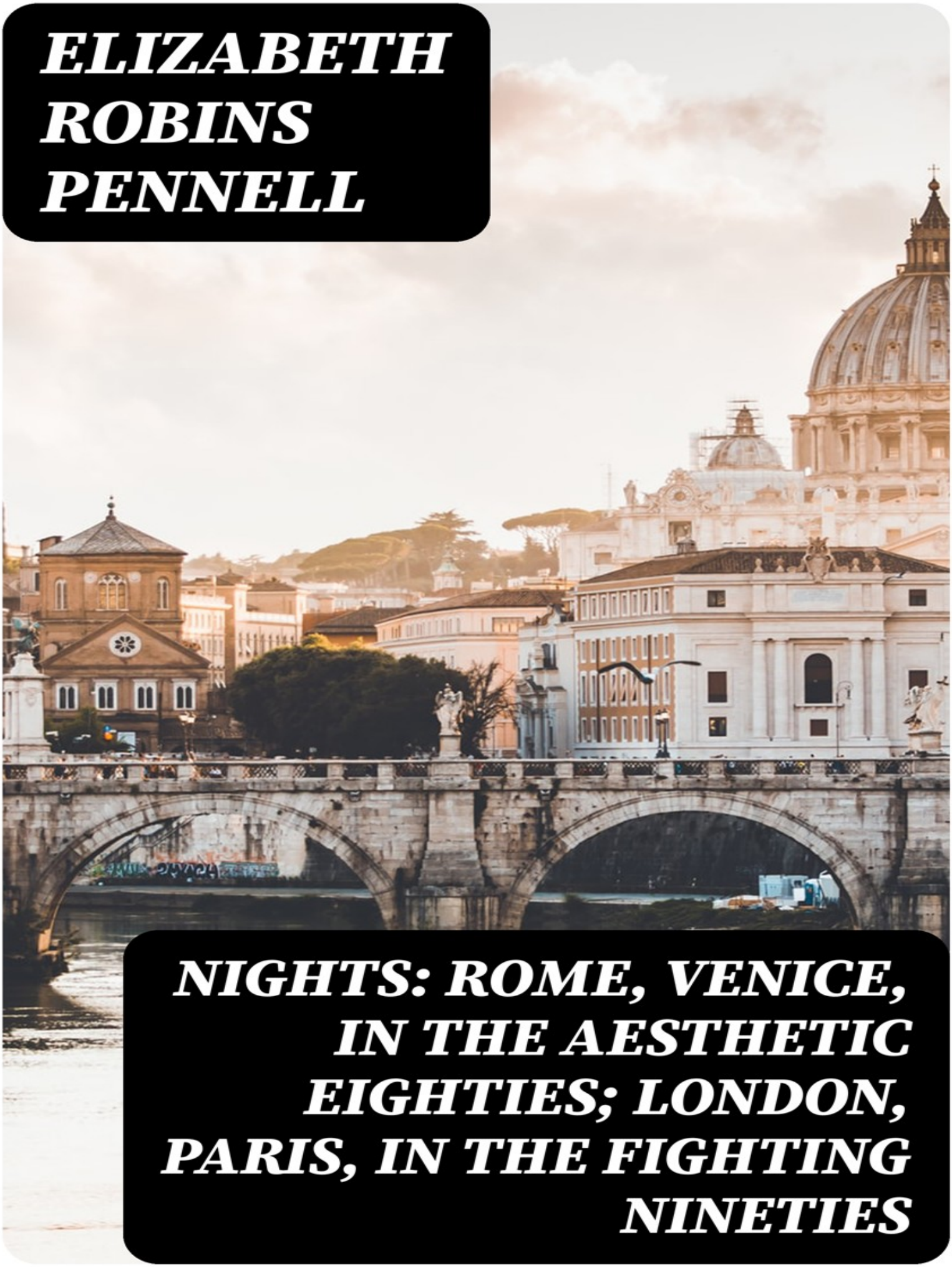
ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL



