

Jacob A. Riis, "*Feast-Days in Little Italy*," THE CENTURY MAGAZINE, August 1899, 491-500.

The rumble of trucks and the slamming of boxes up on the corner ceased for the moment, and in the hush that fell upon Mulberry street snatches of a familiar tune, punctuated by a determined drum, struggled into the block. Around the corner came a band of musicians with green cock-feathers in hats set rakishly over fierce, sunburnt faces. A raft of boys walked in front, abreast of two bored policemen, stepping in time to the music. Four men carried a silk-fringed banner with evident pride. Behind them a strange procession toiled along: women with babies at the breast and dragging little children; fat and prosperous padrones carrying their canes like staves of office and authority; young men out for a holiday; old men with lives of hardship and toil written in their halting gait and worn and crooked frames; lastly, a cripple on crutches, who strove manfully to keep up. The officials in Police Headquarters looked out of the windows and viewed the show indifferently. It was an every-day spectacle. This one had wandered around the block thrice that day. President Roosevelt (of the Police Board), who had come out to go to lunch, was much interested. To him it was new.

"Where do you suppose they are going?" he said, surveying the procession from the steps. He was told that some Italian village saint was having his day celebrated around in Elizabeth street, and he expressed a desire to see how it was done. So we fell in, he and I, and followed the band too, at a little distance.

It led us to a ramshackle old house in Elizabeth street, and halted there in front of a saloon with the appealing announcement on a swinging sign: "Vino, Vino, di

California, di Italia. Any Kind of Whisky for Sale." The band and the fat men went into the saloon. We followed the women, the children, and the scraggy ones through a gap in the brick wall that passed for an alley to the back yard, and there came upon the village of Auletta feasting its patron saint.

It was a yard no longer, but a temple. All the sheets of the tenement had been stretched so as to cover the ugly sheds and outhouses. Against the dark rear tenement the shrine of the saint had been erected, shutting it altogether out of sight with a wealth of scarlet and gold. Great candles and little ones, painted and beribboned, burned in a luminous grove before the altar. The sun shone down upon a mass of holiday-clad men and women, to whom it was all as a memory of home, of the beloved home across the seas; upon mothers kneeling devoutly with their little ones at the shrine, and upon children bringing offerings to the saint's glory. His face smiled down benignly upon them from the frame of gaudy colors with the coat of arms of the village,--or was it a hint at the legendary history of the saint?--a fox dragging a reluctant rooster by the tail. In his own country the saint is held to be mighty against fever and the ague, of which there is much there. The faith which prompted a stricken mother to hang the poor garments of her epileptic boy close to his hand, in the hope that so he might be healed, provoked no smile in the latter-day spectators. The sorrow and trust were too genuine for that. The fire-escapes of the tenement had, with the aid of some cheap muslin draperies, a little tinsel, and the strange artistic genius of this people, been transformed into beautiful balconies, upon which the tenants of the front house had reserved seats. In a corner of the yard over by the hydrant, a sheep, which was to be raffled off as the climax of the celebration, munched its wisp of hay patiently, while bare-legged children climbed its

back and pulled its wool. From the second story of the adjoining house, which was a stable, a big white horse stuck his head at intervals out of the window, and surveyed the shrine and the people with an interested look.

The musicians, issuing forth victorious from a protracted struggle with a fleet of schooners in the saloon, came out, wiping their mustachios, and blew "Santa Lucia" on their horns. The sweetly seductive melody woke the echoes of the block and its slumbering memories. The old women rocked in their seats, their faces buried in their hands. The crowd from the street increased, and the chief celebrant, who turned out to be no less a person than the saloon-keeper himself, reaped a liberal harvest of silver half-dollars. The villagers bowed and crossed themselves before the saint, and put into the plate their share toward the expense of the celebration. Its guardian made a strong effort to explain about the saint to Mr. Roosevelt.

"He is just-a lik'-a your St. Patrick here," he said, and the president of the Police Board nodded. He understood.

