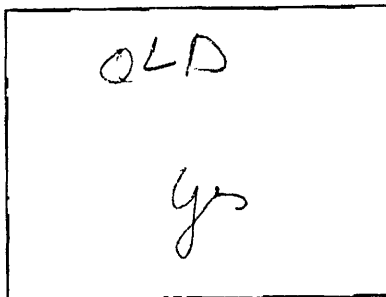


A WOMAN IN ROME.

1000 words.



Maurice Rowdon.

It isn't easy being a woman in Rome---not a foreign woman, anyway. As a native you know how to deal with the problem. But even then you can make tactical mistakes. The problem is---how to walk through the streets of Rome alone, take a coffee alone, look at the ruins alone, with your own thoughts as you have them at home. You aren't molested in Rome. Italians don't molest. They're too considerate, for one thing; for another, it's a clumsy way of trying to win a woman.

They approach you delicately. Not always. But usually. Are you English? (You don't reply, of course). American? Perhaps you are French? Parlez-vous francais? Sprechen-Sie Deutsch? Allora---you must be Italian, then--- Lei parla italiano! You assume that after a few more questions he will lost heart---or face (people are beginning to notice). But he doesn't lose anything. Your silence was an encouragement to him; without knowing it you committed a tactical blunder. Silence equals offering no resistance; and offering no resistance (for a Roman) is half-way to being won.

You can get up and leave, you can walk faster, but he may do the same. He may walk alongside you for half a mile or more. He may talk the whole time without you giving him one reply. But even if he's talking a language you know

nothing about he'll make himself understood. He has that knack: this is the knack of a people who've been invaded many times and suffered many indignities (from the foreigner) in silence. He's patient.

Sooner or later he will convey to you that he really likes you---not you as any woman but you in yourself. You will begin to understand---in pidgeon German, English or gesture-Italian---that actually he made a choice when he came up and spoke to you. Sooner or later you will have to walk to your hotel or to a restaurant. A restaurant may scare him off, as there is the question of a bill to be paid; but Rome is becoming a prosperous city and the bitter old days of only having one suit and one white shirt to your name (lovingly kept for Sundays) are over.

And for all you know yourself you may have changed your feelings without meaning to: you may have started to find him---interesting---refreshingly confident---imaginative. You may think---by this time---that he and you don't look too bad side by side, walking along the street (which would be impossible to think in London if you were just talked to in that way---yet---if only people were more forthcoming...) You may be finding his tolerance---his tolerance of your silence and your (presumably) haughty look---you may be finding that very sympathetic, too. Then perhaps your haughty look will begin to disappear. And he will notice this at once, to the second. His hour will have begun.

He asks no price for his company---he doesn't even ask the price of your attention. And this simple lack of

ambition attracts you. You like him---to make things quite clear---as a person. Of course as a man---a male---a bag of Italian tricks---you know him too well to take him seriously. But as a person he's worth listening to. Then, after all, he has seen something about you that, perhaps nobody else has quite penetrated to; so perhaps he's not so simple, after all. Perhaps not such a bag of tricks after all. And you're on holiday. You can drop him at the next corner---today---tomorrow.

Now this is all very well for a holiday. But suppose you live in Rome? You can do what the Roman woman does in the same situation: you can look straight ahead with a deliberate, hard, contemptuous scowl, as if you wouldn't even look at a dog like that (you've got better things in mind---a rather wounding thought, that). This does discourage. But even then not always. For one thing you have to be quite mature to do it, and you really have to feel the contempt. And then you are a foreigner, and not used to scowling at men.

So what do you do? Well, you can go to the police. There was the case of the American girl who plodded all over the ruins of the Colosseum trying to concentrate on them... while a young Roman followed her six inches away (his face six inches away) talking in a kind of trembling passionate undertone all the time: it is quite the thing to tell a woman you've never clapped eyes on before that she's extraordinarily beautiful, a real peach---as she's passing by; you may block her path---in which case, if she's a Roman too, she will walk round you without even giving you a glance.

But this American girl didn't know any of these things, and she had come a long way to see the Colosseum. So she went to the police, who had an office more or less in the ruins, perhaps just for situations of that kind. And their answer was, 'Do you wonder men follow a beautiful young woman like you?' And they gave her a bunch of roses---took them out of a pot on the table---wrapped them up nicely and gave them to her---something, they said, to remember them by!

Now you can't be annoyed at that kind of thing. But it does stop you seeing the Colosseum if that's what you really want to see. After all, you may be in Rome on business. You may want to take pictures or prepare a lecture. How can you explain that to the young man when you know he'd be only too happy to take your photographs for you and give you a (probably accurate) lecture not only on every stone in the Colosseum you want to know about but every other ancient building in Rome? Romans are the most wonderful improvisers in the world, after all. They've had to be.

There is one answer and one answer only. You buy a dog. From that time on no young man will approach you, let alone talk to you with his face six inches away. At best he will call out (from inside a car) to ask whether your dog lays eggs (a favourite question) or if his name is Antonio. You don't have to scowl. You can even answer the question. And he won't approach you. He's far too afraid of dogs. And if you are approached it will be by a man (probably very polite, talking English, and middle-aged) who will enquire

about your dog, having one of his own.

But isn't this rather disappointing?

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