NIGHTS: ROME, VENICE, IN THE AESTHETIC EIGHTIES; LONDON, PARIS, IN THE FIGHTING NINETIES

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Elizabeth Robins Pennell

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NIGHTS

ROME ✧ VENICE
IN THE ÆSTHETIC EIGHTIES

LONDON ✧ PARIS
IN THE FIGHTING NINETIES

BY

ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL

WITH SIXTEEN ILLUSTRATIONS

PHILADELPHIA AND LONDON
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
MCMXVI

PREFACE

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There are times when we recall old memories much as we take down old favourites from our bookshelves, just to see how they have worn, how they have stood the test of years. Sometimes the books have worn so well that we cannot put them away until we have read every word to the very last again, we have not done with the memories until we have lived again through every moment of the past to which they belong. It is in this spirit that I brought my Nights of long ago to the test, and, finding that for me they stand it triumphantly and are still as vivid and vociferous and full of life as they were of old, I have not had the courage to loose my hold upon them and let them drift back once more into unfriendly silence.

It contributes to my pleasure in this revival of my Nights, that I have been helped in many ways to give more substantial form to the familiar ghosts who wander through them. My debt of gratitude is great. Mr. William Nicholson has been willing for me to use his portrait of Henley and from Mrs. Henley I have the bust by Rodin. Mr. Frederick H. Evans has lent me the very interesting photograph he made of Beardsley, to whom he was so good a friend, and to Mr. John Lane, the publisher of the *Yellow Book*, I owe Beardsley's sketch of Harland. To Mr. John Ross I am indebted for the drawing of Phil May by himself never before published, to the Houghton Mifflin Company for the portrait of Vedder, to Mr. Duveneck for the painting of himself by Mr. Joseph de Camp. The photograph of Iwan-Müller and George W. Steevens reminds me of the day so long since when I

went with them and Mrs. Steevens to Mr. Frederick Hollyer's and we were all photographed in turn, so that this record of the visit seems surely mine by right. It was Mr. Hollyer, too, who photographed the fine portrait "Bob" Stevenson painted of himself, and it was Mrs. Stevenson who gave me my copy of it. I have Mr. J. McLure Hamilton's permission to publish his portrait of J—, while J—has been so generous with his prints, portraits of old backgrounds of the Nights, that I can add this book to the many in which I have profited by his collaboration. I have also to thank the Editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, in which my Nights in Rome and in Venice first appeared, for his consent to their re-publication now in book form.

ELIZABETH ROBINS PENNELL

3. Adelphi Terrace House, London
December 25, 1915

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A WORD TO EXPLAIN

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If I wrote the story of my days during these last thirty years, it would be the story of hard work. No doubt the work often looked to others uncommonly like play, but it was work all the same.

From the start it must have struck those who did not understand and who were interested, or curious enough to spare a thought, that my principal occupation was to amuse myself. When I was young, in America the "trip to Europe" was considered the crowning pleasure, or symbol of pleasure, within the possibility of hope for even those who were most given to pleasure. In Philadelphia it also stood for money—not necessarily wealth, but the comfortably assured income that made existence behind Philadelphia's spacious red brick fronts the average Philadelphian's right. And it was with this trip that J. and I began our life together. But

misleading as was the impression made to all whom it did not concern, great satisfaction as it was to my family, who saw in it the ease and comfort it represented to the Philadelphian, we ourselves, with the best will in the world, could imagine it no holiday for us, nor accept it as the symbol of the correct Philadelphia income. Our pleasure was in the fact of the many and definite commissions which obliged us to go to Europe to earn any sort of an income, correct or otherwise—commissions without which we could have faced neither the trip nor marriage. I can remember that during the two or three weeks between our wedding and our sailing we were both kept busy, J. with drawings he had to finish for the *Century*, and I with the last touches to an article for the *Atlantic*. And if the days on the boat gave us breathing space, if not much work, except in preparation, was done, the reason was that the new commissions commenced only with our landing at Liverpool.

