

IN HIS BLOOD

Author Francis Marion Crawford's
Coastal Calabrese Refuge
and the Vampire Tales It Inspired

By Karen Haid

Photo courtesy Stefano Contini ©

*“And now I knew that those white,
misty arms had been round me, too; I knew it in a flash,
and I shuddered as I remembered that I had heard the night owl then, too.
But it had not been the night owl. It was the cry of the Thing.”*

—Francis Marion Crawford

Arco Magno, the natural arch on the coast of San Nicola Arcella in the province of Cosenza

Its pointy fangs were poised on the moonlit hillside just beneath the rocky promontory. Far-off Transylvania, perhaps? The sea was eerily calm, but those looking down from the watchtower above enjoyed a cool breeze, or was it an icy chill? A story by Bram Stoker? No, not Romania, but Italy!

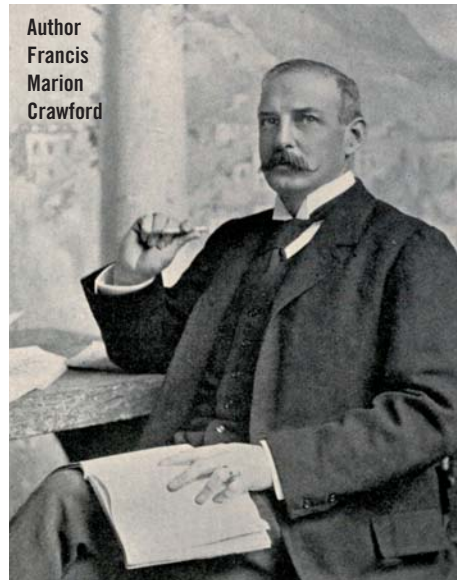
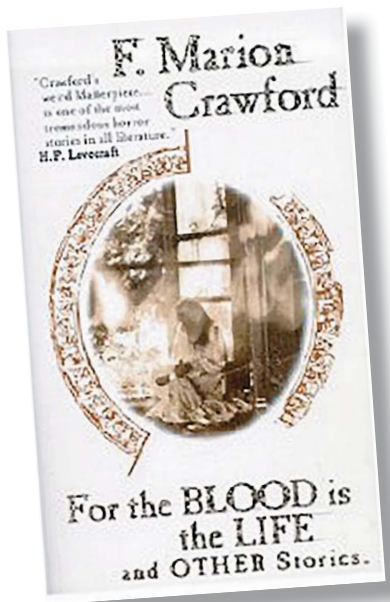
An imposing 16th-century tower perched on Calabria's rugged coastline set the scene for the classic vampire tale, "For the Blood Is the Life," by Francis Marion Crawford. First published by Collier's Week-

ly in 1905, this innovative story of supernatural horror still delivers a hair-raising shiver today. Crawford's straightforward, conversational style matter-of-factly draws the reader into an otherworldly realm and leaves no reason for doubt. The vampiress, called Cristina by day and The Thing by night, seduces her victims, lyrically and sensually, in the shadow of the thick-walled tower, starkly rectangular, sitting on a spit of land jutting out into the Tyrrhenian Sea, and dramatically surveilling the craggy coast

of the town of San Nicola Arcella in the northwest corner of Calabria.

The Torre San Nicola Arcella was built as one of many towers along the region's long seashore. Planned at seven-and-a-half miles apart as protection from Saracen attacks, they were constructed in varying shapes and sizes and survive in diverse states of disrepair.

At the outset of his fantastical short story, Crawford describes this fortress built by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V: The tower stands in one of the loneliest spots in Southern



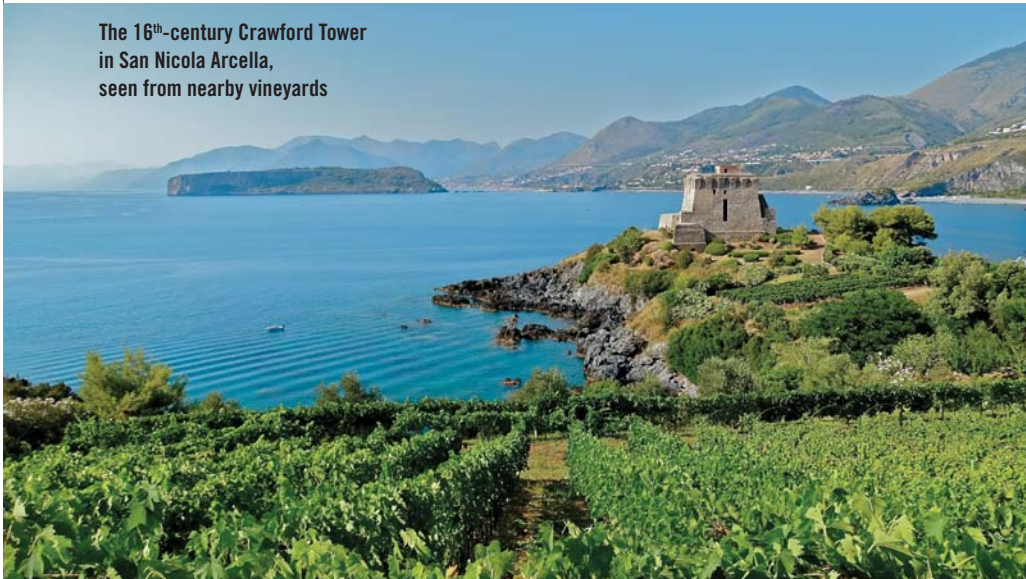
Author
Francis
Marion
Crawford



View of the old town of San Nicola Arcella

Photo courtesy Stefano Contin ©

The 16th-century Crawford Tower in San Nicola Arcella, seen from nearby vineyards



