

My visits abroad.

" Ah ! quel plaisir d'etre en Voyage !"

Jean de Paris.

Three Times in Italy.

It was not long after I had started classes in Cambridge that I began to have more work to do than I could well get through. The Government Education Department at that time started evening classes in villages. As I had been a Royal Academy student I was recognised as a suitable teacher. I accepted the appointment and I did evening work as well as day work. By the end of the winter I was exceedingly tired and needed a complete change. Louisa Bensly had been to Italy twice but was more than willing to go for a holiday there for the third time so we arranged to visit Pisa, Florence and Venice together. The very idea of seeing Italy seemed to sweep away my tiredness. I had forgotten it by the time Louisa and I had boarded the train for King's Cross. The train started at half past seven in the morning.

My mother had made up for me a packet of sandwiches but advised me to get something to eat at Victoria. When we got there I certainly felt hungry after such an early breakfast and made for the restaurant. Louisa demurred and said it was not necessary to have another breakfast. I said I wanted it and she followed protesting but succumbed to coffee and a bun. When our train rolled out of the station I felt in the highest



spirits but Louisa had become more and more thoughtful and she hardly spoke. I opened my bag and purse to see that everything was safe. "I know foreign money better than you do," said Louisa. "I had better do all the paying, so I'll keep your purse for you". Not knowing what was in Louisa's mind I gave it to her.

What was in Louisa's mind was this :- Mrs. Bensly had said to her -"I feel sure that Mary might be inclined to be extravagant. You must look after her". At once a magnificent plan dawned on the mind of my guide, philosopher and friend. This trip of ours should be done more economically than it had ever been done before. It should form a record to be proud of. She evidently repented having given way over the bun and coffee but she would not be so weak again. The wish to beat all travelling records had become a burning resolve,

There was lunch to be had on the train but she had carefully avoided giving the necessary orders for it. I shared my sandwiches with her (she had not brought any) and was quite confident that all would be well when we reached Paris. Alas ! When we did reach it she would not get out as most people do and cross the city in a fiacre. The fare would have dipped into our purse too much. Nor would she have supper in a restaurant and join the train when comfortably fed. No. She insisted that we should remain in our carriage and go right round the city by the ceinture railway. Heavens ! It was tiring and dreary.



Not only did we get no food in Paris but it meant that we must make the whole journey to Pisa - a journey without a pause - with no refreshment. She allowed no more than one longish roll each and a very small bottle of Vin Ordinaire which we must share.

At the Italian frontier a German-Swiss lady got into our carriage with her fat, professor-like husband. She settled him down as if he had been a child. She changed his hat to a cap and tucked a rug round his knees and then looked round as if for another child to take care of. I was hardly capable of realising how it was done but in a moment she had swept the passengers, including Louisa, to the opposite side of the carriage and placed ~~me~~ lengthways on the seat. Bless her! I occasionally opened my eyes to see Louisa's strong gaunt face which wore a rather puzzled expression. We got to our hotel at Pisa about eleven o'clock at night. The landlord expected us to have been fed. However he had plenty of good butter - (we had had none with our rolls). There was bread, not too stale, and tea which tasted like nectar.

Such was my excitement at being in Italy that I got up early next morning and was soon out and sitting sketching on a stone seat under the leaning tower. I was especially happy because in front of me was a green space over which peasants passed wearing their national costume - not for show but as their natural wear. I was not wise in the choice of my seat.



It was only the beginning of April and the stone was cold. I had to sit in the shade for the sun was so blinding that I could not bear the light on my paper. By the time we had left Pisa I had the worst cold that I have ever had. I thought that it was the Italian air that made me lightheaded, I thought that it was newness that made everything I saw burn itself into my brain and yet seem unreal but I know now that I must have gone about with a high temperature. The white houses, their green shutters, the sweep of the Arno, the home of Galileo are all like dreams. Some scenes ~~is~~ - not the best - I remember as I would remember dreams and others which most people would hold in their memories are blotted out of mine. It was the same when we got to Florence and the weather, although fine and cloudless, tried me dreadfully. There was a cold breeze blowing. On one side of the street I was shivering with cold and on the other I felt scorched as if I were in the tropics. I was greedy to see all I could see and went to galleries and churches. Luckily I have visited Florence again otherwise I should not even remember one picture in a gallery clearly. Louisa was resolved that not only should we miss none of the sights but also that we should know all that was to be known about them. In spite of her head being full of knowledge she would go nowhere without a guide book. Whether we started out to see a church or a gallery, whether we climbed up to Fiesoli or St. Miniato, whether we went for an expedition to see the country