From the moment of our arrival in England I see in memory my life by day as one long vista of work. It is mostly a beautiful vista, the more beautiful, I am ready to admit, because the work I owed the beauty to forced me to keep my eyes open and my wits about me. Under the circumstances, I simply could not afford to let what small powers of observation I possess grow rusty, for, no matter what else might happen, I had to turn my journey into some sort of readable "copy" afterwards. If I know parts of Europe fairly well, I am indebted not to the fashionable need of taking waters, not to following the approved routes of travel, not to meeting my fellow countrymen in hotels as alike as two peas no matter how different the capitals to which they

belong, not to any fatuous preference of another country to my own, but to the work that brought us to England and the Continent and has kept us there, with fresh commissions, ever since.

It was work that sent us from end to end of Great Britain and gave me my knowledge of the land. As I look back to those remote days after our arrival in Liverpool, I see J. and myself on an absurd, old-fashioned, long-superannuated Rotary tandem tricycle riding along winding roads and lanes, between the hedgerows and under the elms English prose and verse had long since made familiar, in and out of little grey or red villages clustered round the old church tower, passing through great towns of many factories and high smoke-belching chimneys, halting for months under the shadow of some old castle or cathedral that had been appointed one of our stations by the way. Or I see us both trudging on foot, knapsacks on our backs, climbing up and down the brown and purple hills of the Highlands, circling the peaceful lochs, skirting the swift mountain streams, tramping along the lonely roads of the far Hebrides: summer after summer journeying to the beautiful places the usual tourist in Britain journeys to for pleasure, but where we went because papers and magazines at home, with a wisdom we applauded, had asked us to go and make the drawings and write the articles by which we paid our way in the world.

And it was work that sent us from end to end of France, and now in looking back I see J. and myself on the neat, compact Humber tandem,—then so new-fashioned, to-day as out-moded as the Rotary,—riding along straight poplared roads, through well-ordered forests and over wild hills,

between vineyards, one year under the grey skies of Flanders or among the lagoons of Picardy and another under the brilliant sunshine of Provence or through the rich pastures of the sweet Bourbonnais, in and out of ancient villages and towns as full of romance as their names, with halts as long under the shadow of still nobler churches and fairer castles, getting to know the people and their ways and how pleasant life is in the land where beauty and thrift, gaiety and toil, courtesy and wit, go ever hand in hand.

And again it was work that sent us still further south, to Italy which in my younger years I had longed for the more because I fancied it as inaccessible to me as Lhassa or the Grande Chartreuse. And again down the beautiful vista of work I see J. and myself still on the neat compact Humber, but now pushing up long white zigzags to grim hill-towns, rushing down the same zigzags into radiant valleys of fruit and flowers, winding between vineyards where the vines were festooned from tree to tree, and fields where huge, white, wide-horned oxen pulled the plough, bumping over the stones of old Roman roads, parting with the wonderful tandem only for the long stay in wonderful Rome and wonderful Venice.

And again it was work that sent us, now each on a safety bicycle—a change that explains how time was flying—by the canals and on the flat roads of Belgium and Holland; into Germany, through the Harz with Heine for guide, by the castled Rhine and Moselle that may have lost their reputation for a while but that can never lose their loveliness; into Austria, on to Hungary, up in the Carpathians and to those heights from which the Russian

Army but the other day looked down upon the Hungarian plain; into Spain, to sun-burnt Andalusia, for weeks in the Alhambra, to windy Madrid, for days in the Prado; into Switzerland, the "Playground of Europe," where our work must have seemed more than ever like play as we climbed, on our cycles and on foot, over the highest of the high Alpine passes, one after the other; again into Italy; again into France; again through England; again—but they were too numerous to count, all those journeys that claimed so many of my days and taught me, while I worked, all I have learned of Europe.

Of such well-travelled roads anyway, it may be said people have heard as much as people can stand, and therefore I am wise to hold my peace about days spent upon them. But on the best-travelled road adventure lies in wait for the traveller who seeks it, chance awaits the discoverer who knows his business. Why, to this day J. and I are appealed to for facts about Le Puy because a quarter of a century ago we made our discovery of the town as the Most Picturesque Place in the World and sought our adventure by proclaiming the fact in print. But our discoveries might have been greater, our adventures more daring, and I should be silent about them now for quite another and far more sensible reason, and this is that I was not silent at the time. The tale of those old days is told.