Photos courtesy Stefano Contin ©



Sunset at San Nicola Arcella

Photos courtesy Stefano Contin ©

Italy, at the extremity of a curving, rocky promontory, which forms a small but safe natural harbor at the southern extremity of the Gulf of Policastro, and just north of Cape Scalea, the birth-place of Judas Iscariot, according to the old local legend. The tower stands alone on this hooked spur of the rock, and there is not a house to be seen within three miles of it.

Traveling in his yacht along the southern Italian coast down to Sicily, Crawford sailed past this tower many times. He liked stopping off at its bay, going ashore with his family and picnicking by the tower which was then locked up tight with heavy old chains. One day, in 1887, he quietly left his little party after lunch, making

his way to the nearby village. To his wife's shock, he returned with a large, rusty key, declaring he had bought the place. Actually, he had leased it for 50 years at the rate of \$25 per year!

Crawford fixed up the tower in modest fashion, and used this simple, isolated spot as his refuge, a quiet place for writing, far away from modern life. More than a century later, the tower and surrounding landscape remain largely unchanged. The locals still pay homage to their illustrious former resident who even spoke the local dialect. They call the architectural landmark Torre Crawford. But who was this man who would choose such an abandoned, desolate place for inspiration?

Francis Marion Crawford was born

of American parents in 1854 in the Tuscan town of Bagni di Lucca, where a street has been named after him. He is descended from a distinguished New England family that includes the revolutionary war hero General Francis Marion. His father was the sculptor Thomas Crawford, who designed the Statue of Freedom on the top of the U.S. Capitol; and his aunt was Julia Ward Howe, who wrote the lyrics to the "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Crawford was a world traveler. He spoke 16 languages and, although he lived most of his life in Italy, saw himself as a patriotic American—not surprising considering his lineage. However, he was also a citizen of the world, and great Italophile. He loved Italy. ➤



Modern mural at San Nicola Arcella

The Italian peninsula and its people fueled his imagination and romantic spirit. The prolific writer set 20 novels on Italian soil and wrote four lengthy histories and numerous articles about Italy. His approach was meticulous, only writing about subjects of which he had intimate knowledge. For example, he learned the art of silversmithing, personally designing and hammering out metal forms to knowledgeably describe the protagonist's profession in his novel "Marzio's Crucifix" (1887). Likewise, with glassblowing in "Marietta" (1901), a love story set in Renaissance Venice. To learn winemaking, he went on an autumn walking tour through Calabria. He dressed as an itinerant and went from one vineyard to another, giving a hand to the locals while learning the craft.

Crawford is fondly remembered in San Nicola Arcella for the fame he brought to their little corner of the world. Italians know the vampire story in translation under the title "Cristina." Just up the coast, the citizens of Sant'Agnesello, neighbor to the better-known Sorrento, also hold dear the memory of the American writer. His principal Italian residence, quite

a contrast to the secluded Calabrian refuge, was a beautiful villa along the Sorrentine peninsula, today a hotel run by the Salesian Sisters of Don Bosco. He built this luxurious mansion for his family. For himself, he preferred simpler accommodations and, interestingly, when in New York, he felt more at home in Little Italy than on Fifth Avenue.

While Torre Crawford hasn't changed much in the past 100 years, the solitude that the author sought out and enjoyed is not what it once was, particularly during the summer tourist season. San Nicola Arcella and the larger, adjoining town of Scalea are exclusive beach locales in a region that doesn't lack for stunning shorelines. Just to the north, off the coast of Praia a Mare, is the captivating Isola di Dino with its many grottos. However, memorable amongst the spectacular is the large, natural arch called Arco Magno.

This chalky rock, weathered into a graceful arc of roughly 65 feet high, dramatically protects its pebbly beach with natural spring below. The iridescent water shimmering between azure and green invites beachgoers to take a dip in this natural Mediter-

anean playground. Unfortunately, expanding tourism can be at odds with the delicate environment, and the community of San Nicola Arcella wants to keep this precious gem intact for future generations.

The town of about 2,000 sits on a nearby hill along the area of coastline designated the Riviera dei Cedri for its noted cultivation of the citron. The original inhabitants would have been fishermen, but today, in addition to agriculture, the principal focus is tourism. To preserve the area's natural wonders, an effort is underway with a petition for signatures on change.org to request that the Arco Magno be recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Crawford discovered this area of incredible natural beauty over a century ago. Today's travelers can visit his former refuge, the Torre Crawford, by appointment, and perhaps find their own Calabrian inspiration in this captivating southern region. ▲

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