

(Outline)

by

Maurice Rowdon

'A Tuscan Village'  
Outline

145 EAST 52ND STREET  
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AN OUTLINE

OF

"A TUSCAN VILLAGE"

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A TUSCAN VILLAGE

MAURICE ROWDON

1. INTRODUCTION.

The last War abruptly ended a mediaeval state of affairs in the Italian countryside. 'Mediaeval' here is not an emotional description: it refers to an at-one-time sound agricultural system of mezzadria by which the landowner was responsible for paying the taxes and for the upkeep of his holding while sharing the produce 50/50 with the peasant family living under one of his roofs. In the heyday of mezzadria families contained three and sometimes four generations, eleven and twelve children were usual, four and five heads to a bedroom (or a bed). This meant a strong labour force concentrated in a small area, and producing the basic necessities of life from grain to olive oil. The women ground their meal and baked their own bread. The earth was manured from the stables on the ground floor, the cattle (their warmth heating the upstairs rooms in the winter) were fed from the pasture and meal grown outside the door. The vines were planted at spacious intervals to aid their deep- and wide-travelling roots that searched for water when the upper soil was baked to cracking, and they leaned for support on young trees. The olive trees were carefully pruned, usually by one of the village experts on the subject who made his rounds, and the earth round the trunks was turned thoroughly and deeply each year. There was wheat, barley, rye, and grass for the cattle in the fallow fields. Beans and maize, grown among the vines, were especially beneficial for the earth between them, and the human sewage (today harmful because it emerges from the pozzi neri or 'black wells' mixed with kitchen detergent) was each year, on two or three smelly days in the spring, carted round the vineyards to give the embryonic grapes their most powerful boost of all. The weather, apart from fearful dogdays just at the time of the arduous grain harvest (scything and sheathing were by hand until ten years ago), was helpful. Indeed, the rich

soil and the rich climate with its mostly clement and precisely-timed rainfalls combined to make crops spring to life at the touch of a hand.

The entire peninsula consisted of tiny farming enclaves of this kind, not too happy in an obvious way but not too desperate either. There was health and long life, but on rather an animal level of existence. The hospitals were not crowded as they are today, there were not the sudden heart failures and the unexplained early deaths by cancer (this village has the highest rate in the Sienese area).

In Tuscany, more than elsewhere in the peninsula, these little enclaves were rich in produce. The hilly land was hard to work, for its boulders as well as its slopes, but it produced the finest wine in the land and the finest olive oil. Today Chianti-region oil (and this applies to both the 'classical' area and the so-called 'Sienese hills') fetches nearly twice the price of the sluggish oil produced in the Neapolitan area, while the wine sometimes attains an alcohol content of 13 degrees without 'loading' by sugar or chemical additives.

After the last War a movement towards the towns began, gathering pace through the Fifties and encouraged tacitly by governments obsessed by their industrialisation policies. Market prices fell, the labour force dwindled further, and by 1960 it looked as if the bottom would drop out of the country's agricultural life, at a time when Italy still had more people working on the land than any other country in Europe, including France. That was when the mezzadria system ceased to work and the padrone or proprietor ceased to derive enough from his 50% to pay the taxes and give himself an adequate unearned income. Trade union pressure from 1960 onwards pushed the peasant's share up to 53% and more, and then the system was abolished, indeed forbidden as a relic of the bad old days. With it went memories of maltreatment by arrogant agents or fattori, the landowners' stooges, who did nothing about leaky farmhouses and considered electricity and running water luxuries. A few miles from the village a young woman had plunged to her death down a well when the brick rim collapsed: the fattore had been

promising to repair it for five years or more. The old order died with bitterness and recrimination.