scenery or just a field where we could gather a few flowers, the guide book was pressed under Louisa's arm ready for service. I was not able to take in much instruction in Florence, I suppose because I was ill, and I grew to have a distaste for guide books. I looked forward to going to Venice. I had a sort of instinct that the air would suit me. I must have looked ill for Louisa became anxious about me. We reached Venice at midnight and found on leaving the station, that it was pouring with rain. When we got into the gondola she made me sit well back under the canopy and expressed her anxiety. I cheered her up. In that wet, soft air I knew I should recover. The blessed, falling rain began already to wash away the work of those hot, cold, dry, draughty Florence streets. We had rooms in an hotel in St. Mark's Square.

In spite of feeling at once nearly cured by the air of Venice I had a feverish desire for afternoon tea and a frantic desire to buy things. Both these wishes had been denied me in Florence and although they were stronger than ever in Venice they were still denied me. Louisa held firmly to my purse.

As I wanted to draw St. Mark's Cathedral and there was a view of it from our hotel window I remained behind one afternoon to draw it. Louisa left me to visit some famous church, It was not long before she returned. She was flushed and looked tense and strange and began to walk up and down the room. On my questioning her as to what was the matter, she blurted out - "My purse has been stolen!" She said that two men had knocked



against her as she entered the church and she soon found that they had taken her purse. I asked how much money was in it. "A lot !" she answered. "Can you manage to get home without it ?" "No". "If it will help, I can lend you some of mine. I must have a good ~~sum~~ sum left". "It is your purse that has been stolen !" she said miserably. "Mine ! Where did you keep it ?" "In the pocket of my coat ." "Louisa ! in that outer pocket of that little jacket of yours ! Any one could take it from that !" "Yes", she said humbly. "I know. I am afraid you must send for more money ". "Wont you hav enough over to repay me ?" I asked. She paused. There was evidently a struggle in her mind. She repeated - "You had better send for more money".

I was vexed. A storm broke on her. It was not a bad storm but another and a very heavy one poured over her when I discovered - after I had written to my mother - that Mrs Bensly had given her an ample supply of money. She, physically as well as metaphorically, bowed before the storm. I asked her to give me the amount that I had had in my purse. Afterwards she made me feel somewhat repentant of my hardness by being too humble. She would, when we were walking, lag a yard or so behind me with her head down like a tramp-woman following her man. It made me feel sad and ridiculous for she was so big and I was so small. I nearly stamped at her but that would have been no good. At last by dint of carefully leading her



to bring out her store of knowledge she was induced to walk level with me for I told her that I could take in any information far better when she told it than when she read from the guide book.

The only time that the Baedeker was forgotten was the time- two wasted, precious mornings - that we spent at the Police Station in a vain attempt to trace the thieves. Louisa could remember their appearance and incautiously described it to the police. How dull and tiring those mornings were. The second day the police ranged a line of men in front of Louisa for her to pick out the culprits. I don't suppose any of those men were the guilty ones but Louisa felt it necessary to question very carefully her memory, as well as the men, before she let them all go. The only relief to the dullness was when some men in the station began to quarrel and then to fight. Whether they were witnesses or prisoners I do not know. I grew frightened for I thought it would come to knives. The police were astonishingly patient with them - and with Louisa - but at last she decided, though with regret, to give up the hunt for the pickpockets. I was glad and I am sure the police officer was.

I now had the control of my own purse. I had afternoon tea when I liked it - and that was every day - and I bought my mother a present costing twelve lira, which seemed to Louisa a terrible extravagance.

When the time came for us to leave Venice and return



home I insisted that we should not spend the night in the train and she insisted that if we went to an hotel in Paris it should be one marked with three stars in Baedeker. She seemed to think that hotels in Paris were not likely to be respectable. In those days there were generally rooms to be had in any hotel without booking them beforehand so we did not finally fix on one until we were in the train. We looked over the list of Paris hotels with three stars and chose "Hotel Suisse".