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Other journeys I made had no less an air of holiday-taking and meant no less hard labour. For most men work is

bounded by the four walls of the office or the factory, or the shop, or the school, and rigidly regulated by hours, and they consequently suspect the amateur or the dawdler in the artist or writer who works where and when and as he pleases. Journalism has led me into pleasant places but never by the path of idleness. Rare has been the month of May that has not found me in Paris, not for the sunshine and gaiety that draw the tourist to it in that gay sunlit season, but for industrious days, with my eyes and catalogue and note-book, in the *Salons*. Few have been the International Exhibitions, from Glasgow to Ghent, from Antwerp to Venice, that I have missed, and if in my devoted attendance I might easily have been mistaken for the tireless pleasure-seeker, if I got what fun I could at odd moments out of my opportunities, never was I without my inseparable note-book and pencil in my hand or in my pocket, never without good, long, serious articles to be written in my hotel bedroom. Even in London when I might have passed for the idlest stroller along Bond Street or Piccadilly on an idle afternoon, oftener than not I have been bound for a gallery somewhere with the prospect of long hours' writing as the result of it. But though the task varied, the tale of these days as well has been told, and has duly appeared in the long columns of many a paper, in the long articles of many a magazine.

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As time went on, my journeys were fewer and J. took his oftener by himself. A new variety of task was set me that left so little leisure for the galleries that I gave up "doing"

them for my London papers. My days went to the making of books which, whether I wrote them alone or in collaboration with J., required my undivided attention. When these were such books as the Life of My Uncle, Charles Godfrey Leland, or the Life of Whistler, they called for research, days of reading in the Art Library at South Kensington, the British Museum, the London Library, days of seeing people and places, days of travelling, days of correspondence, days upon days at my desk writing—these days crowded with interesting incident, curious surprises, amusing talk, hours of hope, hours of black despair—in their own way days of discovery and adventure. But in this case again the tale has been told and I am not so foolish as to sit down and tell it anew, sorely as I may be tempted. Anybody who reads further will find that the principal truth my nights have revealed to me is that the man who is interested—really interested—in something, does not want to talk, and often cannot think, about anything else. But it does not follow that he can make sure of listeners as keen to hear about it. The writer may, in his enthusiasm, write the same book twice, but even if it prove a "best-seller" the first time, he runs a risk the second of seeing it disposed of as a remainder.

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So it has been throughout my working life: my day's task has had no other object than to get itself chronicled in print. If *what* the work was that filled my day is not known, it could not interest anybody were I to write about it now. If *how* I worked during all those long hours is to me an all-absorbing

subject and edifying spectacle, I am not so vain as not to realize that I must be the only person to find it so. Most men—and women too—were brought into the world to work, but most of them would be so willing to shirk the obligation that the best they ask is to be allowed to forget their own labours while they can, and not to be bothered with a report of other people's. By nature I am inclined to Charles Lamb's belief that a man—or a woman—cannot have too little to do and too much time to do it in. But necessity having forced me to give over my days to work, it happens that I, personally, would from sheer force of habit find days without it a bore. However, I would not, for that reason, argue that work is its own reward to any save the genius, or that methods of work are of importance to any save the workman who employs them.

Whatever man's endurance may be, I know one weak woman whose powers of work are limited. There was never anybody to regulate my day of work save myself, since I am glad to say it has not been my lot to waste the golden years of my life in an office, and I am not the stern task-master or tiresome trade-unionist who insists upon so many hours and so much work in them, and will make not an inch of allowance either more or less. Sometimes my hours were more, sometimes they were less, but always my energy was apt to slacken with the slackening of the day. I never found inspiration in the midnight oil and oceans of coffee. I have always wanted my solid eight hours of sleep, and would not shrink from nine or ten if they fitted in with a worker's life. Youth often gave me the courage I have not now to take up work again—a promised article, necessary reading, making

notes, copying—at night. But youth never induced me to rely upon this night work if I could help it. My nearest approach to a rule was that at the end of the day I was at liberty to play, that my nights at least could be free of work.