It was the biggest change since ancient times. Mediaeval Christendom differed less from life under imperial Rome than this new Italy did from its immediate predecessor, which only ten years before had seemed set to stay for as long as people wanted to eat pasta and drink wine. Between 1960 and 1965 landowners sold up their holdings in droves. The peasants became landworkers on an eight-hour day, living in shiny apartments with the Box and the Fridge in the kitchen (the latter put back in its original plastic wrapping for the winter months). The transition from a happy dog's life to a nervous and problematic modern one meant an upheaval to which few Italians have given more than a passing thought, though notice it they certainly did. Everything seemed to aid it, even the weather. Between 1960 and 1970, explain it how you like, the classical Italian weather collapsed, the seasons went haywire. There were a series of desperately wet and even cold summers, which made the land even less desirable to work than before. It was no doubt part of a global weather-switch, but particularly drastic in Italy because of the soundness and benign regularity of the old climate, warmed by hot blasts from the Sahara oven, cooled from the west by the Atlantic, in a well-nigh perfect balance. In the old days the sun would come up like a great mellow gong in the morning and go down in a resplendently clear blue sky of a night. In Roman apartment houses the central heating came on at dawn on November 17 and went off on March 17, and that seemed right to the day. The air had a marvellous élan in the old days which was in the people too. The unfailing sun provoked them to a certain sensuous arrogance. All that has gone. Italy became a northern country.

## 2. THE VILLAGE.

As for the Italian peasant, his life had differed little in 1950 from what it had been even in Etruscan times when his plough (used nowadays only for the tricky bends the tractor can't manage) was first designed. It was he who during those centuries between turned Italy into Europe's loveliest garden. With the change in his habits has come a change of mind, and naturally enough the 'garden' has altered too. In fact, it has disappeared. Except in the daydreams package-tour visitors bring with them. To anyone interested in the quick shifts of Italian society it is revealing to see a foreign tourist humouring and patronising a peasant who exists only in wishful tourist thinking (after all why shouldn't he have the holiday he paid for?), and even attempting 'warm' gesticulations which to the cool and sophisticated Italian mind, living on the dividends of an enormous Greek, Roman and Florentine heritage, look completely and endearingly mad.

SAN GIMIGNANO figures high in the package-tour lists. It is something to see, this 'little Manhattan' with its cluster of towers---this untouched jewel of mediaeval architecture that dozed from the <sup>time of the</sup> ducal Medici, when it gave up all claim to independence, to that of the Panzer Grenadier division that lodged in its surrounding fields in 1943. It is a typically and exclusively rural village in the province of Siena, without even a railway station much less a modern highway. It perches on a volcanic hill about four hundred metres above sea level, looking much the same inside its massive walls as it did in the fourteenth century, only cleaner and altogether less real. It has twelve towers (thirteen have been counted but this is an unlucky number) instead of the seventy-two of its mediaeval heyday. The missing sixty fell down in the course of the centuries in earthquakes, war and above all internecine argument between one tower and another. The people of San Gimignano have always been known as an obstreperous lot---who settled local scores with boiling oil and boulders. Their neighbours in Colle val d'Elsa will tell you that

this is why they declined from the prominence of a prosperous market town to a pretty satellite of first Volterra and then Florence. Dante harangued the people, as well he might, from the balcony of the town hall which is still there today. Ghirlandaio, Barna da Siena, Benozzo Gozzoli, Bartolo di Fredi---these were some of the painters who found the village solvent enough to take on commissions there. The cathedral alone, approached by a vast outdoor staircase that provides a gallery for the open-air opera performances of today, testifies to its pride. The main square has a tall fountain in its centre---though not so much in its centre as to be unsympathetic: the curling sidelanes and crooked squarelets show a mediaeval distaste for symmetry. The houses bustling round the main square give no sign of any life later than the sixteenth century, except for the glassy eye of the first-class hotel in one of its corners where a pet raven with clipped wings used to walk and talk. Now the hotel parking lot hides him. There is one main street rising from the Etruscan gate on the south or Poggibonsi side to the 'square of the fountain' and dropping down to the north or Certaldo gate on the other side. If you take the other lane out of the square, between some of the village's most imposing façades, at one time frescoed, you get to the prison, which houses murderers and other confirmed criminals who must pass many years 'at the university', as Italians say. Until a couple of years ago it became quite a usual thing for Sicilian convicts there to break loose in twos and threes and ~~seize~~<sup>alarm</sup> the local farms. Then the Sicilian governor was shifted somewhere else.