Between birthdays, the other added, the saint was left in the loft of the saloon, lest the priest get hold of him and get a corner on him, as it were. Once he got him into his possession, he would not let the people have him except upon payment of a fee that would grow with the years. But the saint belonged to the people, not to the church. He was their home patron, and they were not going to give him up. In the saloon they had him safe. Mr. Roosevelt delighted the honest villagers by taking five shares in the sheep, albeit the suggestion that it might be won by him and conducted in triumph by the band to Police Headquarters gave him pause. He trusted to luck, however, and took chances.

And luck favored him. He did not win the sheep. The names of all who had taken chances were put into a bag with that of the saint, and in the evening drawn out one by one. When the saint's name appeared there arose a great shout. The next would be the winner. Every neck was craned to read the lucky name as it came out.

"Philomeno Motso," read the man with the bag, and there was an answering shriek from the third-floor fire-escape behind the shrine. The widow up there had won the prize. Such luck was undreamed of. She came down forthwith and hugged the sheep rapturously, while the children kissed it and wept for joy. The last of the candles went out, and the shrine was locked in the loft over the saloon for another year.

San Donato's feast-day is one of very many such days that are celebrated in New York in the summer months. By what magic the calendar of Italian saints was arranged so as to bring so many birthdays within the season of American sunshine I do not know. But it is well. The religious fervor of our Italians is not to be pent up within brick walls, and sunshine and flowers belong naturally to it. "Religious" perhaps hardly describes it, yet in its outward garb it is nearly always that. They have their purely secular feasts,--their Garibaldi day and their Constitution day, both in June, their Columbus day, and the day in September commemorating the invasion of Rome and the end of the temporal power of the pope,--and they celebrate them with the enthusiasm of which their hundred and fifty-odd societies in New York have always an abundant store. The rigors of our Northern winter and an unfavorable experience with the police have driven the carnival indoors and turned it into a big masquerade ball. Once, on a temptingly sunny February day some eight or ten years ago, Mulberry street started in to keep carnival in the

traditional way; but it had forgotten the police regulations. The merry-makers were locked up for masquerading without a permit, and were fined ten dollars each in the police court. Ball tickets are cheaper, and Mulberry street has confined itself to dancing since. But if one wishes to catch a glimpse of the real man, it is not on these occasions that it is to be had. It is when he is "at home" with the saint in the back yard, the church, or wherever it may be.

To the Italian who came over the sea the saint remains the rallying-point in his civic and domestic life to the end of his days. His son may cast him off, but not the father. Occasionally their relations are strained, perhaps. Such things happen in all families. Inattention to duty on the part of the saint may seem to require correction, or even more drastic measures. You may catch your man, after a losing game of cards, shying a boot at the shrine in the corner, with an angry "Why did you let me lose? I gave you a new candle last week"; but that only goes to prove the closeness of the compact between them. To the homesick peasant who hangs about the Mott-street cafe for hours, hungrily devouring with his eyes the candy counterfeit of Mount Vesuvius in the window, with lurid lava-streams descending and saffron smoke ascending, predicting untold stomach-quakes in the block, the saint means home and kindred, neighborly friendship in a strange land, and the old communal ties, which, if anything, are tightened by distance and homesickness. In fact, those ties are as real as they were at home. Just as the Aulettans flock in Elizabeth street, so in Mulberry, Mott, and Thompson streets downtown, and in the numbered streets of Little Italy uptown, almost every block has its own village of mountain or lowland, and with the village its patron saint, in whose worship or celebration--call it what you will--the particular camp makes reply to the

question. "Who is my neighbor?" For the feuds came over with the fealty, and are of record in the police office. When a fresh record is made, the detectives do not go out haphazard in the Bend and look for the man with the knife. They find out to what village he belonged, and, if it is not a question of cards, which other village is its pet enemy.

