

Chapter 36 - American Society in Italy

Chapter 36 – American Society in Italy explores the myth and eventual unraveling of a unified American social circle in Italy, particularly in cultural hubs like Rome and Florence. Once imagined as a thriving expatriate community, it is instead revealed as fragmented, fluid, and more aspirational than substantial. The author recalls a distant past—roughly forty to fifty years earlier—when Rome harbored a quiet colony of American creatives and intellectuals, people who sought inspiration in the ruins and serenity of the Eternal City. Back then, Rome was a peaceful and affordable place to live. Notable figures like Story, Crawford, and Charlotte Cushman were not just passing tourists but contributors to an artistic exchange that helped define that fleeting era. Hawthorne’s *The Marble Faun* captured that atmosphere, portraying a romanticized version of expatriate life that is no longer possible.

As Rome evolved into the capital of unified Italy and modernity began reshaping the city’s fabric, so too did the nature of its visitors. Wealthy New Yorkers soon replaced the modest artists, bringing with them the desire to mingle with or marry into European nobility. The arrival of these socially ambitious Americans diluted what had once been a cohesive and intellectually vibrant enclave. The cost of living rose, simple pleasures faded, and Rome’s slow pace gave way to aristocratic posturing. By the 1870s, the city’s American circle had splintered, with many absorbed into the local power dynamics defined by allegiance to either the royal (White) or papal (Black) factions. The once-shared identity of being American gave way to personal aspirations that aligned more with Italian nobility than with national camaraderie.

This shift was more than just cultural—it redefined social motives. Americans who once came to Rome for artistic growth or philosophical retreat now arrived hoping to secure influence, social prestige, or even noble titles through strategic marriages. These unions, while sometimes romanticized, were largely transactional, with American

dowries often traded for European names. The irony, of course, is that while Americans longed for titles, Italians sought fortunes. The idea of a mutual cultural exchange gave way to an opportunistic arrangement. The rich Americans became increasingly susceptible to exploitation, their marble-cluttered villas a testament to taste without understanding, wealth without restraint.

The chapter doesn't spare its satire. Americans were often mocked for their clumsy attempts to "buy" culture—shipping home oversized statues that had no place or value beyond their novelty. The author paints a picture of women too eager to adopt noble manners, and men chasing connections in vain, rarely accepted by true Italian aristocracy. Titles were dangled like carrots, and often, what began as social ambition ended in personal or financial ruin. The Italians—witty and charming—knew well how to navigate this influx. They welcomed the American presence with grace, but without delusion. It was always clear who truly belonged and who did not.

Eventually, all that remained of American society in Italy were scattered individuals, staying behind for reasons as practical as cost of living or as aspirational as academic study. Yet, these remnants formed no unified group. Instead, they drifted into cliques, often defined by petty rivalries or minor grievances. The absence of a common social goal revealed just how hollow the idea of an "American Society in Italy" had become. Without shared values or purpose, even those who stayed long-term found little sense of community, falling into gossip, isolation, or quiet resignation.

Still, the chapter doesn't dwell entirely in cynicism. There is a tone of melancholy appreciation for what once was—a recognition that the early days of American life in Rome, filled with artists and philosophers, held something authentic. But that time passed. And what followed was a lesson in the limits of cultural migration. Wealth may open doors, but it cannot buy belonging. Identity, once fractured by ambition, becomes harder to reclaim. The story of Americans in Italy, then, is not just about loss or missteps—it's about how aspirations can obscure reality, and how nostalgia can mislead even the well-intentioned.

By the chapter's end, Chapter 36 – American Society in Italy invites readers to reflect on the deeper truths of expatriate life. It's not merely about geography or even social prestige—it's about intention, cohesion, and cultural humility. Without those, even the grandest palazzos become lonely, and society becomes little more than scattered individuals clinging to illusions of grandeur.