Like many other hilltop towns San Gimignano came into being during the Roman decline as an escape from malaria and brigands in the plains. It had a much earlier life---hence the Etruscan gates---and was probably a fortress in Roman times, like Todi in Umbria. But the intimate shape of the San Gimignano we know, its sidelanes hugged between cavernous small-windowed houses with workshops and cellars on their ground floors, argue the post-Roman yearning for security. The village had no river, unlike Colle val

d'Elsa, and it was off any usual military line of advance (which blessing did a lot to preserve the entire province). That was how the village's air of detachment and vague uselessness came into being: as early as the sixteenth century it became a place where landowners liked to relax in the summer months, cooled by the 'traitor' as San Gimignano's evening breeze, bringing rheumatic twinges to unsuspecting bare shoulders, is called.

Today in the summer months tourist buses arrive disgorging between 500 and 1000 tourists a day, which in a village with a population of under 10,000 is quite a handful. They tell the shopkeepers in all languages (even in Italian now that tourism has hit the peninsula, together with other consumer attitudes) that this is a paradise on earth. The shopkeepers---who want to stay in business---have learned to stomach their astonishment and clap a sour smile on their faces. <sup>At one time all the</sup> ~~that was when~~ tourists were foreigners, and foreigners were considered mad anyway. Now the Italians---driving over from Modena and Trento and Milan and Apuglia---have gone mad too. Well, from dogs to cristiani (meaning 'human beings') in under twenty years---it's enough to drive any nation crazy. The villagers look on the new world with more money in their pockets than ever before---and less sense of security.

This book is mainly about the people it happened to---the peasants in the surrounding fields who before the last War were laughed out of the village as scarecrows if they put their noses inside and it wasn't market day. There is Dino Pasticcini, nicknamed 'Ganga' by his workmates, 'Bongini' in town and 'Pasticcio' (mess) by his younger relatives. He looks like an Etruscan, gay and erect and weatherbeaten, in his working clothes, and an English county gentleman in his Sunday best. There is Guido Agnarelli ('Il Brigante') who fought in the Albanian war and had a chip on his shoulder long before it came into fashion. There is benign and softly-spoken Bruno Masi who keeps pictures of Lenin and Stalin on the wall where a madonnina should be, and his son whose face is out of Botticelli and ~~who~~ has smashed up two or three motor scooters. There is

Bruno Rossi who always leaves his shirt hanging out of a hole in his trousers when he walks to the village of an evening and, like his brother before him, dead now, puts the words compagnia bella at the end of nearly all his sentences, meaning 'lovely female company' but on his lips something like 'and all that rot'. There is the young shepherd who married a Sicilian girl and milked so hard to make money that his neighbours called him 'il filisteo'. There is Pietro who as a boy twelve years back painted delicate little devotional pictures and threw his truck-driver's licence into the pig trough so that he couldn't work. He found a job in Germany and came back 'a prince', as everyone said, with money enough in his pocket to buy his mother, widowed in the war, a small farm of her own. She is tiny and bent almost double and toothless, and her three sons love her so much that none of them has married. Now Pietro is a smart chauffeur in Florence, and eats with his elderly employers because his talk amuses them so. His brother Gianni found work in Germany too, following his example, but he returned after two weeks saying that they had no spaghetti there. Not one of these is any more in a tied farmhouse---except Bruno Masi, the most deeply and intelligently convinced communist of them all, and he still abides by the old system of mezzadria, just to keep life asymmetrical!

All of them remember the old order with nausea and are doing well in the new. Even now they seem unable quite to believe that their liberation came about. Little wonder that they wander into the village of an evening with their hands in their pockets, just to watch---to absorb and digest this unexpected variety. A busload of girls from BynMawr or Mount Holyoke might be arriving for a summer congress, or Zeffirelli's team might be setting the cameras up for a scene with Valentina Cortese, or a huge vintage Rolls might pull up outside the 'Fountain Hotel' and a whole pop-group crawl out like scraggy old witches fresh from a mortuary. A strange world to unfold ~~at~~ ~~a sudden~~---and without the slightest effort on one's part.