When we reached Paris Louisa spoke to the fiacre driver with great confidence but apparently she did not make him understand the address of the hotel. He first looked thoughtful, then pleased. We got in and he then drove off at a great pace and soon we seemed to be in a very poor quarter. We arrived at a little Inn. Our driver was evidently friends with the innkeeper and his wife. Our luggage was taken with speed upstairs into two bedrooms one opening into the other. It was now late. The driver had gone. Neither of us had been firm enough over the matter. Louisa sat down on her one chair in blank misery. We did not know where we were in Paris but it was certainly out of the way of fiacres. Louisa suddenly grasped the dangers of the situation, and said firmly that we must baricade our doors before we went to bed. She dragged her bed in front of her door. My door would lock but insecurely. I put a chair in front of it with a piece of luggage on it. After all this we were so tired that we prepared for bed and slept at once and



awoke refreshed after an undisturbed night. Our rooms were the plainest that I have been in but were clean. We descended for breakfast and found that the owners of the Inn were a kindly, honest Swiss couple. They charged so little that I laughed at Fate having made us economical against our will and when all hope of beating economy records had been already lost. I think that Louisa felt that that was very hard to bear.

We reached home safely.

I went to Italy later. I was asked to take two of my former pupils there. They were to have six weeks abroad dividing the time between Venice, Florence and Rome. Their names were Dolly Lock and Molly Thornely. They were eighteen years old and fresh from boarding school. My expenses would be paid but I felt quite sure that I was expected in return to get some culture into their heads as well as to give them a good time and bring them back well. These last two requirements, I may say, I succeeded in. In the first I failed.

We were to travel very comfortably. No night was to be spent in the train and no economy need be practised in meals etc. So all sounded well. A lady, Miss Kenny, asked us at the last if she might join the party. I was very glad to have her. Yes. All sounded very well but yet I learnt a lesson from that journey. If Venice, Florence and, above all, Rome are to



be taken in, in the proper, educational, traditional way, it must not be in the company of two young women fresh from school. And the idea that you or any one else might have the power of putting culture into their minds - in the way of history, art or such like - could be thrown away at once. The time spent in Venice suited them very well and indeed it was a heavenly time. We had a gondola with its gondolier at our service all day long and even sometimes in the evening when the moon was up. We stored in it food and rugs and - we lazed. Galleries would have been wholly neglected if it had not been for Miss Kenny but little time was given to them. I am certain that the girls forgot everything they had seen five minutes after they were in the gondola. For the second time and for a different reason my memory of galleries and churches became hazy in Venice and in Florence. When we moved to Florence it did not meet with their approval at all. It was showery weather, They found the streets dark, narrow and muddy. We saw the sights but I am sure they did not care much for them. Molly and Dolly preferred shops to galleries, were bored by churches and museums, did not seem to care for scenery, as scenery, and Molly would put her hand over my mouth if my words smacked of instruction. They bought between them 22 hats in Florence.

They thought Rome was perfect! It was warm, fine weather. The expeditions that could be made in the country round were delightful. We had many picnics. The shops of Rome they found



very good. They spent much time in them. I felt that though the usual sights of Rome were denied me at least I knew its shops well. They carried back lovely silk shawls and scarves. They liked sometimes to wander about the Forum but with little interest in its history. The Palatine Hill above it was not then gardened and wild anemones of a lovely red-purple colour grew in the grass. I went off to see the beginning of some excavations and returned to find the two girls perched on a bit of ruin with Molly's sunshiny golden hair and Dolly's dark locks wreathed in anemones. They were holding flowers some of which had dropped from their hands and were scattered on their white frocks. They looked so like nymphs that I felt they had given me what I wanted, the spirit of the place.

One late afternoon they were lazy. Dolly wanted to rest and Molly said she would keep her company in our boarding house. Miss Kenny and I were free. A wonderful thing happened to me. I felt that I must go somewhere with a guide-book ! Nothing else would satisfy me. I seized mine. Miss Kenny did the same and although she had never quite dropped hers I knew she grasped it with added pleasure. We hurried out full of pleasant excitement. We chose our chaise and ordered the driver to take us along the Appian Way. We, with our guide books, did at least spend two hours in Rome in the traditional, traveller's way.