The play to many might pass for a mild form of mild amusement, for it usually consisted in nothing more riotous than meeting my friends and talking with them. But I confess that the talk and the quality of it, the meeting and its informality did strike me as so singularly stimulating as to verge upon the riotous. The manner of playing was entirely new to me in the beginning. All conventions bind with a heavy chain, but none with a heavier than the Philadelphia variety. Spruce Street nights had never been so free and so vociferous and so late, and, being a good Philadelphian, I am not sure if the nights that succeeded have yet lost for me their novelty. As a consequence, if, in looking back, my days appear to be wholly monopolized by work, my nights seem consecrated as wholly to amusement. The poet's "hideous" is the last adjective I could apply to the night my busy day sank into.

How I worked may concern nobody save myself, but how I played I cannot help hoping has a wider interest. Those old nights were typical of a period, and they threw me with many people, contemporaries of J.'s and mine, who did much to make that period what it was. The nights as gay, as stimulating, that I have spent in other people's houses I have not the courage to recall except in the utmost privacy. Pepys and N.P. Willis in their time, no less than a whole army of Pamelas and Priscillas in ours, have shown the lengths and indiscretions to which so intimate a breach of

hospitality may lead. I have had my experience. For some years a house with closely curtained windows has reproached me daily for not understanding that the man who invites the world to stare at him and is not happy if it won't, objects when his neighbours say lightly what they see. I am every bit as afraid to speak openly of those people who shared our nights and who, with us, have outlived them. Cowardice long since convinced me that it is not of the dead, but of the living, only good should be spoken—and if good cannot be spoken, what then? However, it is not in pursuit of problems that I have busied myself in reviving those old nights, but rather for the pleasure we all of us have, as the years go on, in feeling our way back along the Corridors of Time and living our past over again in memory. If I go further and live mine over again in print, it is because I like to think the fault will not lie with me if it altogether dies—I have given it, anyway, the chance of a longer lease of life.

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It will give an idea of what ages ago those nights were, and of the youth I brought to them, if I say that I arrived in Rome on the first tandem tricycle ever seen in Italy.

I can look back to it now with pride, for I was, in my way, a pioneer, but there was not much to be proud about at the time. Rome was so little impressed that J., my fellow pioneer, and I,—J. and I who in every town on the way from Florence had been the delight of the gaping crowd, J. and I who in all those beautiful October days on the white roads of Italy had suffered from nothing save the excess of the people's amiable attentions,—scarcely showed ourselves beyond the *Porta del Popolo* and the Piazza of the same name, before we were arrested for driving the tandem furiously through the *Corso*—as if anybody could drive anything furiously through the *Corso* at the hour before sunset, when all the world comes home from the *Borghese*. But two policemen, drawing their swords as if they meant business, commanded us to dismount and, between them, we walked ignominiously to the hotel, pushing the tricycle; and an astonished and not in the least admiring crowd followed; and the policeman asked us for a *lira*, which we refused, taking it for a proof of the corruption of modern Rome—and they were so within their legal rights that I do not care to say for how many more than one we were asked a few weeks later by the Syndic, whom we could not refuse; and altogether I do not think we were to blame if, after the

policemen and the swords and the crowd had gone and the tricycle was locked up, and we wandered from the hotel in the gathering dusk, we were the two most ill-tempered young people who ever set out to enjoy their first night in Rome.

Nor was our temper improved when J.'s instinct, which in a strange place takes him straight where he wants to go, having got us into the *Ghetto*, failed to get us out again. The *Ghetto* itself was all right, so what a *Ghetto* ought to be that had I been the Romans, I would not have pulled it down, I would have preserved it as a historical monument,—dirty, dark and mysterious, a labyrinth of narrow crooked streets, lined with tall grim houses, filled with melodramatic shadows and dim figures skulking in them, but a nightmare of a labyrinth which kept bringing us forever back to the same spot. And we could not dine on picturesqueness, and we would not have dined in any of the murderous-looking houses at any price, and at last J. admitted that there were times when a native might be a better guide than instinct, and in his best Italian he asked the way of two men who were passing. One, who wore the tweeds and flannel shirt by which in calmer moments we must have recognized him, pulled the other by the sleeve and growled in English: "Come on, don't bother about the beastly foreigners!" I can afford to forgive him to-day when I remember what his incivility cost him not only that night, when we would not let him off until he had shown us out of the *Ghetto*, but on a succession of our nights in Rome, Fate having neatly arranged that at the one house whose doors were opened to us he should be a constant visitor.