For militant trade unionism never existed in Italy. The people had always been most unrebelling and sweet-tempered where politics were concerned: that was observed by Giuseppe Baretti, one of Italy's greatest literary lions (and so rebellious that Italian secret police pursued him all over Europe) over two centuries ago. Democracy hit Italy all of a sudden, at the end of the last War, together with its alter ego, industrial capitalism. It was a foreign import. The two great donors were the USA and the USSR: the USA donated by way of investments, while its Sixth Fleet patrolled the Mediterranean, and the USSR donated a new morality. The result was perhaps the most immoral Italy since the decay of the Roman empire. Only the worst of the popes would have felt at home. As for the democracy, it was like the new morality---a hoax.

### 3. THE YEARS OF ANGER.

From 1960 on farmhouses began to be abandoned <sup>on a large scale.</sup> / ~~in a big way.~~  
For a time they were to be bought for a song from landlords unable to cope with the new world they saw coming. A few foreigners bought the damp, roofless burrows and started converting them---regarded as madmen locally for wanting to live where only dogs had lived hitherto. Then the Italian middle class caught on, as city conditions proved not to be such a joy as they expected. There was a rush to get weekend places, and the prices soared. They came from Milan, Rome, Florence, in that order chronologically. A quiet volte face took place: a middle class which had based its entire figura or image on being town-based, visiting the country for brief and contemptuous glances at the fattore's books, now occupied the farmhouses while peasants sat with their feet up in dainty apartments watching the latest pop festival on the Box.

And benefits rained down on the peasant faster than even he thought quite sane. Inside ten years he became a land-worker with an eight-till-five job (with a two-hour

siesta in the shade for some) where before he had slaved from dawn till dusk---~~and even there had been~~<sup>with</sup> the cattle to feed and bed down. His Saturdays were now free. His holidays were paid and even rainy days (latest concession of all) were considered no fault of his. There is a national health scheme, partly to cope with the hypochondria that set in with the ~~free~~ leisure. Dino Pasticcini even began to complain, 'We get too much money'. He was not used to being sought after. His labour had become precious. He had to get used to feeling self-respect. It wasn't easy.

How did it happen? It wasn't all pressure from the formidable communist party (San Gimignano is very red, but then the same is said of every village and market town in the peninsula), <sup>though Communism</sup> ~~it~~ did benefit enormously after the last War from the discrediting of the owner class, after its association with fascism. Nor could any amount of trade union pressure have revived a sagging agriculture. The fact is that Tuscany was given a new injection of blood by those middle-class people who bought up the farm-houses and---only incidentally, it seemed at the time---the land that went with them. Business-men from Genoa and Livorno as well as the great cities began to invest in concentrated vineyards, now that the world was thirsty for wine. The politicians went in for it too---Malagodi, Chancellor of the Exchequer 197<sup>3</sup>~~1~~, developed his vast farm near Siena, Olivetti bought up large holdings a stone's throw from San Gimignano, one-time prime minister Fanfani did the same. When both business men and politicians want to do something badly in Italy it becomes an act of parliament. So the state began pouring out vast subsidies to help anyone who wished to help slake the world-thirst. Help was also available if you wanted to rebuild outhouses, or repair farmhouses (provided they were not for residential purposes). If you wanted to live in the house and get a grant as well you installed a few oxen in the empty cattle shed for a day, during the inspector's visit. (I myself tried that one but the inspector arrived before the oxen).

