

The Picnic Papers

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Picnic in Rome

by Milton Gendel

For generations the English have been domesticating the Sublime by choosing its precincts for their picnics. There is no beauty spot in creation, on Alp, lakeside or riverbank, in jungle or desert, that has not served as a setting for a group of English people with picnic baskets, spirit lamps and teapots in cosies. At least this was so before the highway picnic became current, with picnickers on folding chairs and the open boot of the car serving as buffet.

Once, in the spring, a few decades ago, Rome offered a happy conjunction of scenic sublimity and picnicking English to provide appropriate foreground figures. Evelyn Waugh, in the Holy City for his annual Easter devotions, was the star of the occasion. Jenny Crosse, daughter of Robert Graves and correspondent of *Picture Post*, was always the moving spirit on such occasions. She rang up Babs Johnson, the writer known as Georgina Masson.

‘Evelyn Waugh is here with Diana Cooper - you know - she’s Mrs Stitch in his novels. I thought we might have it at your place in the Villa Doria Pamphilj.’

The self-educated daughter of an Indian Army officer, Babs brought the competence, pertinacity and inspiration of a Mrs Beaton to her various interests. The two ladies devised the guest list, which contained enough flannel-coated men and hatted or bandanna-ed women to provide the cast for a proper English picnic.

Then Evelyn Waugh announced that he would come to the picnic only if he did not have to sit on the ground. With some regret Babs Johnson gave up the thought of the remoter romantic glades of the villa, where daffodils were springing and cherry trees blossoming, and moved her tables and chairs out in front of the vaulted stable that old Prince Filippo Doria let her have as a grace-and-favour home in his park.

A lovely limpid blue and gold April day framed Babs’s stable-yard rock garden. Jenny bustled about serving Frascati, mascarpone and ricotta seasoned with salt and pepper and garnished with a sprinkling of paprika. Next came tufted raw fennel, to be pulled apart and dipped in olive oil with mustard, and eggs stuffed with anchovies. Round loaves of crusty bread, the descendants of those found - baked hard - in the ashes of Pompeii were set out together with plates of prosciutto, minuscule slices of spicy salami, rounds of lonza and mortadella.

When Evelyn Waugh arrived he was allotted a little table to himself where he sat plump with a commanding air, more lordly than any rank-proud gentleman on the Grand Tour.

The talk turned on the personality and history of Pius XII, the reigning pontiff. Jenny and Babs were censorious. The Pope was austere, autocratic. Sympathetic to German *Kultur*, he had not been outspoken enough against the Nazis. True, the Vatican had contributed to the gold ransom extorted from the Roman Jews during the German occupation, but it hadn’t prevented their deportation or the massacre of the hostages at the Fosse Ardeatine. A devout Catholic guest blushed with discomfiture at the protracted and irreverent discussion. Evelyn Waugh, now impatient, banged his fork on the table.

Jenny placatingly held out a bottle of Frascati.

‘Some wine, Evelyn?’ He fixed her with a cold blue eye. ‘Mrs Crosse,’ he said, with compelling emphasis, ‘has anyone ever remarked on the uncanny resemblance between you and the late unlamented Mrs Roosevelt? Undoubtedly she was one of the most ill-favoured women the world has ever seen.’

A stunned silence followed this pronouncement, as its author returned to spearing rounds of salami. It was broken by Diana Cooper, out of the depths of her bonnet: ‘He’s just *too* awful.’

Jenny retreated to the stable converted into a sitting-room where Babs was uncorking some wine. ‘Are you crying?’ Babs asked. Jenny repeated what had just been said to her. Babs, a sturdy woman with iron-grey hair, a determined look and a kind eye, listened with growing indignation. She had been brought up near the Khyber Pass, where respect was paid to the New Testament on Sundays and holidays, but where daily life was ruled more by the Old Testament. She was also uncompromising in her view of women’s rights.

‘Jenny,’ she said, ‘you go right out there now and hit him as hard as you can. you’re a woman and he won’t dare hit you back.’ Jenny looked shocked, but obediently turned and went back to the rock garden.

Evelyn Waugh peered up at her with a bland expression as she addressed him: ‘Evelyn, I have always admired you as a writer. After your behaviour today I want you to know that I no longer admire you as a man. But, as Christians, perhaps we meet on common ground. So I *forgive* you.’

As a master of dry comedy he must have relished the turning of his elective worm into a monument of moral dignity. The company certainly did: there were shouts of laughter, followed by praise for Jenny and belated reproof for Evelyn Waugh.

‘I don’t care much For picnics,’ said Waugh when it was time to go. ‘But I enjoyed this one immensely. And I shall never forget it.’