

## A SAINT'S DAY IN CAPRI

*Robert Alder McLeod*

THE FOURTEENTH OF MAY is the festival of San Costanzo, the patron saint of Capri. Since this is the great event of their year, the Capriots contrive to get three days' sport out of it, beginning their merrymaking on the day before the fourteenth and not ending it until the day after. The festival fell this year on a Wednesday.

On the Tuesday morning, Capri was startled by the advent of a brass band of some twenty pieces from Naples. They were chiefly boys and not one of them seemed over thirty; a healthy looking set, who blew lustily and drank copiously, even while wearing on their hats the inscription "Inmates of the Royal Institution for Veterans and the Infirm". But in art, and above all in music, one may be a veteran at a tender age. After playing before the houses of the syndic, the judge, and other dignitaries, they visited our hotel, taking their stand in the courtyard, where no sound could be lost and, as the landlord's wine flowed freely, their music here was especially boisterous and prolonged.

The small piazza, Capri's forum, usually the dullest of places, had put on a strange air of gaiety. A flagstaff had been planted in the middle of it and a huge Italian flag was now fluttering in the confined space, like a bird in a cage. A fair had suddenly sprung up! There were as many as five stands, and they all made a great display of stale cakes and strings of dried cucumber-seeds and other tempting confections, which appealed to the appetites of the knots of children gathered around them.

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This paper was written in 1873 by Robert Alder McLeod, (1843-1878), who was born of Loyalist stock in Bedeque, Prince Edward Island. While retaining his Canadian citizenship to the end, he lost an arm in the American Civil War and in spite of many misfortunes attained an outstanding academic record—possibly the highest in history—at Harvard University. The paper was submitted by his nephew, Dr. Harold Garnet Black, a graduate of Mount Allison University, who gave an account of McLeod's extraordinary career in an article, "Soldier of Misfortune", in the *Dalhousie Review*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Spring, 1960).

For nearly a week the mason had been busy at work on a queer little structure on one side of the piazza, close by the jail. At first, only unsightly heaps of stone and mortar were to be seen, but these were gradually shaped by the trowel of the artist into a sort of rockery, of which the various parts were joined by arches and bridges. The salient points were adorned with vases and female busts, and in the centre was an altar. Bright colours were then freely laid on by the same hand and wild flowers transplanted into the vases. On the altar was placed the figure of a man, a very flat person, and altogether much like an exaggerated gingerbread man, except that his complexion was of a decided pink. It was therefore in fine contrast with his coal-black eyes, moustaches, and hair. In his hand he held a hollow wand terminating in the nose of a watering-pot.

A barrel of water stood on the top of the jail and a system of reed pipes, descending from it, disappeared in the saint's back; for this figure was meant to represent San Costanzo, in his most beneficent quality of rain-bringer. Since the rainfall is much less in Capri than elsewhere in Italy, the island occasionally suffers from drought. When such a calamity befalls them, it is the custom of these simple people to celebrate a *triduo* in honor of their patron saint; and for three days the priests pray to him unceasingly and carry his silver effigy in solemn procession about the island. San Costanzo is rather partial to these jaunts and never fails to pay for them promptly by sending plenty of rain. They say that once upon a time he used to bring water down from a clear sky. However this may be, it is certain that nowadays he conforms more to common usage and causes rain-clouds to gather first.

At the call of the vesper bell, which rang much earlier than usual, I joined the crowd that was pouring into the church of San Stefano. A great part of the nave was taken up by the band of veterans, who stood there with hats on, giving a most deafening performance of a lively opera air. The priests had just brought out from the sacristy the famous silver effigy of San Costanzo, of which they are the guardians. It is a half-figure of life size, and represents his saintship with mitre on head, crosier in hand, and two fingers extended in benediction.

The precious idol was slowly borne down one aisle and up the other and finally deposited upon the chief altar. Men, women, and children knelt as it passed and with words and gestures devoutly begged the saint's blessing. To make this ceremony more imposing, long strings of huge firecrackers that had been arranged on the walls without were now touched off, and at the same time the mason's fountain was set a-going and, for five minutes, squirted

merrily away from the wand and other orifices. In the evening the flat man and his rockery were illuminated with little oil lamps.

It is plain that the Capriots enjoy nothing more than the peaceful explosion of gunpowder, and the next morning was preceded and ushered in by furious volleys of firecrackers. The main feature of the day was to be the carrying of the silver saint in procession down to his former home, the church which bears his name, near the marina. By nine o'clock the piazza was quite filled with *contadini* in their brightest holiday attire. It was a sea of Phrygian caps and gaudy handkerchiefs.

His saintship was borne out from the church, the veterans meanwhile doing their whole duty. Close by the flagstaff, in the centre of the piazza, was a stand decently covered with white. On this the saint was deposited, not without much ceremony, facing toward the apothecary's shop, and a gorgeous yellow canopy protected him from the sun. Certain ropes, provided with pulleys and stretched from the top of the apothecary's shop to another housetop on the opposite side of the piazza, passed directly over the saint's station; and the bustle of preparation at the two ends promised something—but what, I could not guess.

Suddenly there was launched from the apothecary's roof an angel. She glided swiftly down one of the ropes, until nearly directly over the saint; then, by an ingenious contrivance, she was made to descend so as to be on a level with him. She was a good-looking angel, better dressed than most of the women present, and her heavenly origin was chiefly indicated by two shining silvery wings. Her very slim wooden legs, crooked at a sharp angle at the knee and sticking out separately behind, somewhat lessened the grace of her appearance. An empty censer was hanging from her hands. The stoutest and most venerable of the priests stepped forward bareheaded, filled and lighted it, and the white smoke rose freely in the calm air.