Highly advantageous state loans were available for investment in new farming enterprises, and straight cash benefits (up to 70% of the total cost) for any peasant who worked 'direct' (that is, owned his land) and wanted up-to-date machinery. There was a scramble to rip up the old vines and flatten the slopes with bulldozers, to make vineyard-maintenance easy and indeed mechanically possible; cement poles sprang up everywhere, supporting wires; fresh young plants began to peep up, with just room enough between the rows for a hoeing tractor to pass. With one hectare of concentrated vineyard you can, after five years of careful nursing, produce around ten thousand litres of wine a year. One worker can manage a hectare comfortably, so long as he has the right machinery for hoeing and copper-sulphate spraying. Against the market price of the wine has to be put not only his labour but that of a squad brought in for the harvest, together with machinery- and cellar-maintenance, sulphur and copper sulphate and fertiliser, and the minimal land-tax. Even writing off the first five years as capital-expenditure does not impede an early profit margin. And the more hectares you have the more that margin is. One Roman gentleman with a holding three miles from the village got so enthusiastic about it all that he ploughed up one hectare of land annually for a new purpose ~~each time~~---from vineyard to olive grove to turkey farm---and got a handsome subsidy each time. They ~~was~~ *tumbled* him in the end: someone in the agricultural department at Siena had been paid too little---and he was obliged to pay back a portion of what he had filched, in bribes of course, to keep the matter out of the courts.

It isn't so easy for the poor when they're in a fix. As Bruno Masi found when his eldest son Marino was killed by a truck on the perilous Poggibonsi-Certaldo four years ago. But then it is an understood thing that when something like twenty million lire has to change hands in insurance-money lawyers and other interested parties should step in and take a fair lick of it. If you are an unprotected sort of individual you may end with just enough to pay

your personal expenses. Masi stood his ground against a false police report and a lawyer's suggestion that he settle for a small sum out of court (the lawyer would have taken his whack from the truck-firm). But the lawsuit is still pending. In Italy the law has always tended to work for those with power, against those without. The prisons are packed with legally innocent people awaiting trial (in some cases for years). Yet the press is fairly outspoken on occasion. The 'poor' of today are rich men compared with their grandfathers. But this is due more to ~~from~~ foreign pressure than to Italian. The communist party and the trade unions thrived under this pressure, not from any indigenous dynamic force. So the law tends to operate as it always did. The new morality mitigates its operations here and there. But the old stark facts remain.

#### 4. THE NEW MORALITY.

The Church was, in the old order, Italy's greatest balancer and saboteur. It provided a centre of interests for all Italians, a kind of market of jobs and sinecures, not to say influence. It had holdings and tax-assessors in every part of Europe. This was a decisive factor operating against any religious reform movement inside the country. It was why Savanorola was burned at the stake and quickly forgotten by masses of people who not ten years before <sup>had seen</sup> ~~had~~ him as the greatest man in Italy. It meant that the Reformation, when it happened, was a foreign movement: that is, <sup>in countries</sup> where Rome was the revenue-collector and not the benefactor. Too many Italians derived too much from Rome to want to alter the Church on a mere matter of conscience. And this unity of interests cut through the different power-interests of the various Italian states---Milan, Venice, Naples, Florence. Yet it also made unity impossible. More than any other force in Italian life, it delayed political unification until as late as 1860. It produced in the Italian a contempt towards any sort of idealism, and a corresponding attach-

ment to the current status quo, a fact which partly explains the weakness of the communist party relative to its spectacular membership. Still today, despite the massive debunking it has had over the past thirty years, from its own ranks too, the Church wields a formidable internal influence: the world's most powerful free-floating institution, with 500 million devotees in every part of the world---there perhaps lies the reason why there has been no communist takeover.

Historically, the Church made sure that it remained Italy's only means of unification, its only true centre, by steadily preventing great military states like Milan, and empires like Venice, and the virtually foreign kingdom of the Two Sicilies, from ever holding the field alone. It did this by embroiling them with each other, and by constantly threatening to bring foreign armies down into the peninsula. This policy of remaining in the ascendent at whatever cost to Italian life was the most disastrous single blight on the country's history.

