



The Basilica of St. Mary Major, home of the Relics of the Crib was, it seems even at this time, one of Cornelia's shrines of predilection. In those days there were still vineyards along the N. E. side and it must have changed little during the half-century since Piranesi made this engraving of it.

# The Connellys' First Visit to Rome

## Part II

By

L. S. MUIR

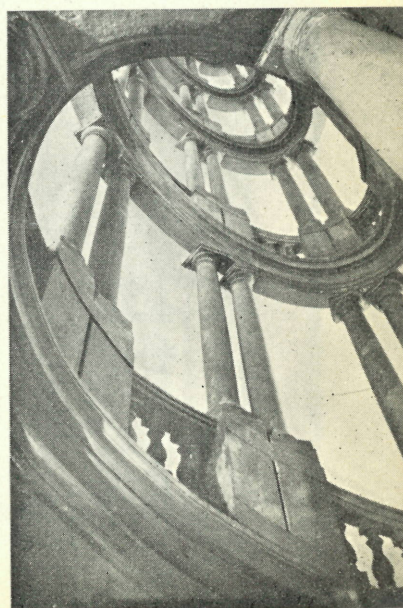
History often hangs by a thread. Much that we know about Pierce and Cornelia Connelly's first visit to Europe would not be known at all if it were not for the fact that their grand-daughter, Princess Marina Borghese, has preserved for us the detailed passport of their travels and that this disintegrating and faded document was able to be rejuvenated by scientific treatment in the Vatican Library.

We have, therefore, clear evidence that Pierce remained in England from the date of his Calais visa, May 13th 1836, to his application for a French visa from his own legation in London on August 27th. Four days later he was travelling to Marseilles and thence to Leghorn by the steamship *François Premier*. One can guess that the passport authorities had no trouble in identifying among the Italian crowd at Florence, Spoleto, or Montegualandro, this gaunt American "age 31 years, 5 ft 10 1/2 in., forehead retreating, eyes grey, nose prominent, mouth small, chin long, hair bald, complexion pale, face thin" whose return to Rome — through the Porta del Popolo on 12th September — was so excitedly

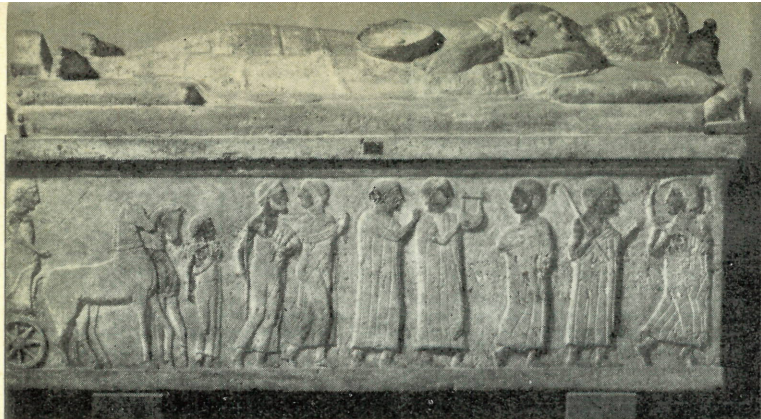
awaited by Cornelia and the children. There was little chance in those days of keeping to any scheduled time of arrival so Pierce is likely to have appeared unannounced at the Palazzo Simonetti and to have taken the beautiful elliptical staircase in giant strides until he reached Apartment 5, probably on the third floor.

We know much of what he had to tell his family but little of the way in which Cornelia, Mercer and Ady had spent their time. One topic of interest which had enthralled Rome that summer was the

Specchi's  
beautiful  
staircase, still  
to be seen  
at the  
Palazzo  
Simonetti  
(Banco  
di Roma).







Recumbent Warrior  
in Terracotta  
from Cerveteri.

