

Edward Ross, THE OLD WORLD AND THE NEW

CHAPTER V

THE ITALIANS

The immigration from Italy has shot up like Jonah's gourd. During the last decade a fourth of our immigrants have been Italians, and from being a twentieth part of our foreign-born, they have risen to be a tenth. This freshet is not born of religious or political oppression, for Italy enjoys a government on modern lines, created by the efforts of patriots like Mazzini, Cavour, and Garibaldi. The impulse that every year prompts from a quarter to a half of a million Italians to wander oversea is purely economic. Ignorance and the subjection of women cause blind multiplication, with the result that the Italians are wresting their food from narrower plots than any other European people. A population approximating that of all our Atlantic States is trying to live from a space little greater than the combined areas of New York and Georgia. Although Argentina seconds the United States in absorbing the overflow, still; Italy's population continually swells, her birth-rate is not sinking so rapidly as her death-rate, and one sees no reason why the Italian dusk should not in time quench what of the Celto-Teutonic flush lingers in the cheek of the native American. [end page 95]

DISTRIBUTION THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES

Of our one and one-third million of Italians, the Northeast down to Washington holds about three-fourths, while south and southwest of the Capitol there are only three and a half per cent. The middle West has sixteen per cent, and the quota of the Far West is seven and a half per cent.

For the most part, they are greatly concentrated in cities. Roughly speaking, five-sixths of the Italians in Delaware are in Wilmington; in Maryland, three-sevenths are in Baltimore; in Illinois, three-eighths are in Chicago; in Nebraska, two thirds are in Omaha; in Missouri, three-fifths are in St. Louis; in Oregon, one-half are in Portland; in Pennsylvania, one-half are in Philadelphia; in Louisiana, two-fifths are in New Orleans; in Michigan, a third are in Detroit; and in Ohio, a quarter are in Cleveland. In New York City are massed a third of a million of Italians, one-fourth of all in the country. Although a slow percolation into the rural districts is going on, this current distributes immigrants very differently from the older streams that debouched on the advancing frontier.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS

Migratory job-hunters rather than homeseekers, the Italians are loath to encumber themselves with their women. The women are only a little more than one-fifth of the whole, nor do they come here more freely as time goes on. A natural [end page 96] consequence of leaving families behind is a huge return current to Italy, amounting to a third of the arrivals *from* Italy.

More than half of our British immigrants are skilled. Of the Italian arrivals, one out of eight is skilled, one out of four is a farm-laborer, one out of three is a common laborer, and one in two hundred and fifty has a profession. In a word, two-thirds are of rural origin. The illiteracy of the Italian immigrants more than fourteen years of age is forty-seven per cent.; so that of the two million illiterates admitted to this country 1899-1909, nearly one-half hailed from Italy.

NORTH ITALIANS AND SOUTH ITALIANS

The fact that the emigrants from the north of Italy wander chiefly to South America, where industrially they dominate, while the emigrants from central and southern Italy come to this country, where they are dominated, makes it important to remember that in race advancement the North Italians differ from the rest of their fellow-countrymen. In the veins of the broad-head people of Piedmont, Lombardy, and Venetia runs much Northern blood-Celtic, Gothic, Lombard, and German. The other Italians are of the long-head, dark, Mediterranean race, with no small infusion of Greek, Saracen, and African blood in the Calabrians and Sicilians. Rarely is there so wide an ethnic gulf between the geographical extremes of a nation as there is between Milan and Palermo. [end page 97]

The Italians themselves have set forth these contrasts in the sharpest relief. In an elaborate treatise, Professor Niceforo shows that blue eyes and fair hair occur twice as often among the North Italians as among the people south of Rome; that their, understatured are eight per cent of the whole as against twenty per cent for the South Italians; and that they show a greater frequency of high foreheads and a smaller frequency of low brows. They have a third of the illiteracy of the South, twice the school attendance, thrice the number of higher students; and while a clear third of the southern students fail in their examinations, less than a quarter of the northerners fail. Northern Italy is twice as well off in teachers and libraries, five times as productive in book publishing, has twice as many voters to the hundred inhabitants, and buys

half as many lottery-tickets as the South. The astonishing dearth of literary and artistic production in the South ought to confound those optimists who, identifying "Italian" with "Venetian" and "Tuscan," anticipate that the Italian infusion will one day make the American stock bloom with poets and painters. The figures of Niceforo show that the provinces that contribute most to our immigration *have been utterly sterile in creators of beauty.*

In nothing are the two peoples so unlike as in their crimes. While northern Italy leads in fraud and chicane, southern Italy reveals a rank growth of the ferocious crimes that go with a [end page 98] primitive stage of civilization. The contrast is between force and fraud, violence and cunning. The South produces five times as much homicide as the North, four times as much brigandage, three times as many assaults, and five times as many seizures or destructions of property. On the whole, it has from three to four times the violence of the North, while its obscene crimes, which constitute an index of sensuality, are thrice as numerous. As for Sicilians, they are scourged by seven times the homicide, four times the brigandage, and four times the obscene crime suffered by an equal number of North Italians.

