

“...or it might take such a form as that of this pool at the Villa d’Este, that wonderful Italian garden of walls and water”. No, not walls – wall! The sound is better: *wall-and-water*, otherwise it will be wall-sand-water, and we can’t have that! There, with a photograph of the d’Este pool, with pots of agaves, and the water ...hmm...

D’Este...thirty years ago...

It was mid-April: the wisteria was about to come out over the courtyard wall of the hotel where Susan and I were staying in Rome. There were daisies and buttercups in the grass around the plane trees: truly ‘enamelled meads’. A joy to see after February and March, when the chill wind whipped across the piazzas and the Villa Borghese gardens. In its galleries, I wore two coats, scarves, and mittens on my hands in order to draw.

My brother had come out to Rome for a few days before going on with a friend to Greece, and we decided to take the trip out to Tivoli to see the gardens of the Villa d’Este. We had heard that the fountains had been restored to their former glory, and we wanted to see them, even though Michel de Montaigne was so dismissive about them.

The journey is not something I would consider now, a four-hour journey on bad roads (very bad roads), but then we were young.

“Gertrude, Gertrude – we’re ready to go!”

Susan appeared in the doorway. “Whatever are you doing?”

“Trying get this bag shut.”

“Let me help. What have you got in here?”

“All my painting things, my shawl, my walking boots – there!”

I buttoned up my coat, grasped the bag and followed my friend down the stairs. In the vestibule, my brother, Herbert, was settling his bill. Susan and I would be back in a few days.

Outside, the carriage with its two horses was waiting for us, and a picnic basket for the journey was secured next to the driver. The first church bells of the day were ringing. The sun had just risen and the air was quivering with the promise of warmth, and an augury of a magical event. Perhaps this is hindsight talking; that fond rosy cloud which surrounds past isolated hours of sheer delight, such as the ones I now recall. Perhaps.

The carriage had a canopy ready for the sun, with clear views all the way round. Our small trunks were firmly roped to the back. Herbert took my bag, to help me in.

“Why can’t you put everything in your trunk like Susan, Miss Jekyll?”

“Because I like to have my things near me, and accessible.” I climbed in by myself and held out my hand for the bag. He turned to Susan and bowed ostentatiously

“Signora Muir Mackenzie -”

“Herbert, don’t be silly” I said.

“Not at all, I am the perfect gentleman” he helped her in “and don’t glare at me!”

Together on the seat, looking to the back for the view, Herbert magnanimously having offered to face the horse, Susan and I arranged cushions all around us

against the bumpy and uncomfortable road, and pulled travel shawls over our knees and feet.

“A Tivoli!” Herbert cried as he stepped in, and fell into his seat as the carriage started off.

We were as excited as children. The words “Villa d’Este” repeated in my mind, down-up, down-up, like the beginning of a waltz ‘vi – lla -d’e - ste, vi – lla - d’e-ste’. I have an idea I sang them as we rolled out of the city, I, my best friend and my beloved brother. Susan and I had been working hard, sketching and painting and learning the art of the goldsmith. We needed fresh air instead of cold, stuffy museums, countryside instead of musky churches. Above all, we needed to feel *warm*.

Herbert opened his Baedeker.

“There are pages about Hadrian’s Villa” he said.

“And very little about the Villa d’Este” I grumbled

“Let’s see: ‘Villa d’Este, at the entrance of the town near Porta San Croce (entrance right of San Francisco), erected by Pirro Ligorio in 1549 for Cardinal Ipolitto d’Este... was presented by the Duke of Modena to Monsignor Hohenlohe’ ”

“That’s who gave us the permission, well, his secretary did” Susan said

“Will we see him?”

“Of course not” I did glare at him this time. “It’s Easter next week, he’ll be in Rome”

“Hmm. ‘Though sadly neglected it still retains traces of its former splendour: in the casino frescos by Frederigo Zuccari and Muziano (damaged). In the gardens,

terraces, grottos with cascades, densely shaded avenues, lofty cypresses, groups of trees of the most varied hues, and charming points of view' Just the thing!"