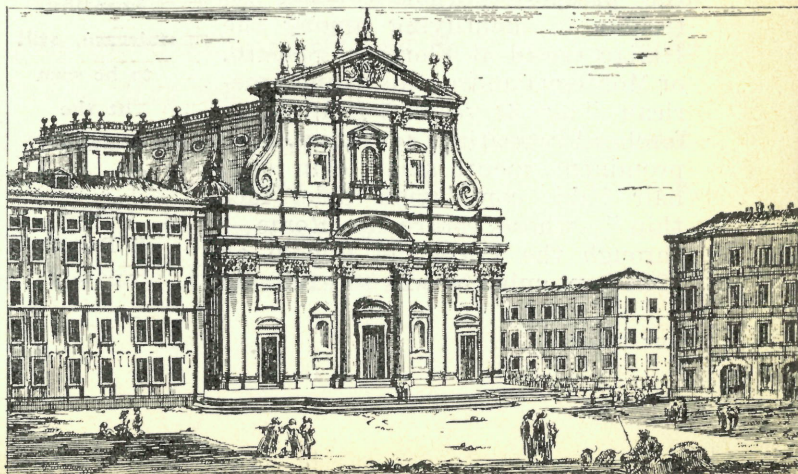
exhibition at the Palazzo Chigi of the wonderful Etruscan finds from Cerveteri where General Galassi had uncovered a tomb of the fifth century B. C. in which a prince and princess were found lying on funeral beds in rich clothing adorned with gold and silver, with a throne, a chariot and every kind of vessel of Attic, Egyptian, Assyrian, and Etruscan design. It is hardly surprising that Pope Gregory XVI thereupon decided to found the Etruscan Museum at the Vatican to display these and other treasures of a lost civilization, whilst Macaulay found the stage set for the great House of Tarquin to advance on Rome in his *Lays* of 1842.

There is a tradition that during this Roman stay, Cornelia was the guest of Marcantonio and Gwendalin Borghese at the fabulous Villa Aldobrandini at Frascati. If so, the summer of 1836 during Pierce's visit to England is the only stretch of time in which she could or would have gone there. During all the rest of their visit they had engage-

ments in the City or were taking lessons in a variety of accomplishments — art, music, Italian. From a "Thank you" letter of Pierce to Lady Shrewsbury at Alton Towers we, however, learn of one incident which throws considerable light on Cornelia at this early date in her Catholic life.

The Church of Sant'Ignazio is the resting place of St. Aloysius and St. John Berchmans. Cornelia was naturally anxious about the future of the children whilst her convert-clergyman husband had no profession. For several weeks she made a daily "pilgrimage" to St. Aloysius' tomb and prayed earnestly that this young saint would take her son, Mercer, under his protection. We have a fleeting glimpse of the little boy in a letter from Cornelia to her sister. He is self-willed and tries to play the master with the French nannie, Annette. Aloysius who had likened himself to twisted iron that needed straightening was a fitting patron for a boy whose obstinacy might

Sant'Ignazio  
in Piranesi's  
time





prove to be that of the strong rather than of the weak. The prayer had a remarkable counterpart in action. Quite unexpectedly and independently, Pierce in England received this offer from Lord Shrewsbury — the Earl would make himself responsible for Mercer's whole education. Pierce tells how Father Roothaan, the Jesuit General, and Father Rosaven are impressed by this answer to prayer adding that Mercer owes it "to his admirable mother's faith and purity." That St. Aloysius had taken care of the boy's lesser and temporal need, must have later been a ray of hope for Cornelia in the agony of his untimely death in 1853.

As soon as Princess Gwendalin Borghese heard of Pierce's return from Alton she came in from Frascati to see him and get first-hand news of her parents. On Sunday September 18th, Mr. and Mrs. Connelly were at an English family dinner with Cardinal Weld in the Odescalchi Palace which looks onto the beautiful façade of the Basilica of the Twelve Apostles.

