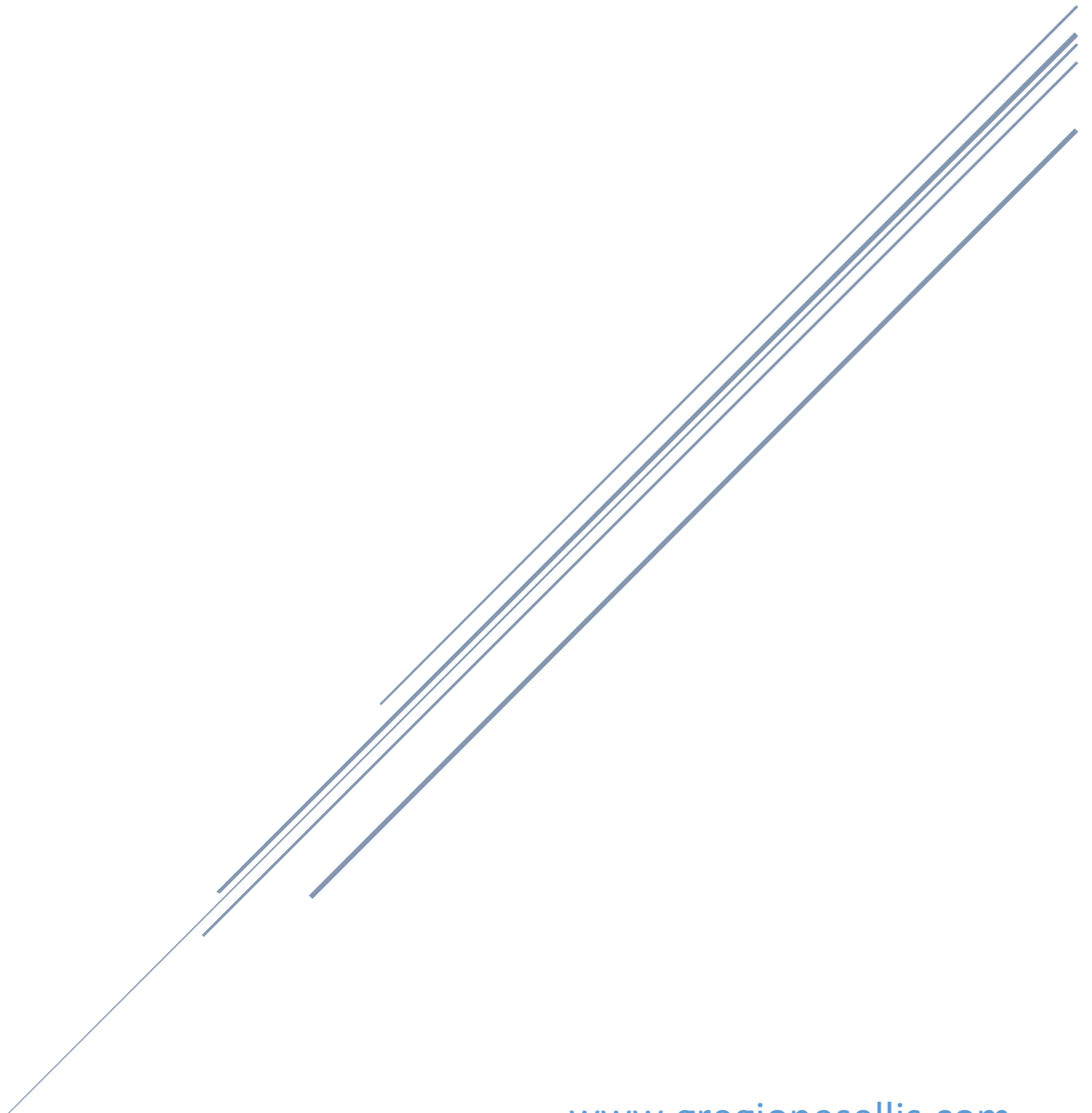


EXCERPT: ROMAN FEVER

by Greg Jones Ellis, adapted with permission from the short story by Edith Wharton



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MRS. SLADE

There's no knowing, I suppose, when the girls will be back. Do you even know back from where? I don't!