Although less advanced, the Italians from the valley of the Po are racially akin to the Swiss and the South Germans. As immigrants, their superiority to other Italians is generally recognized. I have yet to meet an observer who does not rate the North Italian among us as more intelligent, reliable, and progressive than the South Italian. We know from statistics that he is less turbulent, less criminal, less transient; he earns more, rises higher, and acquires citizenship sooner. Yet only a fifth of our Italians are from the North. It is the backward and benighted provinces from Naples to Sicily that send us the flood of "gross little alien" who gave Henry James; on revisiting

Boston, the melancholy vision "of a huge applied sponge-a sponge saturated with the foreign mixture and passed over almost everything I remembered and might still have recovered." [end page 101]

VARIETY OF OCCUPATIONS

Being new-comers, the Italians are doing the heavy, unskilled work which was once the prerogative of the Irish. The shovel is now as firmly associated in our minds with 'Tonio as formerly with Barney, The North Italians go much into mine and quarry and silk-mill, but the others stick close to railroad, street, and construction work. Of our railroads it has been said that "Italians build them, Irish run them, and Jews own them."

Nearer to the truth, perhaps, is the New York *mot*, " Houses nowadays are built by Italians, owned by Jews, and paid for by Irish tenants." Being small and vegetarian, the Italians are not preferred in earthwork for their physical strength, but because of their endurance of heat, cold, wet, and muck. As one contractor puts it, "they can stand the gaff."

Although the South Italians are numerous in the manufacture of boots and shoes, cigars, glass, woolen goods, and clothing, some employers refuse the males for "inside work" because they have the reputation of being turbulent. Their noteworthy absence from the rolling-mills is attributed to the fact that they lack the nervous stability needed for seizing a white-hot piece of iron with a pair of tongs. The phlegmatic Slav stands up to such work.

In the trades, the Italians crop up numerously as bakers, barbers, cobblers, confectioners, tailors, street musicians, scissors-grinders and marble cutters [end page 102]. A great number become hucksters and peddlers of such characteristic wares as fruits and plaster casts. It is the Italian from the North, especially the Genoese, who brings native commercial capacity and becomes a wholesale or commission merchant in fruits and vegetables, while the Neapolitan is still fussing with his banana-stand. Thanks to their race genius, the Italian musicians and teachers of music among us bid fair to break the musical monopoly of the German-Americans.

In one province of southern Italy not a plow exists, and the women wield the hand implements beside the men. It is not strange that immigrants with such experience do well here in truck-farming and market-gardening. Those who engage in real agriculture settle chiefly in colonies, for the voluble, gregarious Italians cannot endure the chill loneliness of the American homestead. They follow their bent for intensive farming, and would hardly know how to handle more than fifteen or twenty acres. Few of them are up to ordinary extensive farming. As one observer says, " They haven't the head for it."

Although Italians are making a living on the cut-over pine-lands of northern Wisconsin, the rocky hills of New England, the sandy, barrens of New Jersey, and the muck soil of western New York, their love of sunshine is not dead. The cane, cotton, and tobacco fields of the South attract them. More than half of the Italians in Louisiana are on the plantations. Half of the [end page 103] sixty thousand in California are in vineyard and orchard. The famed Italian-Swiss colony at Asti employs a thousand men to help it make wine under a *cielo sereno* like that of Italy. Many a

fisherman who has cast his net in the Gulf of Genoa now strains the waters of San Francisco Bay.