Then there are the saints of wider dominion, whose patronage is claimed by many towns, and whose prestige is correspondingly great. The day before the Auletta celebration in Elizabeth street, it had been St. Roch's day,-- "Rocco" he is called by the barbarians of Mulberry street, --and his partizans (sic) had wandered around the block behind the band with the green cock-feathers, resting at intervals in the back yard where the shrine was erected. Indeed, there were half a dozen independent celebrations going on all day in as many yards, always the darkest and shabbiest, which this saint seems to pick out by a kind of instinct, reminiscent, perhaps, of his earthly experiences. He died, according to the story, in a dungeon. St. Roch's day, the 16th of August, is always a red-letter day in the Fourteenth Ward. Until the police interfered after a serious accident in Newark, the custom prevailed of stringing enormous "cannon" fire-crackers through the street, sometimes around the entire square in which the shrine stood, and setting them off at night. The effect of such a running fire was overpowering. At night the street was brightly illuminated. One of my last recollections of the Bend, and one of the very few pleasing ones, is seeing the vilest of the slum alleys, Bandits' Roost, lighted up in honor of "St. Rocco" a few nights before the wreckers made an end of it. An altar had been erected against the stable shed at the rear end of it and made gaudy with soiled ribbons, colored paper, and tallow dips stuck in broken bottle-necks. Across the passageway had been strung a row of beer-glasses, with two disabled schooners for a center-piece, as the

best the Roost could afford. In sober truth, it was the most appropriate. It made a very a brave show, and, oddest of it all not a displeasing one. At all events, I thought so. Perhaps it was the discovery of something in the ambitions of the Bend that was not hopelessly of the gutter which did it.

As St. Roch rules Mulberry street, so Thompson street is preempted by St. Anthony of Padua; but over there there are no back-yard celebrations--at least, I never heard of any. The reason is found in the latitude, not of Thompson street, but of Padua. It is mainly northern Italians who, by the kind of selection I spoke of, have flocked there, and to them the home saint is not what he is to their southern fellows. In a whole schoolful of these children whom I questioned one day, I found only seven who knew "Santa Lucia," and they would not sing it. Any little Neapolitan or Calabrian would have sung it as naturally and as joyously as the robin warbles its love-song in the twilights of spring. Every year St. Anthony gathers his devotees in the great granite church in Sullivan street on June 13. A godly contingent from the tenements farther east finds its way across Broadway then; for St. Anthony has special jurisdiction over things that are lost, and power to restore them. According to local tradition, he is credited also with ability to avert fire. Be it faith in St. Anthony, or the fact that Italians, as a class, do not insure,--very probably it is a combination of both,--certain it is that they are singularly free from that kind of visitation. An Italian tenement fire is nearly as rare as a fire in Chinatown, which happens but once in years.

When the July sun shines fiercest, and melts the asphalt pavements of Little Italy, there comes a day when all the bands and all the processions march toward One Hundred and Fifteenth street. There, quite near the East River, stands the Church of Our Lady of

Mount Carmel, who, in the language of one of her devout adherents, is "the Madonna they worship most" in these parts. Not only from New York and Brooklyn, but from the far towns of New Jersey and the railroad camps of Connecticut, come hosts to kneel at her shrine. All through the night preceding the feast, wagons loaded with confectionery, fruit, and wax candles drive up and take position at the curb, as near the church as possible. Before the dawn is announced by the booming of guns, a double row of wagons extends into the avenue at each end of the block. The drivers sleep in their seats. With the daybreak there is a sudden awakening. The whole of Little Italy appears to pour itself into the street at once, and such marvelous combinations of color break out from the tenements as are never seen anywhere else. The rainbow is only a feeble suggestion of them. Fireworks go off; the hucksters' cries rend the air. The people cheer and forthwith attack the candle-wagons. They are out for a good time, and it is quite evident that they are having it. Women with children in arms elbow the throngs to get near the wagons. Never one goes away without her candle. The venders reap a rich harvest. They have candles from, a few cents up to forty dollars—monster ones twice as long and as heavy as the average purchaser, gorgeously decked with gilt, with pictures of the Madonna, and with crucifixes. The big ones go first.

The great basement doors of the church are opened, and the throng takes shape and direction. It moves toward the shrine above which stands the image of the Virgin in spotless, flowing robes. All about are crutches and canes cast away by those whom she has healed. The women throw themselves before her and hold out their babies to be blessed. Men kneel and mumble prayers. The resistless march of the multitude sweeps them on. They clutch blindly at near-by seats and sink into them repeating incessantly

their prayer and telling their beads. Soon the church is filled to overflowing, but there is no break in the march. There is none till the last ray of the day's sun has long died in the west, and midnight draws near. The crowd presses on and on, stumbles before the shrine in a vain effort to kneel, and catches at the robe of the Virgin for but a single touch, even at the hem of her garment, as it is borne past. Back at the shrine the priests are receiving the offerings of the people and piling them at the feet of the image. The murmur of a thousand subdued voices in fervent supplication rises above the tread of countless feet marching ever on and on.

