

OSCAR.

--Letter to Robert Ross.

A VISIT TO THE POPE

c/o COOK & SON, PIAZZA DI SPAGNA, ROME,

April 16th, 1900.

My dear Robbie,--I simply cannot write. It is too horrid, not of me, but to me. It is a mode of paralysis--a cacoethes tacendi--the one form that malady takes in me.

Well, all passed over very successfully. Palermo, where we stayed eight days, was lovely. The most beautifully situated town in the world--it dreams away its life in the concha d'oro, the exquisite valley that lies between two seas. The lemon groves and the orange gardens were so entirely perfect that I became quite a Pre-Raphaelite, and loathed the ordinary impressionists whose muddy souls and blurred intelligences would have rendered, but by mud and blur, those "golden lamps hung in a

green night" that filled me with such joy. The elaborate and exquisite detail of the true Pre-Raphaelite is the compensation they offer us for the absence of motion; literature and motion being the only arts that are not immobile.

Then nowhere, not even at Ravenna, have I seen such mosaics as in the Capella Palatine, which from pavement to domed ceiling is all gold: one really feels as if one was sitting in the heart of a great honey-comb looking at angels singing: and looking at angels, or indeed at people, singing, is much nicer than listening to them, for this reason: the great artists always give to their angels lutes without strings, pipes without vent-holes, and reeds through which no wind can wander or make whistlings.

Monreale you have heard of--with its cloisters and cathedral: we often drove there.

I also made great friends with a young seminarist, who lived in the cathedral of Palermo--he and eleven others, in little rooms beneath the roof, like birds.

Every day he showed me all over the cathedral, I knelt before the huge porphyry sarcophagus in which Frederick the Second lies: it is a sublime bare monstrous thing--blood-coloured, and held up by lions who have caught some of the rage of the great Emperor's restless soul. At first my young friend, Giuseppe Loverdi, gave me information; but on the third

day I gave information to him, and re-wrote history as usual, and told him all about the supreme King and his Court of Poets, and the terrible book that he never wrote. His reason for entering the church was singularly mediaeval. I asked him why he thought of becoming a clerico, and how. He answered: "My father is a cook and most poor; and we are many at home, so it seemed to me a good thing that there should be in so small a house as ours, one mouth less to feed; for though I am slim, I eat much, too much, alas! I fear."

I told him to be comforted, because God used poverty often as a means of bringing people to Him, and used riches never, or rarely; so Giuseppe was comforted, and I gave him a little book of devotion, very pretty, and with far more pictures than prayers in it--so of great service to Giuseppe whose eyes are beautiful. I also gave him many lire, and prophesied for him a Cardinal's hat, if he remained very good and never forgot me.

At Naples we stopped three days: most of my friends are, as you know, in prison, but I met some of nice memory.

We came to Rome on Holy Thursday. H--- left on Saturday for Gland--and yesterday, to the terror of Grissell {5} and all the Papal Court, I appeared in the front rank of the pilgrims in the Vatican, and got the blessing of the Holy Father--a blessing they would have denied me.

He was wonderful as he was carried past me on his throne--not of flesh

and blood, but a white soul robed in white and an artist as well as a saint--the only instance in history, if the newspapers are to be believed. I have seen nothing like the extraordinary grace of his gestures as he rose, from moment to moment, to bless--possibly the pilgrims, but certainly me.

Tree should see him. It is his only chance.

I was deeply impressed, and my walking-stick showed signs of budding, would have budded, indeed, only at the door of the Chapel it was taken from me by the Knave of Spades. This strange prohibition is, of course, in honour of Tannhauser.

How did I get the ticket? By a miracle, of course. I thought it was hopeless and made no effort of any kind. On Saturday afternoon at five o'clock H--- and I went to have tea at the Hotel de l'Europe. Suddenly, as I was eating buttered toast, a man--or what seemed to be one--dressed like a hotel porter entered and asked me would I like to see the Pope on Easter Day. I bowed my head humbly and said "Non sum dignus," or words to that effect. He at once produced a ticket!

When I tell you that his countenance was of supernatural ugliness, and that the price of the ticket was thirty pieces of silver, I need say no more.

An equally curious thing is that whenever I pass the hotel, which I do

constantly, I see the same man. Scientists call that phenomenon an obsession of the visual nerve. You and I know better.

On the afternoon of Easter Day I heard Vespers at the Lateran: music quite lovely. At the close, a Bishop in red, and with red gloves--such as Pater talks of in Gaston de Latour--came out on the balcony and showed us the Relics. He was swarthy, and wore a yellow mitre. A sinister mediaeval man, but superbly Gothic, just like the bishops carved on stalls or on portals: and when one thinks that once people mocked at stained-glass attitudes! they are the only attitudes for the clothes. The sight of the Bishop, whom I watched with fascination, filled me with the great sense of the realism of Gothic art. Neither in Greek art nor in Gothic art is there any pose. Posing was invented by bad portrait-painters; and the first person who posed was a stock-broker, and he has gone on posing ever since.

I send you a photograph I took on Palm Sunday at Palermo. Do send me some of yours, and love me always, and try to read this letter.

Kindest regards to your dear mother.

Always,

OSCAR.

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