Other doors might have opened had we had the clothes in which to knock at them. But we had come to Rome for four days with no more baggage than the tandem could carry, and we stayed four months without adding to it. We could have sent for our trunks, of course, or we could have bought new things in the Roman shops, but we did neither, I can hardly say why except that the story of our journey had to be finished, and other delightful articles we had crossed the Atlantic to do were waiting, and these were commissions that could not be neglected, since they were the capital upon which we had started out on our married life five months before. And our Letter of Credit was small, and Youth is stern with itself;—or, more likely, we did not trouble simply because it saved so much more trouble not to. No woman would have to be taught by Ibsen or anybody else how to live her own life, were she willing to live it in shabby clothes. It is not an easy thing to do, I know. I share the weakness of most women in feeling it a disgrace, or a misfortune, to be caught in the wrong clothes in the right place. But that year in Rome I had not outgrown the first ardours of work and, besides, in the old days, a cycle seemed an excuse for any and all degrees of shabbiness. In my short skirts, at a time when short skirts were not the mode, covered with mud, and carrying a tiny bag, I have walked into the biggest hotels of Europe without a tremor, conscious that the cycle at the door was my triumphant apology. The cyclist's dress, like the nun's uniform, was a universal passport, and I have never had the cleverness to invent another to replace it since I gave up cycling.

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If we could not spend our nights in other people's houses, neither could we spend them in the rooms we had taken for ourselves at the top of one of the highest houses on the top of one of the highest hills in Rome. There was no objection to the rooms: they were charming, but we had found them on a warm November day when the sun was streaming in through the windows that looked far and wide over the town, and beyond to the *Campagna*, and still beyond to a shining line on the horizon we knew was the Mediterranean, and we did not ask about anything save the price, which to our surprise we could pay, and so we moved in at once. Nor for days, as we sat at our work in the sunlight, the windows open and Rome at our feet, did we imagine there could be anything to ask about, except if, by asking, we could prevail upon the *Padrona's* son-in-law to go and blow his melancholy cornet anywhere rather than on the roof directly over our heads. Living in rooms was the nearest approach I had made in all my life to housekeeping, I was still in a state of wonderment at everything in Rome, from Romulus and Remus on the morning pat of butter to the November roses in full bloom on the Pincian, I was quite content to let practical affairs and domestic details look out for themselves—or, perhaps it would be more true to say that I never gave them a thought.

But even in Rome the sun must set and November nights grow chill, and a night came when, after a day of rain, a fire would have been pleasant, and suddenly we discovered there was no place to make it in. It had never occurred to us

that there could not be, fresh as we were from the land where heat in the house is as much a matter of course as a sun in the sky. At first we wrapped ourselves in shawls and blankets, hired the *padrona's* biggest *scaldino*, and called it an experience. After a few evenings we decided it was an experience we could do without and, like all miserable Romans who have no fireplace, we settled down to spending our nights in the restaurants and *cafés* of Rome.

I doubt if I should care to spend my nights that way now; a quarter of a century has added unexpected charm to a dinner-table and fireside of my own; but no Arabian Nights could then have been fuller of entertainment than the Roman Nights that drove us from home in search of warmth and food. In Philadelphia there never had been a suspicion of chance, a shadow of adventure about my dinner. It was as inevitable as six o'clock and as inevitably eaten in the seclusion of the Philadelphia second-story back-building dining-room, if not of my family, then of one or another of my friends. In Rome it became a delightful uncertainty that transformed the six flights of stairs leading to it from our rooms into the "Road to Anywhere". That road was by no means an easy one to climb up again and if we could help it, we never climbed down more than once a day, usually a little before dusk, a few hours earlier when we were in a rare holiday mood, and always in time for a long or short tramp before dinner. If we came to a church we dropped into it, or a gallery, or a palace, or a garden, when we were in time. We followed the streets wherever they might lead,—along the brand-new *Via Nazionale* to the Forum or the narrow alleys to St. Peter's, beyond the gates to the *Campagna*—