MRS. ANSLEY

I think those young Italian aviators we met at the Embassy invited them to fly to Tarquinia for tea.

MRS. SLADE

Aviators! Imagine, Grace. Soaring into the clouds with two virtual strangers. Should we be disapproving? I'm not. I'm envious.

MRS. ANSLEY

I suppose they'll want to wait and fly back by moonlight.

MRS. SLADE

Or maybe Jenny will finally surprise me and not come back at all. She'll become the mistress of an aerial daredevil. A scarlet woman at last!

MRS. ANSLEY

Really, Alida.

MRS. SLADE

Moonlight—moonlight! What a part it still plays. Do you suppose our daughters are as sentimental as we were?

MRS. ANSLEY

I've come to the conclusion that I don't in the least know what they are.

MRS. SLADE

Too true. And perhaps we didn't know much more about each other – or ourselves--- at that age.

MRS ANSLEY

No, perhaps we didn't.

(She glances a bit surprised at MRS. SLADE.) I never should have supposed you were sentimental, Alida.

MRS. SLADE

Well, perhaps I wasn't.

They sit in silence, Mrs. Ansley fidgeting occasionally with her knitting and bag, while Mrs. Slade gazes pensively down at the ruins. After a moment, the lights fade up on the ruins below. The two older women are lost in thought. The voices of Barbara and Jenny float in. They are laughing.

VOICE (BABS)

Oh, Jenny! I am so *glad* we lost those two *boring* Italians! But let's not let our mothers know we didn't take off in the aeroplane. They were so looking forward to fretting about us – and our virtue. Look! There they are, still sitting in that dreary café overlooking the Forum!

VOICE (JENNY)

I think they're rather sweet. I hope mother isn't going to sit there until the sun sets.

VOICE (BABS)

Oh, no! Roman fever!

They both laugh.

VOICE (JENNY)

You know, I think they still believe you can get it.

VOICE (BABS)

I know they do! That's why they hover so around us!

VOICE (JENNY)

Maybe I should look in on mother.

VOICE (BABS)

Jenny! We're young and in Rome. They had their moment. Besides, your mother is well capable of looking after herself. And my poor mother just sits and knits. Nothing to worry about there. Honestly, you'd never believe she was once the catch of the season. Now it's your mother who's the merry widow!

VOICE (JENNY)

Barbara! She's just a bit more vivacious, maybe. But nothing scandalous.

*Lights change, coming up on the lower level.
YOUNG GRACE AND YOUNG ALIDA enter. They
furtively look around, knowing that sun is setting
and they are unchaperoned. ALIDA is thrilled.
GRACE less so.*

YOUNG ALIDA
(Echoing the last line)

Nothing scandalous!

YOUNG GRACE

Scandal has a different meaning here in Rome, Alida.

YOUNG ALIDA

Grace! That's almost scandalous itself! I think we'd better get you back home before you become a woman of the world!

There is a brief silence.

YOUNG GRACE

Can't one be a woman of the world on East 73rd Street?

YOUNG ALIDA

I hardly think so. Although I know I shall never be able to quite sit through Sunday afternoon teas now that I've had the joys of an *aperitivo*.

YOUNG GRACE

I can't say I like the taste of them. But I'm surprised at how I've taken to the Roman cooking.

YOUNG ALIDA

Well, I suppose it's partly because it's such a surprise! Fresh fish, artichokes, simple soups. None of the spicy nonsense I expected.

YOUNG GRACE

And...well...I didn't realize wine could be so delicious. And so light. I rarely feel intoxicated. Do you?

YOUNG ALIDA

I'm too in love. That's all the intoxication I need.

YOUNG GRACE

Are you truly in love with Delphin?

YOUNG ALIDA

Hmm...well, perhaps I misspoke. I do love Delphin. I am not really intoxicated by him. I am, however, dizzy with the prospect of---

YOUNG GRACE

---marriage?