There are two-score rural colonies of Italians in the South, and the settlements at Bryan, Texas, and Sunnyside and Tontitown, Arkansas, are well known. Italians have been welcomed to the South by planters dissatisfied with negro labor or desirous of deriving a return from their raw land. As a cotton raiser, the Italian has excelled the negro at every point. When it was found, however, that thrifty Pietro insisted on buying land after his second crop as tenant, whereas the black tenant will go on forever letting his superintending white landlord draw an income from him, the enthusiasm of the planters cooled. Then, too, a fear has sprung up lest the Italians, being without the southern white man's strong race feeling, should mix with the negroes and create a hybrid. The South, therefore, is less eager for Italian immigrants than it was, and the legislatures of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia have recorded their sense of the undesirableness of this element.

CHARACTERISTIC VICES

The peoples from the Azores to Armenia are well-nigh immune to the seduction of Alcohol; so [end page 104] that if this be the test of desirableness, it will be easy to part the sheep from the goats. Certain American sentimentalists go into raptures over the "sobriety" of the new immigrants, and to such we may as well concede first as last that there would be no liquor problem here if abstemious Portuguese had landed at Jamestown instead of hard-drinking English; if temperate Rumanians had settled the colonies instead of thirsty Germans and

Scotch-Irish; and if sober, coffee-drinking Turks had peopled the West instead of bibulous Hibernians and Scandinavians. The proportion of Italian charity cases due to drink is only a sixth of that for foreign-born cases, and a seventh of that for cases among native Americans. Alcoholics occur among the Italians in the charity hospitals from a tenth to a twentieth as often as among North Europeans. Still, American example and American strain are telling on the habits of the Italians, and in the Italian home the bottle of "rock and rye" is seen with increasing frequency by the side of the bottle of Chianti.

Bachelors in the pick-and-shovel brigade will have their diversions, so it is not surprising that the Italians, like the abstemious Chinese, are addicted to gambling. Games of chance flourish in their saloons, and many a knife-thrust has come out of a game of cards. At home the state lottery has whetted the taste for gambling. In the Neapolitan the intoxication of the lottery takes the place occupied by alcoholic intoxication in the Anglo-Saxon. When one learns that on an average [end page 105] the Neapolitan risks \$3.15 a year in the lottery, six times as much as the average Italian, one does not wonder that the immigrant hankers to put his money on something.

VIOLENCE IN CRIME

For all the great majority of the Italian immigrants are peaceable and industrious, no other element matches them in propensity for personal violence. In homicide, rape, blackmail, and kidnapping they lead the foreign-born. Says the Immigration Commission: "The Italian criminals are largest in numbers and create most alarm by the violent character of their offenses in this country." Among moderns, gainful offenses occur from three to seven times as frequently as

crimes of violence. The medievalism of the South Italians appears from the fact that they commit more deeds of personal violence than gainful offenses.

Browning, who knew the Italians, expresses this cheerful alacrity in murder when, in "The Ring and the Book," the *Pope* tells of the four "brighteyed, black-haired boys" *Count Guido* hired for his bloody work:

Murder me some three people, old and young,
Ye never heard the names of-and be paid
So much. And the whole four accede at once.
Demur? Do cattle bidden march or halt?

All is done purely for the pay which earned,
And not forthcoming at the instant, makes [end page 106]

Religion heresy, and the lord o' the land
Fit subject for a murder in his turn.
The patron with cut throat and rifled purse,
Deposited i' the roadside ditch, his due,
Naught hinders each good fellow trudging home
The heavier by a piece or two in poke,
And so with new zest to the common life,
Mattock and spade, plow-tail and wagon-shaft
Till some such other piece of luck betide.

It was frequently stated to the members of the Immigration Commission in southern Italy that crime had greatly diminished in many communities because most of the criminals had gone to America. One Italian official at Messina stated that several years ago southern Italy was a hotbed of crime, but that now very few criminals were left. When asked as to their whereabouts, he replied, "Why, they are all in the United States." From the Camorra, that vast spiderweb of thieves and prostitutes by whom life and politics in Naples are controlled, have come thousands who find the hard-working Italian immigrants a richer field of exploitation than any field open at home. Still more harassing is the Mafia, by means of which Sicilians contrive to ignore police and courts and to secure justice in their own way. A legacy of Spanish domination and Spanish arrogance is the sense of *omerta*, or manliness, which holds it dastardly to betray to justice even one's dearest foe. To avenge one's wrongs oneself, and never to appeal to law, is a part of Sicilian honor. [end page 107]

In an Italian quarter are men who never work, yet who have plenty of money. "No," they say, "we do not work. Work does not agree with us. We have friends who work and give us money. Why not?" It is these parasites who commit most of the crime. Their honest fellow-countrymen shrink from them, yet, if one of them is arrested, some make it a point of honor to swear him off, while -all scrupulously forget anything against him. Thanks to this perverse idea of "honor," an Italian murder may be committed in the street in broad daylight, with dozens looking on, yet a few minutes later every spectator will deny to the police that he has seen anything. This highbinder contempt for law is reinforced by sheer terrorism. It is said that often in our courts the sudden wilting of a promising Italian witness has been brought about by the secret giving of the "death-sign," a quick passing of the hand across the throat as if cutting.