Afterwards, when Molly had two little girls of her own, she said to me - "If only I could go now to Italy with you ! It was a lovely time but I want to see it again and I know that



I should understand and enjoy it far, far more". As for me, on the other hand, I found her such a delightful travelling companion that I should love to go again with her - as she was then - and spend my time in picnics and shopping.

We all reached Cambridge in comfort spending three nights in good hotels on the way back.

One of my closest friends in Cambridge is Signe Laven. One day a few years ago she asked me if I would go with her for an Easter holiday to Italy. She wanted it to be a sketching holiday not only for my sake, but for her own. She declared that she would be quite content to sit near me and make her attempt while I sketched whatever I fancied. She promised that she would not be impatient if I chose to work at strange and difficult subjects and vowed that she would express no disappointment if I began to move elsewhere when she was only halfway through a sketch. Altogether she made me feel that I could trust her to behave like an attendant angel with artistic sympathies.

I was delighted to go abroad with my Swedish friend. I knew, without her promises, that she would prove an unusual patient sketching companion. We planned a holiday in Venice, Rome and Florence. We should take guide books but only look at them in the evenings because our holiday was to be devoted to painting and wandering. For nearly a month we should live in



a world of our own.

I was supposed to be the guide for this expedition and I saw that we travelled comfortably, spent a night on the way and were well fed.

The train as usual arrived at Venice station about midnight and, as often happens, in pouring rain. That was a great disappointment to Signe for she had heard a good deal of the moon shining on the old houses and being reflected in black velvet water. That beauty I had seen on my second visit to Venice but the weather this time was in some way worse than when I was forced into the back of the cabin of the gondola by Louisa's strong hand to shield me from the wind as well as from the rain. Now there was no excitement - no beauty. The weather was simply dismal. The buildings were sombre and the unreflecting water was evenly speckled with raindrops. No breeze ripple varied its monotony. As we neared the Rialto I was really sorry for my friend. That sorrow however was soon over for in a moment all was changed. A man appeared from some alley not far from the bridge and ran along with a torch in his hand. Other runners appeared all with torches and in a few minutes the Rialto was illuminated and the water was no longer a dead grey but shimmered and glowed. Signe and I were delighted by the suddenness and fairylike ceremony to do honour to Mussolini's birthday or an anniversary of his accession to power.

In Venice Signe astonished me by the artistic feeling



she showed in her sketch efforts. When we left Venice for Rome she felt herself half an artist. We were both happy. Her professional work and mine slipped into the backgrounds of our minds. We read no newspapers. The world's troubles, the world's dictators did not exist, and politics ceased to have any meaning. The only thing that was important was to do a little creative work.

We had rooms in Rome in an hotel above the twin churches at the upper end of the Corso. We soon found that we should have a very pleasant sketching ground in the Forum and the light could be good in the mornings for what we wanted to draw. One morning when we came down to breakfast we found considerable excitement in the hotel. The hotel keeper himself came to speak to us. He told us that Mussolini had been shot at and wounded in the arm and that his would-be assassin was a woman - an Irish lady. I did not think of it at the time but I am sure that the hotel keeper was anxious about us, especially about me. However neither of us thought even for a moment that there would be any reason to prevent us from going to our work as usual, so we sallied out and began our walk down the Corso. Never shall I forget the hullabaloo in that street! Men, - mostly black shirted, - had commandeered every car, cart, van, or lorry that they could get hold of. They careered up and down the narrow Corso shouting and demanding the salute and ready to terrorise any one who would not give it. There were many



pedestrians running along the narrow strip of pavement and the squares were full of people, many of them shouting themselves hoarse. We were glad to get to the peace of the Forum.

That afternoon we were due to call on a friend that we had made in Cambridge and who lived now in Rome. She had been the Mother Superior of St. Mary's Convent and was now the Mother Superior of a much larger Convent in Rome. We had a warm welcome from her. She had hoped that we should not fail to come in spite of the excitement on the streets for she wished to warn us. She was anxious about us and she begged us to be very careful - not to wander anywhere near where Mussolini lived, - not to talk in English in any public place, - and to keep very quiet even in our hotel. If any complication should arise in the condition of his wound no English woman would be safe from insult and might even be in serious danger. We promised that we would avoid Mussolini most carefully and we felt that it was an easy promise to give especially when we soon heard that he was going to Minorca to recover. Signe said - "I suppose I ought to feel glad that we are now safe going about Rome but I should like to have seen the great man".