The angel being now adroitly jerked by a rope from behind, she and the censer were set swinging in opposite directions, and she had all the appearance of voluntarily honouring the saint, by waving the incense before him. This was the supreme moment of the show. Water squirted from the flat man's wand and oozed from the other orifices of the fountain while the peasants kept breathless silence. Then, as the angel re-ascended and began to glide backwards towards the roof whence she had come, the waving of the incense seemed to be a benediction for all. It was touching to see how earnestly the people, many of them kneeling, crossed themselves over and over

again, kissed their hands to the angel, murmured bits of prayer and, by a peculiar gesture of the two forefingers, asked her blessing.

This spectacle over, the procession was formed. It passed out through the massive medieval gateway and followed the windings of the steep road that leads down to the church of San Costanzo about a mile distant. The sun was hot, though it was still early in the morning, so that, instead of joining the line, it was pleasanter to step aside, as I did, upon the little public terrace, the Pincio of Capri, and watch it move slowly down.

At first the procession was so shut in by high walls that I could watch only glimpses of it, here and there, among the vineyards and fig trees, but its gradual advance was clearly marked by the successive explosions of fire-crackers on the tops of the houses that lay on the route. At length, it reached a point where the walls cease and the road rises to a level with the tops of the orange trees in front of it, and the view was now unobstructed. It was a most pleasant sight. The distance hid all unsightliness of detail, and the bright-coloured line seemed to have no firmer support than the tips of the orange grove.

First marched fifty maidens in white, with blue sashes and veils. These were the *Figlie di Maria*. They had taken a vow not to sit as models for artists, not to dance the tarantella, and not to marry. It is commonly said that none but homely girls join this self-sacrificing band, but the truth is that some of the younger ones are very pretty. It may be suspected that recruits are enlisted at a very tender age, before those little beauties know the value of their charms, and that afterwards those who have a chance to marry desert their colours, so that, of the older ones, only the more plain-looking are left in the service. The other girls of the island jestingly call themselves by way of distinction, *Figlie del diavolo!*

The fifty white-robed maidens bore a blue flag. They were followed by about as many boys carrying the red banner of San Costanzo, with the saint's head marked upon it. Next came that frightful band of men known as the *Brothers*, most often seen at funerals, to which their presence gives a peculiar ghastliness. They wear a white gown reaching to the ground, and around their shoulders a small dark cape, the colour of which shows to which of the orders they belong. The head and face are covered by a tight-fitting white hood, in which are holes for the eyes and which ends in a pointed flap that reaches to the breast. While their identity is thus quite concealed, their expressionless faces and apparently sightless eyes give them a grotesque and horrible appearance.

Next came that very holy man, the hermit of Capri, bearing aloft a crucifix; then about a dozen priests, several of whom had come over from the mainland. They were gay in scarlet capes, and chanted lustily. In their midst, borne on the shoulders of four of the *Brothers*, was conspicuous the glittering saint under his yellow canopy. Close on their heels followed the veterans, silent just at this moment, and after them, that formidable corps, the Capri militia.

Many of those citizen soldiers could have been recognized, had they been nearer, but as it was, I could distinguish only my tailor, straightening his legs as he walked, and my comely young barber who, as corporal, brought up the rear. Last of all came the crowd of peasant women, without whose following and wild singing no Capri procession would be complete. Their song was more pleasing for the distance, and their bright-coloured garments looked like broken bits of a rainbow. These Capri airs are remnants of ancient Greek music and are curiously executed. A part of the singers carry on the burden of the song in a shrill key for a certain time, at the end of which they let it drop to a low pitch. Then the others, who meanwhile have been moaning a sort of low accompaniment, rush in with their voices, seize upon and carry forward the shrill air until they are themselves relieved of it in like manner.

In this order the procession made its way down to the ancient church of San Costanzo. There the silver effigy was placed on a conspicuous throne, and thither flocked the people during the day to seek its blessing. When at a later hour I strolled down, I found the interior of the little church so decked out with tinsel and coloured hangings that even the six famous antique marble columns, which are the chief ornament of this building, were hidden from view. As these columns had once seen the licentious revels of Tiberius in his *Palazzo al mare*, it seemed not improper that they should stand veiled in the presence of the great Christian saint. In front of the church a miniature fair was in operation, and a clever juggler from the mainland was holding the attention of young Capriots and winning their pennies by the wonderful three-card trick.

This day of busy and happy idleness was crowned in the evening by a display of fireworks in the piazza. Many of the larger pieces failed, but the deafening firecrackers succeeded only too well. The most fun was made by dragging around among the crowd a pasteboard donkey and lady rider, which burnt and fizzed and exploded in a marvellous way at all points.

The next morning the procession was again formed and the saint brought back to the piazza. The angel came down once more from the

apothecary's roof, waved her incense as before, and presented the saint with six wax candles, which are regarded, it is said, with peculiar veneration. His saintship next entered the church, took his station upon the chief altar, and remained there for the rest of the day. He was followed thither by the band and the militia. The proud step of my barber told as plainly as words could have done that soldiering was his true calling. The veterans again made everything under the quaint little domes quiver with their brazen music. When they had retired and when the wild chant of the *Figlie di Maria* was ended, the women present pressed forward and knelt around the altar, waiting their turn to kiss the relics of San Costanzo. A priest held in his hands a small box, the glass cover of which was fastened to it by cords and sealing wax. In it was a finger bone of the blessed martyr lying on a bed of rose cotton. Each woman, as the box was presented to her by the priest, kissed it, touched her forehead to it, and kissed it again.

This observance, common throughout Italy, was originally a way of making the sign of the cross. Not until five days later, when the last perfume of the women's kisses might be supposed to have passed away from the holy little box, were the men allowed a like privilege.