The American, with his ready resort to the vigilance committee, is amazed that a whole community should let itself thus be bullied by a few miscreants known to all. Nothing of the sort has ever been tolerated by North European immigrants. The secret lies in the inaptness of the South Italians for good team work. Individualistic to the marrow, they lack the gift of pulling together, and have never achieved an efficient cooperating unit larger than the family.

General Theodore E. Bingham, former Police Commissioner of New York, estimated that there [end page 109] are in that city not less than 3000 desperadoes from southern Italy, "among them as many ferocious and desperate men as ever gathered in a modern city in time of peace medieval criminals who must be dealt with under modern law." In 1908 he stated: "Crimes of blackmailing, blowing up of shops and houses, and kidnapping of their 'countrymen have become prevalent among Italian residents of the city to an extent that cannot be much longer tolerated." It is obvious that if our legal system is called upon to cope with a great volume of such crime for a long time, it will slough off certain Anglo-Saxon features and adopt the methods which alone avail in Italy, namely, state police, registry system, "special surveillance" and "admonition."

ASSIMILATION WITH AMERICANS

Not being transients, the North Italians do not resist Americanizing influences. The Genoese, for example, come not to earn wages, but to engage in business. They shun the Italian "quarter," mix with Americans, and Anglicize their names. Mariani becomes Merriam; Abata turns to Abbey; Garberino softens to Gilbert; while Campana suffers a "sea change" into Bell. In

the produce-markets they deal with Americans, and as high-class saloon-keepers then are forging past Michael and Gustaf.

But the South Italians remain nearly as aloof as did the Cantonese who built the Central Pacific Railway. Navvies who leave for Naples [end page 111] when the ground freezes, and return in April, who huddle in a "camp" or a box-car, or herd on some "Dago Flat," are not really in America. In a memorial to the acting mayor of New York, the Italian-American Civic League speaks of the "great civically inert mass" of their countrymen in New York, and declares, "By far the largest part of the Italians of this city have lived a life of their own, almost entirely apart from the American environment." "In one street" writes Signor Pecorini, "will be found peasants from one Italian village; in the next street the place of origin is different, and distinct are manners, customs, and sympathies. Entire villages have been transplanted from Italy to one New York Street, and with the others have come the doctor, the grocer, the priest, and the annual celebration of the local patron saint."

Among the foreign-born, the Italians rank lowest in adhesion to trade-unions, lowest in ability, to speak English, lowest in proportion naturalized after ten years' residence, lowest in proportion of children in' school, and highest in proportion of children at work. Taking into account the innumerable "birds of passage" without family or future in, this country, it would be safe to say that half, perhaps two-thirds, of our Italian immigrants are *under* America, not *of* it. Far from being borne along with our onward life, they drift round and round in a "Little Italy" eddy, or lie motionless in some industrial pocket or crevice at the bottom of the national current. [end page 112]

LACK OF MENTAL ABILITY

Steerage passengers from a Naples boat show a distressing frequency of low foreheads, open mouths, weak chins, poor features, skew faces, small or knobby crania, and backless heads. Such people, lack the power to take rational care of themselves; hence their death-rate in New York is twice the general death-rate and thrice that of the Germans. No other immigrants from Europe, unless it be the Portuguese or the half-African Bravas of the Azores, show so low an earning power as the South Italians. In our cities the head of the household earns on an average \$390 a year, as against \$449 for the North Italian; \$552 for the Bohemian, and \$630 for the German. In silk-mill and wollen-mill, in iron-ore mining and the clothing trade, no other nationality has so many low-pay workers; nor does this industrial inferiority fade out in the least with the lapse of time.

Their want of mechanical aptitude is often noticed. For example, in a New England mill manned solely by South Italians only one out of fifteen of the extra hands taken on during the "rush" season shows sufficient aptitude to be worth keeping. The operatives require closer supervision than Americans, and each is given only one thing to do, so as to put the least possible strain on his attention.