When the time came for us to leave Rome for Florence we decided that we would go on our last night and drop pennies into Trevi fountain. The moon was at its full so the charm that would bring us again to Rome would certainly work. After our late meal we went out and chose our usual chaise driver.



He was an old man and his chaise was old but we liked him and he seemed to love his horse. When we told him that we wanted to go to Trevi Fountain he knew all about it and was quite jocund. He advised us to bring cups from the hotel for if we drank the water we should not be able to leave Rome but would stay there for the rest of our lives. We did not go back to the hotel to fetch cups. We preferred to be able to return to England.

We trundles along in the chaise passing an unusual number of walkers. We reached the Piazza Venezia and found it crowded. After a few minutes the carriage could go no further. We were closed up before and behind. What was happening we could only guess but our old driver thought it could be nothing else but the return of Mussolini. Signe became excited. She had acquired a great admiration for the Duce for no other reason as far as I could tell than that Rome was far cleaner than it had been and that he had put down all beggars. She talked in a loud voice, (as she always did when speaking in a foreign tongue) to our driver who really did not like it, asking him many questions - was Mussolini married? How many children had he? etc. I tried to stop her for I saw we were noticed and said in a low voice: - "You promised the Mother Superior that you would not talk in the streets". "I promised her that I would not speak English but I am speaking Italian". Even I knew how little like Italian her Italian was.

Opposite to us as we sat, was a big building; a palace; with a balcony and a lighted tall window behind it. Very



soon out stepped Mussolini. He was greeted with a mighty ovation in honour of his safe return from convalescence in Minorca. He raised his hand, the huzzahs and wild gestures stopped and he made a short speech.

Just as he ended an Italian policeman caught sight of us. He was, very angry. There was no movement of the people. They seemed to be waiting for Mussolini to come out again so those round us had time to listen to our scolding by the irate official.. I forced Signe to be quiet while the old driver was questioned. He declared his innocence and to the man's angry words only answered by asking with disarming pathos : " How on earth am I to get out of this ? " At last a way was cleared. All the time I had my work cut out to dominate the free spirit of a Scandinavian woman. She wanted to join in the altercation.

We were guided to a quiet street and from there we made our way to Trevi Fountain. The water looked black and almost sinister as we dropped our pennies in. No one but the old man saw us do it. Perhaps the want of the usual spectators broke the charm for it has not worked for me. That dark shadowy fountain and the almost deserted street are my last memories of Rome.

Signe said to me - "I am very glad that I have seen Mussolini - even from so far off and in such a dim light. I should have liked to have seen him nearer but perhaps it is a good thing that we have done with him ".



We left for Florence early the next morning. We had a peaceful time there and a busy one. In the evening, after our sketching and sight seeing, we read the history of the city. I read aloud to her an account of Savonarola. Signe was much upset by the manner of his death and asked if I would show her the next morning the stone let into the rough pavement of the great Piazza to mark the place where he had been burned at the stake.

The next morning, almost the last we were to spend together in Italy, we went to visit it. The piazza was unusually crowded but neither of us paid much attention to the people, I know that my friend was very sorrowful - not merely on account of Savonarola but for any one who had been made to suffer in such a way. She was silent and I am sure that was a good thing for us. The crowd had increased as we lingered over the stone and we walked through the people wondering what was going to happen. Quite suddenly police appeared and everyone round us was pressed back but as it happened it fell to us to be in the very front row of the course which was guarded by soldiers. We waited quietly and wonderingly and then at last we knew the reason for the excitement. From somewhere appeared carriages and in one of them was the unmistakable figure of Mussolini himself. He had on a very Roman looking military costume. His helmet was gilded and shone fiercely in the sun. His face looked Roman and he had a grim expression. Perhaps the acclamations seemed to him weak and lacking in spontaneous enthusiasm. They



seemed so to me. Florence is not Rome. His open carriage passed closely and quickly. He was driven to the building where he was to be given an official lunch.

When it was safe to speak again Signe remarked - "I am glad to have been so close to Mussolini. He seems to follow us so perhaps it is a good thing that we are leaving Italy."

A few days after this we reached England safely.