with its magnificent portico, and its great dome open to the sun and the stars.

Rome has so much to offer, that it is an impertinence to give it a mere tourist's view. I cannot speak of it as a religious capital: to many, of course, it is this before all else. But even the distant gratitude of a Protestant to those dubious Renaissance Popes who were such superb art-patrons and collectors, is likely to be a little strained by the never-ending staircases and galleries of the Vatican museums. Yet here, where so much should be familiar and expected, there are surprises. I had not expected to find a young Englishman lying on his back on the floor of the Sistine Chapel, examining Michelangelo's frescoes through a pair of binoculars; I could sympathise with the Pope who had insisted on covering up the Last Judgment. But nothing had prepared me for the sumptuous splendour of the Raphael apartments, or the touching beauty of the Chapel of Nicholas V.

All Rome is a shrine to pilgrims—religious, antiquarian or artistic. But there is one place of pilgrimage that no one who cares for English poetry will overlook—the Protestant Cemetery outside the walls of San Paolo, where Keats and Shelley are buried. It is a delightful setting, with the old wall crumbling along one side, and a little island of cypresses and gravestones sheltered in the triangle whose base is filled by the plain stone pyramid of Cestius. I was struck by the accretions of history in this place: on the outside of the city wall, against which Shelley's ashes lie, there is now a recent tablet to local Italian partisans who fell here in an action against the Germans in September, 1943. Keats and Severn lie together, in the furthest corner of the cemetery: according to his wish, there is no name upon Keats's gravestone, but the fine memorial relief on the wall above fitly confirms his immortality.

Much of my own time in Rome was spent exploring the ground of the siege of 1849, from the heights of Gianicolo where Garibaldi on his great bronze horse now averts his gaze from the city he failed to save, to the south-western corner of the wall, where the breaches of the French guns are still clearly visible. Arthur Hugh Clough, in those thrilling months when Lombard gallantry and Garibaldi's Legion—reinforced by many of the artists and foreign students of Rome—wrote some of the finest pages in the history of resurgent Italy, went the rounds of the churches and solemnly visited the Vatican Galleries like any Victorian abroad. But he was passionately engaged, in spirit if not bodily, in the defence of the Roman Republic; and it may be that "Say not the struggle naught availeth" was in fact written in the open, under fire, with his notebook resting on his knee. At least that one poem was to find a sudden new

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