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CHRISTMAS. AT AMALFI.

A Talk by Dorothy Macardle.

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A mischance of travel for which I am thankful now, landed me in Amalfi, after dark, on the shortest day of last year. Next morning I woke to see the Mediterranean glittering under my balcony and the famous old monastery high on its crag shining white against the ascending sun. I heard the light splash of waves, children's excited voices, and chiming bells. By mid-day, strolling along the narrow street that runs between the cliffs and <sup>the</sup> sea-front, I was too hot in my summer coat.

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The place, at first sight, leaves one almost incredulous.

You would wonder, looking up from the mole, how those clumps of houses, those narrow terraces, those towers, that campanile, and the famous cathedral beside which it rises, were ever jig-sawed in among the perpendicular crags. Still more inexplicable it seems that so cramped and small a settlement should have achieved historic power and importance. Can it be true that part of the ancient city lies beneath the sea?

They must have been vigorous folk who built bridges and towns about this rock-bound bay of Salerno, where steep ravines, hewn by southward-moving ice and torrents, widened as these reached the sea. One can trace, in the shadowed, ancient streets that climb up north of the piazza, how the founders tunnelled and terraced and hewed steps, and on every shelf piled stone upon stone. To-day, high earth-quake arches keep houses from toppling, face to face. Above, towers with murderous histories stand on peaks which one would imagine only eagles could reach.

Other little towns of fabulous age - Vietri, Majore, Minore, Atrani, Praiano, Positano - remain as witnesses to human audacity, scaling the rocky sides of chasms and looking down at the sea.

Of all these that lie between Salerno and Sorrento, Amalfi is still the Queen; and Amalfi is one of the few that escaped tragic fatalities and wreckage during the floods of October, 1954.

On Christmas Eve, a holiday and a fair day, the population was out in the sun, meeting and greeting, buying and selling, or sitting on the mole or the sea-wall. A great many of the shops had hung their wares out round their windows and doors. Walls were festooned with onions and garlic, ripe yellow melons and the small blood-red tomatoes used for sauce. The local ceramics made a brilliant display with red and ambers and purples on deep-sea-green.

The little town has the friendly air of a village, unburdened by wealth or importance, now. In no time one is perceived to be a stranger and greeted with nods and smiles. One is offered help in phrases of English or American, but the people are too polite, and too non-competitive in temper, to pester anybody to buy.

The piazza was crammed with men and women and multitudinous children enjoying the fair. Most of the trade was going to the bancarelle - little movable stalls hung with sweets and Christmas tree decorations, figurari for the Crib, and toys. A local sweetmeat wrapped in painted tinsel looks just like a gaudy fish. The statue of Saint Andrew, Patron Saint of sea-farers and of Amalfi, where his bones repose, had a string of them on one wrist.

Amalfi honours its protector with two feasts every year, when Masses are celebrated with magnificence by the Archbishop, processions of women move slowly across the piazza and up the great flight of steps before the Cathedral - the Duomo. There is a distribution by the Priests of the "Manna of St. Andrew", a substance exuded near the saint's relics and valued as producing miraculous cures, and then, splendid processions move through the streets with a boy in historical costume bearing the  
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city's ancient and famous flag.

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The piazza is dominated on the west side by mountainous crags and on the east by the Duomo, above its wide, soaring flight of steps. The Cathedral was founded more than a thousand years ago. Greek columns from Paestum support the nave. Unhappily, these have been covered with baroque decoration, and the facade, which collapsed about ninety years ago, has been replaced by one whose stripes and checks, interlacings and frescoes and mosaics dazzle rather than please the eye. Its campanile, yellow and green, has an Arabic air.

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Here, and in the arsenal and the museum the city's historic past is recorded; in the minds of its proud citizens also. The stranger learns all about it without delay.

Among the maritime cities of Italy eight hundred years ago, Amalfi was the sovereign, outrivalling Venice and Pisa and Genoa. As a Maritime Republic, she armed her ships and defended herself in wars for supremacy. She struck her own coinage, traded with the East, took part in the crusades and founded hospitals in the Levant. The magnetic compass originated here and so did the earliest European code of maritime laws.

The citizens indulge in no melancholy brooding over a resplendent past. They still have their place in the sun, and possess a source of pacific pride in the music and literature created here. In Amalfi Ibsen's "Dolls' House" was written; many well-known writers come often; up there, in Revello, "Parsifal" was composed and every summer concerts of Wagner's music are given there in a garden under the crag, looking over the sea, looking over the fabulous "Siren Shore".

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The December night closes in early. By four o'clock the sun has gone down behind the jagged mountains to the west, which become stark silhouettes again a green and vermillion after-glow. Lights come out on the high terraces, then, overhead, the stars.

On Christmas Eve the towering crags were soon invisible against the mid-winter sky, but the air remained soft and warm. Down into the bright streets trooped couples and groups and whole families, some of them four or five generations long. There was joyous anticipation in all faces, old and young - not a hint of the worry and tension we bring to preparations for Christmas here. New acquaintances, on learning that this would be my first Italian Christmas, smiled with twinkling eyes and boasted: "You have come to the best place: you will see!"