"Listen!" commanded Susan, twisting round "Oh, look!"

The road ahead was full of goats, making a terrific noise with their bleating and their bells. The driver started gesticulating and barking out words which perhaps would not bear translation, while the goatherd shrugged and urged his flock onwards. Herbert leaned over the side and prodded some animals with his walking stick.

"Go on – *via, via!*" The carriage stopped, with goats all around it.

Susan and I started to wave our arms.

"Mmmeah! meah !" we cried, "mea!" and shouted with laughter as the goats and the driver got crosser and crosser. Our efforts did not help. "Mehaaaah! At last the goats were herded past and the carriage started off again. We fell back giggling, and re-arranged the tumbled cushions.

The road, if you can call it that, wound through olive trees, passed lemon groves and vineyards. Tall cypresses, those most Italian of trees, cast early morning shadows on the terracotta roofs and the sun-scorched ochre walls in the villages. On the walls next to the doors of the houses were little water fonts, and sometimes, through an archway, we had glimpses of tiny courtyards with bright flowers in pots, and a woman sweeping. We passed arched shrines with Madonnas inside, some with lit candles, others with flowers dried by the sun.

We stopped for a second breakfast from our picnic basket, offering some to the driver, Arturo. He politely took what we offered and went to the other side of the road to eat it.

It was warm, so warm....

We were silent the rest of the journey, I, observing the shapes of the ancient olives, the different shades of green, and making pictures in the clouds.

When did I last do that?

The road began to rise and Herbert was the first to see the hilltop town that was Tivoli. At the hotel, two men came to unload the luggage, and allow the carriage into the courtyard for the horses to feed and rest before their return journey to Rome with other travellers.

I was too excited to take the midday rest, and I opened the shutters to look out. My window faced a gorge, with water tumbling down, white flecked, drenching the hanging vegetation on the rock, and crashing out of sight at the bottom. On my left, on the edge of the rock, so near I might have leaned across and touched it, stood the Temple of the Sibyl, built exactly to the proportions of Vitruvius, but now without its roof and several pillars. I dragged a chair across to the window, unpacked my sketchbook and pencils, and started to draw.

At three in the afternoon, I pulled on my boots and wide-brimmed hat, and we walked downhill to the Villa we had come to see.

The entrance, indeed next to the church, was a heavy wooden door in a high wall. The bell tolled and it was several minutes before it was opened by a man in shirtsleeves and waistcoat.

“Signor?” he looked at Herbert. I had the invitation in my hand and offered it to him. He looked at it and then smiled. “Prego” and opened the door wider. I was almost trembling in anticipation – what if the garden was a disappointment?

We followed the man down the path at the side of the building, and onto a broad terrace. Herbert spoke to him in Italian, and then went with him into the house to see the paintings. In order to first see the garden without encumbrance, and then decide what to draw, I stowed my painting bag under a stone seat: an action without which the magical happening would not have occurred.

We looked over the little wall, and could see nothing but huge cypresses, and a view across the town. There was a sound of water. Susan squeezed my arm.

“Come on, let’s find it!” So we went down the steep path, the water sound getting louder and louder, and found an avenue of fountains. I was enchanted by the long stretch of dripping maidenhair fern, running my fingers through it and feeling the stone shapes underneath.

“There’s supposed to be a hundred” Susan said “I suppose there are, if you count the spouts up and down and the fans! “

“Look at these masks, their cheeks blown out with the water!” I imitated them.

“Do you suppose they stop puffing and blowing when there is no one here?”

“Of course, it’s just for us!” We laughed and trailed our hands under the spouts as we walked along towards a statue of a woman with a spear, silhouetted against the sky.

The woman was accompanied by a sculpture of Romulus and Remus with their wolf-mother and to her side was a collection of ruined miniature buildings, ‘Little Rome’

We wandered through the grottoes with their broken mosaics, water dripping over the niches that once held statues, and back along a terrace path, following a roaring of water until we found a high fountain with steps either side.

Susan looked up and shaded her eyes.