YOUNG ALIDA

A life of pleasure and station.

Lights down on the lower level and YOUNG GRACE AND ALIDA exit.

MRS. SLADE

(Echoing the last line:)..A life of pleasure and station. I got what I wanted. *(Sighs.)*

The voices of BARBARA and JENNY return.

VOICE (BABS)

Jenny, I heard your mother tell her club ladies that she was so bored living next to us that she'd rather live in a speakeasy! That created quite a stir.

VOICE (JENNY)

That was a joke, Babs!

VOICE (BABS)

Well, there may not be any speakeasies, but let's go see if we can get ourselves into a little trouble tonight. With or without our high-flying escorts!

VOICE (JENNY)

(Hesitating) Well....

MRS. SLADE laughs quietly.

MRS. SLADE

Here we are. Two old ladies---

MRS. ANSLEY

Alida, we're not old!

MRS. SLADE nods toward the knitting, knowingly.

MRS. ANSLEY

I told you, I just don't like to be idle.

MRS. SLADE

Time is such a betrayer. And, at times, a consoler.

MRS. ANSLEY

I can't say I have gotten used to being a widow, if that's what you mean.

MRS. SLADE

It's not in the least what I mean.

(She takes a long, appraising look at MRS. ANSLEY)

How beautiful you were.

MRS. ANSLEY

Alida, really.

MRS. SLADE (Laughs)

Time has consoled me. Your hair now... It's dull. Your eyes, like mine, have, well, a rather opaque look to them. And your skin has finally fallen victim to gravity.

MRS. ANSLEY

I'm not sure I want to continue in this manner. Perhaps a bottle of wine—

MRS. SLADE

Gives me heartburn.

MRS. ANSLEY

Me, too.

They share a rueful laugh.

MRS. SLADE

You truly miss Horace?

MRS. ANSLEY

Of-of course...

MRS. SLADE

Of course. One is supposed to. I must say, Grace, that I never really found your Horace exciting.

MRS. ANSLEY

I should imagine that to be a good thing.

MRS. SLADE

So solid. So dependable. So... old New York. But then, I suppose he and you were a good match that way.

MRS. ANSLEY

I can't help but think that you somehow are determined to turn this lovely evening into an argument. Are you trying to provoke me?

MRS. SLADE

I should be amazed if I succeeded. Grace. Grace always. Unperturbable.

MRS. ANSLEY

Perhaps not always unperturbable.

A pause.

MRS. ANSLEY

Don't you...miss Delphin?

MRS. SLADE

I miss....

MRS. SLADE lowers her head. MRS. ANSLEY reaches out to touch her arm with sympathy.

MRS. ANSLEY

The loss of a child is impossible to get over, I imagine.

MRS. SLADE

It was somehow easier when Delphin was alive. Not that it didn't hurt every day to remember, but somehow, looking at Delphin made the pain less...unendurable. And, of course, I was distracted. I had to be the hostess to an unending parade of clients. I had to keep myself and the house up, to match Delphin's brilliance. And I always felt I did my bit rather well. Of course, there was always the whispering. One charming guest, after too much port, was heard – by me – to say “What, that handsome woman with the good clothes and the eyes is Slade's wife! Really! Generally the wives of celebrities are such frumps. Heaven knows I took that to heart and doubled my beauty regimen. Now, I can let myself go like---

She stops herself.

Now that I am alone.

MRS. ANSLEY

You have Jenny.

MRS. SLADE

Ah, yes. Dear Jenny. But, you know, she's never needed much mothering. Never did, never will.

VOICE (JENNY)

Mother? I've arranged all the bags. You just settle in and I'll bring us some coffee.
Mother? Are you feeling well?

MRS. SLADE

I suppose I'm the most ungrateful mother in the world. Jenny is solicitous, kind, responsible. And far prettier than me at her age. That, I can tell you, is a relief. She's got the Slade looks, thank heaven. But I wish she'd inherited my backbone.

VOICE (JENNY)

Mother, don't forget to take your tonic.

A clock bell chimes five.

MRS. SLADE

Five o'clock already.