If it be demurred that the ignorant, superstitious Neapolitan or Sicilian, heir to centuries of [end page 113] Bourbon misgovernment, cannot be expected to prove us his race mettle, there are his children, born in America. What showing do they make? Teachers agree that the children of the South Italians rank below the children of the North Italians. They hate study, make slow

progress, and quit school at the first opportunity. While they take to drawing and music, they are poor in spelling and language and very weak in abstract mathematics. In the words of one superintendent, "they lack the conveniences for thinking." More than any other children, they fall behind their grade. "They are below even the Portuguese and the Poles, while at the other extremity stand the children of the Scandinavians and the Hebrews. The explanation of the difference is not irregularity of attendance, for among pupils attending three fourths of the time, or more, the percentage of South Italians retarded is fifty-six as against thirty-seven and a half per cent for the Russian-Hebrew children and twenty-nine per cent for the German. Nor is it due to the father's lack of American experience, for of the children of South Italians who have been in this country ten or more years sixty per cent are backward, as against about half that proportion among the Hebrews and the Germans. After allowing for every disturbing factor, it appears that these children, with the dusk of Saracenic or Berber ancestors showing in their cheeks, are twice as apt to drop behind other pupils of their [end page 114] age as are the children of the non-English-speaking immigrants from northern Europe.

TRAITS OF ITALIAN CHARACTER

The South Italian is volatile, unstable, soon hot, soon cool. Says one observer, "The Italian vote here, is a joke. Every candidate claims it because they were 'for' him when he saw them. But the man who talks last to them gets their vote." A charity worker declares that they change their minds "three steps after they have left you." It is not surprising that such people are unreliable. Credit men pronounce them "very slippery," and say that the Italian merchants themselves do not

extend credit to them. It is generally agreed that the South Italians lie more easily than North Europeans, and utter untruth without that self-consciousness which makes us awkward liars. "

Most of my countrymen," says an educated Italian in the consular service of his country, "disregard their promises unless it is to their advantage to keep them." The man who "sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not" is likely to be a German with his ideal of *Treue*, an Englishman with his ideal of *truth*, or an American with his ideal of *squareness*.

The Italians are sociable. Who can forget the joyous, shameless gregariousness of Naples? As farmers they cluster, and seem to covet the intimacies of the tenement-house. The streets of an Italian quarter are lively with chatter and stir [end page 117] and folks sitting out in front and calling to one another. In their family life they are much less reserved than many other nationalities. With instinctive courtesy they make the visitor welcome, and their quick and demonstrative response to kindly advances makes them many friends. Visiting nurses comment on the warm expressions of gratitude they receive from the children of Italians whom they have helped.

Before the boards of inquiry at Ellis Island their emotional instability stands out in the sharpest contrast to the self-control of the Hebrew and the stolidity of the Slav. They gesticulate much, and usually tears stand in their eyes. When two witnesses are being examined, both talk at once, and their hands will be moving all the time. Their glances flit quickly from one questioner to another, and their eyes are the restless, uncomprehending eyes of the desert Bedouin between

walls. Yet for all this eager attention, they are slow to catch the meaning of a simple question, and often it must be repeated.

Mindful of these darting eyes and hands, one does not wonder that the Sicilian will stab his best friend in a sudden quarrel over a game of cards. The Slavs are ferocious in their cups, but none is so ready with his knife when sober as the South Italian. In railroad work other nationalities shun camps with many Italians. Contractors are afraid of them because the whole force will impulsively quit work, perhaps flare into riot, if they imagine one of their number has suffered a wrong. [end page 118]

The principal of a school with four hundred Sicilian pupils observes that on the playground they are at once more passionate and more vindictive than other children. Elsewhere, once discipline has been established, "the school will run itself"; but in this school the teacher "has to sit on the lid all the time." Their restlessness keeps the truant officer busy, and their darting, flickering attention denies them concentration and the steady, telling stroke. For all their apparent brightness, when at fourteen they quit school, they are rarely beyond the third or fourth grade. As grinding rusty iron reveals the bright metal, so American competition brings to light the race stuff in poverty-crushed immigrants. But not all this stuff is of value in a democracy like ours. Only a people endowed with a steady attention, a slow-fuse temper, and a persistent will can organize itself for success in the international rivalries to come. So far as the American people consents to incorporate with itself great numbers of wavering, excitable, impulsive persons who cannot organize themselves, it must in the end resign itself to lower efficiency, to less democracy, or to both.