Though the Connelys had spent such a comparatively short while in Italy, and Pierce had hardly been in Rome at all, their correspondence reveals that other people were beginning to rely on them: — Could Pierce help his friends to visit the Sistine Chapel and perhaps be their guide? Would he go with Cardinal Franzoni to judge an English sculptor's bust of Mons. de Reisach? We hear of Pierce visiting the Accademia di San Luca with Cornelia and perhaps this was how the Connelys came into touch with Frederick Overbeck who, with his fellow "Nazareni" lived an almost eremitical life on the Pincio, at St. Isidore's, or later in the Palazzo Cenci. Overbeck prayed and painted in the spirit of the Middle Ages. With his long hair and beautiful

ascetic face he must have helped to inspire Cornelia with her artistic ideal, which much else in the Roman art world of the 1830's might possibly have debased.

Hundreds of would-be connoisseurs — French, English, German and American — milled round the studios picking up pictures and sculpture, works devoid of genius but extravagantly praised by the critics of the day. Gwendalin Borghese was alive to their decadence as she wrote of a Dutch painter's portrait of her husband: "I think it very like and very simple which is a great deal now that effect is so much aimed at." Pseudo-Old Masters were being sold everywhere so that if Pierce secured a Guido Reni *Ecce Homo* as his letters affirm, he was keener eyed than most.

There was nothing at all exceptional in the Connelys being invited to the endless receptions of Cardinals or the great Roman Families. These would have been unbearably identical in their display of purple and jewels had not the ever-changing travellers to Rome diversified

Portico of Palazzo Massimo







Cardinal  
Joseph  
Mezzofanti  
1774-1849.

the scene. They were invited, for instance, to Peruzzi's early 16th century Palazzo Massimo with its lovely curved facade nearly opposite Sant'Andrea della Valle, or to the Austrian Embassy at the Palazzo Venezia. Cornelia apologises in one of her letters for seeming to take such events for granted. She was far too simple in heart to do so in fact.

In the biography of the world's most famous linguist, the Bolognese Monsignor — later Cardinal — Mezzofanti, there is an anecdote belonging to this period when he had an office in the Vatican Library. An English-speaking group asked to see the man whom the Pope called "a living Pentecost" and a lady in the party from America and on her way to Vienna asked him for four lines of verse in English which he wrote for her then and there. It so happens that amongst the Connelly documents there is an English quatrain by Mgr. Mezzofanti and written in his hand on April 26th, three days before the Connelly Family left for Vienna. This was, of course, no linguistic feat for a man who wrote in Anglo-Saxon, Old Coptic, Celtic, Hebrew, Russian, Welsh, Persian, even Chinese, and thirtyeight other

full languages besides having knowledge of countless dialects. On being asked once what he was teaching at the College of Propaganda Fide he said that he was helping some Californian students to compose a comparative grammar for three Indian languages which they would need in their apostolate. He was the humblest of men and any old woman could ask the Cardinal to hear her confession in her own tongue by which means he got to know the really lonely and needy of Rome. His nick-name was "Cardinal Mercy".

In the diaries and periodicals of the day, the year 1837 is concerned with hardly any topic except the cholera plague. Prince Chigi records in mid-January the Papal prohibition of Carnival masks and costumes for fear of contagion and, a few days later the appearance of a placard on the Colonna pedestal: "The Roman People *want* the Carnival". To please them and because there was as yet no case of cholera within miles of Rome, there were last minute plans for races and illuminations in the Corso, which were usually one of the sights of Europe. But the people had by then no time to plan the economic side of things which was doubtless their main interest in the affair. They went berserk and smashed the windows of the Corso Palaces to the terror of those inside. Perhaps by way of compensation to the disappointed Romans, a *Girandola* of fireworks took place at Easter and the Connelys witnessed it with the

#### Note

Owing to a mistaken date in the *Life of the Princess Borghese*, an English translation of that by the Chevalier Zeloni, the biographers of Mother Cornelia Connelly have been led astray concerning this cholera epidemic.