“Look at the loggias, one on top of the other! Just imagine the Cardinal at the top “

I was inspecting the nelumbium which filled the pool with its huge lotus leaves, and admiring the wreathing of the vegetation on the surrounding stonework.

“If I go further back - “

I followed her, and we found the pools with water running into them. At the side of us, a waterfall, and ahead of us, the cypresses.

Susan decided that she wanted to draw the vista between the cypresses up to the villa. She had her sketchbook with her, and settled onto a plinth which would once have held a Venus, or a Hercules. I was entranced with the height of those huge cypresses, and stood there, looking up, touching their rough leaf spindles. I felt the dizziness of being in contact with trees three hundred years old. I shut my eyes and commanded the past.

Then, I moved on back up to the avenue of fountains to explore further. I could see a great fall of water before me, between two walls. I entered a courtyard and there in front of me was the most beautiful fountain I had ever seen. On top was a stone woman with a child at her side, gravely looking over the oval sheet of water rushing down into a large pool.

“Oh!”

My hand was on my breast and I was quite still in admiration. I watched the water pouring over, over, over... white and green...and leaned my hand against a plane

tree as old as she. An earth goddess rather than a Madonna. Could I draw her?
Could I draw the water? I would try.

As I walked up the steps to the terrace, I was conscious of the change in the sound of the fountains. The rush of the Sybil fountain subsided, like the cellos of an orchestra, overpowered by the brass section of the high fountain. The runs of water trilled down the bannisters of the steps - the flutes - while the gushes of the avenue masks were the burbling woodwind. I stopped, and the whole combined into rumbustious chords. As I ascended to the terrace, I was sure that it wasn't a symphony but a concerto I was hearing. I imagined I could hear a piano...arpeggios, runs, trills, chords. Strange illusion!

Except that it was not an illusion. It was a piano, played by someone who completely knew what he was doing. I moved to the loggia at the end of the terrace and listened, enchanted, as the piano joined with the fountains in its rises and falls, its cascades of notes, its glorious carillons! I was breathless with the sound, and leaned on the balustrade. The sun was glowing gold and pink over Rome in the distance. I did not need to draw the water; the pianist was doing it for me, like a magician. I was as near to Paradise as I ever have been.

The pianist stopped, and I waited, hoping for more. A man appeared, thin and old, with long grey hair, dressed in a shirt and rough trousers, carrying a cigar. He looked startled to see me, then bowed slightly.

"Buona sera Signora".

I could see he had a tonsure.

"Buona sera" I replied. I started to move away.

“You are English?” he said, in my language, with an accent – French?

“Yes. I do not want to intrude; I was listening to the music”

“Ah!” He puffed on the cigar, sitting on an old metal seat. “It is an upright old piano, but I have to play.” So here was the magician!

“It was so wonderful, against the sound of the fountains, like a concerto.” What lame words these were!

He looked at me and smiled. “Thank you.”

I thought, you are used to admiration. I sketched his head in my mind. Not handsome, but compelling. A modern-day Prospero, who commanded music, magic and water...

Just then I was aware of Susan and Herbert at the other end of the terrace.

I didn't want them, my loved ones. They would break the spell.

Prospero saw them too and looked annoyed. He got up, inclined his head towards me, and went back into the villa. Prospero had broken his staff; but there were still the fountains...

“Who was that?” asked Susan.

“I don't know. A priest I think”

“Didn't look like one,” said Herbert. “Are you alright Gertie?”

I shivered. “Just a little tired.”

“Let's go back then” he said kindly, and offered his arm.

I told them over supper, about the cypresses, the Sybil, the fountains, the orchestra, the piano, and Prospero. I wanted to share it now, with them.

Herbert looked at me when I had finished. "I wonder..." He got up to speak to one of the waiters and came back, smiling.

"I was right! A brilliant pianist, who became an Abbé and who stays sometimes at the Villa! Gertrude, your Prospero was - Franz Liszt!"

I couldn't have been more shocked.

"Your face, Gertie!"

My face indeed!

Franz Liszt - he wrote a piece about the fountains of the Villa d'Este some years later

I believe...