

## George Gissing -By the Ionian Sea

### III

#### THE GRAVE OF ALARIC

A glance shows the situation of Cosenza. The town is built on a steep hillside, above the point where two rivers, flowing from the valleys on either side, mingle their waters under one name, that of the Crati. We drove over a bridge which spans the united current, and entered a narrow street, climbing abruptly between houses so high and so close together as to make a gloom amid sunshine. It was four o'clock; I felt tired and half choked with dust; the thought of rest and a meal was very pleasant. As I searched for the sign of my inn, we suddenly drew up, midway in the dark street, before a darker portal, which seemed the entrance to some dirty warehouse. The driver jumped down -- "Ecco l'albergo!"...

I had come here to think about Alaric, and with my own eyes to behold the place of his burial. ...Thinking to conquer Sicily, the Visigoth marched as far as to the capital of the Bruttii, those mountain tribes which Rome herself never really subdued; at Consentia he fell sick and died. How often had I longed to see this river Busento, ...I saw it in the light of sunrise, flowing amid low, brown, olive-planted hills; at this time of the year it is a narrow, but rapid stream, running through a wide, waste bed of yellow sand and stones. The Crati, which here has only just started upon its long seaward way from some glen of Sila, presents much the same appearance, ...Now, tradition has it that Alaric was buried close to the confluence of the Busento and the Crati. If so, he lay in full view of the town. But the Goths are said to have slain all their prisoners who took part in the work, to ensure secrecy. Are we to suppose that Consentia was depopulated? ... the story must be incorrect, and Alaric's tomb should be sought at least half a mile away, where the Busento is hidden in its deep valley.

It is difficult to walk much in this climate; lassitude and feverish symptoms follow on the slightest exertion; but -- if one can disregard the evil smells which everywhere catch one's breath -- Cosenza has wonders and delights which tempt to day-long rambling. To call the town picturesque is to use an inadequate word; at every step, from the opening of the main street at the hill-foot up to the stern mediæval castle crowning its height, one marvels and admires. So narrow are the ways that a cart drives the pedestrian into shop or alley; two vehicles (but perhaps the thing never happened) would with difficulty pass each other. ...Through the gloom of high balconied houses, one climbs to a sunny piazza, where there are several fine buildings; beyond it lies the public garden, a lovely spot, set with alleys of acacia and groups of palm and flower-beds and fountains; marble busts of Garibaldi, Mazzini, and Cavour gleam among the trees. Here one looks down upon the yellow gorge of the Crati, and sees it widen northward into a vast green plain, in which the track of the river is soon lost. On the other side of the Crati valley, in full view of this garden, begins the mountain region of many-folded Sila -- a noble sight at any time of the day, but most of all when the mists of morning cling about its summits, or when the sunset clothes its broad flanks with purple...

One goes to bed early at Cosenza; the night air is dangerous, and -- darkness brings with it no sort of pastime. I did manage to read a little in my miserable room by an antique lamp, but the effort was dispiriting; better to lie in the dark and think of Goth and Roman. Do the rivers Busento and Crati still keep the secret of that "royal sepulchre, adorned with the splendid spoils and trophies of Rome"? It seems improbable that the grave was ever disturbed; to this day there exists somewhere near Cosenza a treasure-house more alluring than any pictured in Arabian tale. It is not easy to conjecture what "spoils and trophies" the Goths buried with their king; if they sacrificed masses of precious metal, then perchance there it still lies in the river-bed ...