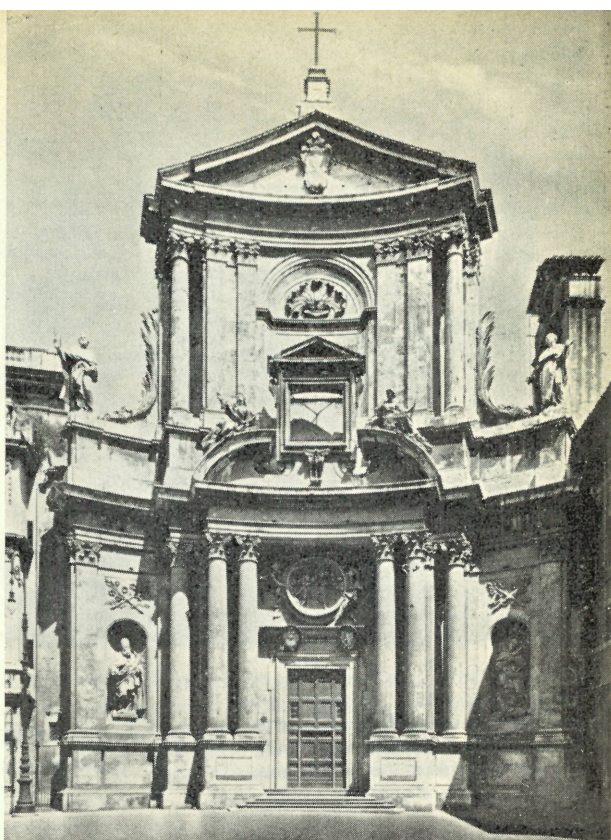
Torlonias from a house near the Theatre of Apollo.

Lent had passed peacefully. Pierce and Cornelia were in the Sistine Chapel on Good Friday and at the Solemn High Mass on Easter Sunday. Their friend, Cardinal Weld, died in April and was buried at San Marcello opposite the Connellys' temporary home. They were present at his Requiem when Dr. Wiseman preached a funeral oration in the grand manner of Bossuet.

On April 25th, only four days before the family set out from Rome, Pope Gregory XVI received Pierce and Cornelia at 10 p.m. in an audience in his library. This would have been at the Quirinal Palace.

Time was running short. Did they through their many English friends meet Wordsworth just arrived in Rome? Did they on their farewell visits, find him peering into the darkness of the Mamertine Prison or gazing up to the "cloud-like beauty" of an Austrian pine on Monte Mario, or watch him shrinking "from the note as from a mistimed thing" when in sight of St. Peter's he heard a cock crow?

They left Rome along the Flaminian Way and we next see them entering the beautiful Porta San Pietro of Perugia at one o'clock on 30th April. Through Florence, Bologna and Ferrara, they reached Venice by mid-May and proceeded to Vienna where, on June 22nd, John Henry was born. Pierce had the audience with Metternich whose import he so greatly exaggerated in the future. But he was called "the most learned Dr. Pierce Connelly" by the Arch-Duke Maximilian who wrote to him on the most intimate terms. On July 29th, as Cardinal Franzoni was writing to congratulate the Connellys on the birth of their son, a soldier died of the dreaded cholera at the Roman



San Marcello in the Corso

Hospital of San Giacomo. This was the first case in Rome. When the scourge reached its peak of fury on August 17th, the Connelly family were already en route for Paris and home. Since there was no passage for them from Le Havre till October, they must have learnt through the pages of *L'Ami de la Religion* something of the plight of the Eternal City, whose *chiaroscuro*, lights and shadows, had given Cornelia a so much richer view of the Church and of human nature.

She was one of those rare people in whom zest and gaiety have a strong counterpart in discernment and strength. Some aspects of her stay in Roman Society had been as unsubstantial as an enjoyable dream. Others would live on to be worked into her creative vision of the good Christian life.

Approved by Fr. Desmond McCarthy, *Promotor Fidei*