I expected liveliness, for I knew that Italians don't keep the religious and secular aspects of the festival apart, but adore and entertain the Holy Child - the Gran Piccolino Gesu - with a heartfelt impulse of tenderness, fantasy and delight. I remembered, too, that these Mediterranean shores are haunted by undying traditions of pagan festivals, such as find their way into the paintings and carvings and mosaics of Christian artists, so that we see the shepherds coming to Bethlehem crowned with the flowers of Arcadia, or playing on the syrinx of Pan. I knew how the popular love of fun and noise and violence had invaded the mediaeval Nativity plays, the wicked king out-Heroding Herod in thundering fury and the ass braying uproariously, until the performance of these plays in sacred precincts had to be prohibited by the Pope.

Saint Francis was surely familiar with all this, for his humble crib designed to remind the faithful of the simplicity and poverty of the Holy Family. In his mountain cave above Greccio, on that Christmas night Twelve Hundred and Twenty-Three, he had a manger with hay in it, and an ox and an ass - not even an image, it seems, for it is recorded that a

visionary/

visionary Infant Jesus was beheld by the participants, shining with heavenly radiance, during the Mass.

The hay from that manger was believed to give miraculous ease to women in child-birth and to sick animals.

The vivacious imagination of the southern peoples has continued through the centuries to add to the Gospel narrative homely details and flights of fantasy. There are pictures and mosaics in which we see St. Joseph bringing the midwives to the stable, or angels preparing the bath for the Baby, testing the water to see that it is not too hot. In poems and stories animals have been given human voices and even a knowledge of Latin on Christmas night: the cock proclaims Christus Natus Est; the slow ox asks where? - Ubi? And the goats and sheep answer, tremulously, Bethlehem. The crib often grew to a whole City of Bethlehem with scores of figures travelling towards the stable under the Star. To the shepherds were given lambs and dogs; to the Kings were added laden slaves and camels and elephants. I have seen processions which move by clockwork, while the Star and lanterns and windows light up when you put a coin in a slot, and I have seen roadside Bethlehems that are just rockeries, stuck with little figures and plants and trees. Craftsmen of Naples have been famous for two hundred years for the making of exquisite and ingenious cribs and the Christmas market there does a busy trade in little figuari still. But here, in Amalfi, all was as simple and spontaneous as St. Francis could have wished.

As the minutes drew towards midnight the piazza below the Cathedral steps became crammed. At the foot of the steps, on either side, stood metal trees to which fireworks had been wired. I was told that at twelve O'clock these would be exploded and soon after that a marvellous star would appear in the upper air.

Now the people who were in the Cathedral and on the great platform/

platform outside it did not know which way to turn their gaze. Babies were lifted shoulder high. Little boys climbed on chairs. Smiling old women hustled to clear a vantage-point for the stranger, eager that she should enjoy and admire all the splendours to come. At any moment the fireworks would blaze, but, within, what a feast of light! Chandeliers rich with candles lined the nave; the gilded ceiling glittered; the altar was framed by an arch of lamps and scores of candles lit up the crib. By their light one could see, hovering in a thicket of pine-boughs, many rosy cherubs with silver wings. The colours and gold of the mosaics and the baroque ornamentation glowed.

The procession had formed near the altar. It was advancing. The crowd parted and people fell on their knees.

Little boys in white and scarlet carried the box and swung the thurible; then came the mitred priests, one carrying before him a life-size figure of the Infant Jesus, a solemn beneficent look on the baby face, one chubby hand lifted to bless. His robe, like those of the priests, was of white, stiff with gold, and a gold halo encircled his head. The Archbishop of Amalfi followed, grave and tall, bearing the crosier.

When the group came to rest outside, on the platform it was welcomed by a roll of drums, thunderous explosions and flaring lights. On and on went the crashes and roars and bangs, while fireworks soared.

The scene was magical. While fountains of coloured fire spilled from the sky, white sparks raced along the verandahs opposite and then cascades of light, like faery water, poured down. A tremendous series of bangs and the whirling of burning wheels in a red-gold glare followed the exploding of the fire-work trees. Then came a pause. All faces were raised. It was the star. It blazed with no noise  
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that reached us - a five-point star with a great, sweeping comet tail. It shone, diamond-bright, and a luminous nimbus floating around it made it appear to move. There was a great sigh as it expired. Quietly, then, the priests turned and led the devout within to the midnight Mass.

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I said, next day, to acquaintances from the neighbouring village, that Amalfi's was the prettiest Christmas celebration I had seen anywhere.

"Ah, you should have been in Atrani!" they replied.

Over Atrani, also, an immense dazzling comet appears, but it does not hover; it comes sweeping, haloed with glory, all across the sky, down from the church of Santa Maria Maddelena on the craggy height to the sea-side village, and vanishes over the houses there.

So another wonder remains to be admired beside that lovely Bay of Salerno: a lure to draw one again, in winter, to the Siren Shore.