By breakfast-time comes the first procession, with a band. Six men bear a banner aloft with a picture of the Virgin made of – greenbacks. Handfuls of bank-notes are pinned to the banner wherever there is a vacant spot. It is an Italian society grateful for past favors, and takes this practical way of bearing witness to the fact. Other banners come during the day, and are borne into the church, to be tendered to the guardian priests. The enthusiasm of the audience is fired at the sight. A woman kneeling in her seat takes off her necklace and flings it at the priest, who catches it deftly and pins it to the robe of the Madonna. The eyes of the happy giver shine with joy. A kind of frenzy seizes the audience; watches, rings, ear-rings, and pins are passed up. The image stands forth in a robe of shimmering gold above the moving multitude.

Outside, band follows band, procession upon procession. From every corner of the compass they march into the street, men, women, and children, shouldering candles, little and big, that wilt in the July sun and crook like question-marks long before the church door is reached. A woman carries a mighty candle on her bare shoulder, walking barefoot on the hot asphalt. It is a self-imposed penance, requiring no little fortitude and

endurance. Some march barefoot the six miles and over from Mulberry street, choosing the roughest pavements and kneeling on the sharpest stones on the way to tell their beads. Lest there should be none sharp enough, the most devout carry flints in their pockets to put under their knees. Girls walk in white with veils and lighted candles. An elderly woman steps proudly, bearing upon her head a temple of wax candles steadied with pink ribbons held by four matrons.

The cry of the chestnut-vender rises above the din. He carries his ware threaded upon a fish-line at the end of a long pole. Dimes in plenty are his catch. Pink lemonade is hawked along the curb, and huge slices of watermelon, red and juicy, make the mouths of the thirsty paraders water. But they cannot stop. At a stand on the corner a boy sits perched on a stool, his whole face buried in an enormous rind, munching away for dear life, while with his disengaged hand he waves mechanically a newspaper fastened to a stick to chase the flies from his table. The sun pours down upon his bare head, the bands bray, the show and the banners go by; he eats right on. He has his share of the feast, and on the point of miracles is satisfied.

The processions lose themselves in the struggling crowds, only to be evolved again farther on by some undiscoverable process of extrication that works automatically without the assistance of the police, who strive manfully but unsuccessfully to clear the way. A company of fifty or sixty girls crowned with wreaths and each carrying a burning taper are greeted with cheers. In their wake a little fellow labors along, bent nearly double under the weight of a monstrous candle. Every garment drips perspiration. He is wet through, but radiantly happy and proud. His gaze is riveted upon the goal that comes steadily nearer, the white-stone steps of the church. Every face is set in the same

direction. Children emerge with the hand that touched the Virgin's robe swathed in handkerchiefs to keep the blessing safe and to make it last. At the shrine the pile of golden offerings grows. Twenty or even thirty thousand dollars is not an unusual valuation of it when the feast is over. The money goes to the work of the church among the poor rather than to deck the image with gold and gems that might tempt sacrilegious thieves.

At noon there is a brief lull to enable the paraders to snatch a hasty bite from the wagons. The early afternoon brings more bands, more processions, ever-increasing invasions from east and west. They come by families, and each member, from father to the baby, must bring a candle to the altar, if nothing more. The block is jammed, and every street in the vicinity. The paraders, with canes and martial step, march and countermarch on the outskirts of the crowd. At any time one may hear half a dozen bands' playing different tunes within ear-shot. The throng keeps time to them all. Night comes, with fervor unabated. Colored lanterns are strung across the street. In the church a thousand candles are lighted. The last tired stragglers have their reward. All the hardships of the long, hot day are forgotten as they prostrate themselves before the Madonna and kiss the hem of her robe. The heavy doors are swung to behind them, and locked. The feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel is past and gone like a beautiful dream. The crowds disperse slowly in the midnight hour. The prosaic Frenchman across the street shrugs his shoulder expressively as he puts up his shutters. "Phantasme Italien," he says, and goes in. Yet he has let his store front and made money. He too has cause to be satisfied.