It meant that while he looked to Rome for advancement the Italian bore a deep sense of hurt towards her. Anticlericalism entered the blood, and is still today something of a national tic. For the Church has never been an easy opponent. More than any other factor in Italian life it brought peace from <sup>one</sup> end of the peninsula to the other: during the eighteenth century the country slept in its arms serenely while foreign armies went to and fro engaging each other in polite battles, near places that their officers regarded as musts in the Grand Tour. The gate at Città di Castello records how in 1860 the town at last 'awoke from the sad rule of the popes' by throwing out papal troops. Life was sad, yes, but safe. The Church's grandest achievement, the Italian family, an institution which overrides all other social loyalties and cuts through business, friendship and politics, proved that Rome was not just out for power in itself. Her priests were often barely literate, and sometimes plain bad men. They invariably lived with a 'sister' (they still do), who rarely looked anything like them. This 'concubinage', as the historians call it, was simply a recognition of human needs.

Even Don Dino---the nearest our village has ever got to Luther, even in looks---lives with his 'sister'. He is soft-spoken and pale. He tried to get his 'niece' (she does look like him) into a convent but she had an illegitimate child instead, and a marriage was hastily arranged. He is our 'believing' priest, and the peasants feel a grudging respect for him. The priest of the little hamlet called Sciuscano is quite different. He works the land below his church and is bronzed like a chalice. He was once seen running across the fields with his skirts bunched up round his waist. He had just been <sup>found</sup> in bed with somebody's wife---and jumped out of the window. But then he has no sister. And he's a communist anyway---he shouts at the top of his voice and bangs the table about bishops like card-holders do about bosses. Now for him the peasants feel no respect at all. Don Silvano, who belongs to the cathedral and looks like a bank clerk, tall and cleanshaven, has the habit of coming into the food-store opposite the cathedral-steps every Friday morning and making enquiries about the state of the frozen fish, it being his fast-day. Then he decides that the fish isn't fresh, so it's got to be a lamb cutlet after all. The young shopkeeper, one of his closest friends, who has stomach cramps because he cannot bring himself to believe in God, though he knows He exists, plays the game with him to the end.

Now these peasant-priests talked to the peasants on a level they understood. They planted fear---when fear of being overruled was in their own hearts. And fear, more than any other human emotion, rules---or did until recently---the Italian mind. The recent liberation of the peasant class has above all been a liberation from perpetual fear, dominating almost every desire and thought that could not be squared with the platitudes taught by the priests (emerging in cliches which are as fixed today as they ever were).

Fear accompanied every lonely act from the sex act to filling in a form. It accounted for the fact that

incest was (and remains) the most practised form of love. A dynamic thing like sex desire was best kept in the family, especially as it burned fierce in the sweltering summer months. Probably no country in the world has a sex life so deeply hidden in the recesses of the home, nor so universally perverted for that reason. A young girl, unable to hold her desires under male importunation, may 'have it behind' like a homosexual before marriage, to stay a virgin. For the importance of virginity is its being a mark of differentiation from the prostitute. Innocence, in ~~the~~ fact the whole experience of 'falling in love' (with its origins in the Provençal troubadour's idealisation of women, never strong in Italy) is rendered impossible by a family life which monopolises all romance, nostalgia, yearning and early erotic excitement, leaving to the distant outside world prostitution. It is why Italians can behave with such ruthlessness towards ~~each~~ <sup>one</sup> ~~another~~ <sup>other</sup>, if they belong to different families, and why collective conscience is minimal.

Before television came along, <sup>at</sup> the veglia or evening 'wake', when peasants sat round each other's doorsteps talking and joking into the late hours, there were two great subjects of conversation---ghosts and the Devil. All animals had a touch of the devil, especially black ones. "A moving bush---an unexpected light in the woods--- there were a hundred things in nature to terrify the human heart and make people hug together in a mutual horror of privacy. After dark only the foolhardy stayed in a house alone. Fear accounted for the crowded bedrooms (and beds) of the Italian home far more than shortage of space. No one envied the charcoal burner's job in the depths of the woods, over long silent nights with the owl flying and the leaves whispering. The loudness of Italian conversation in the dead of night is an act of exorcisation. Keeping the voice down sounds conspiratorial. The clichés of conversation, too, are a form of clinging to the safe. Only in the bosom of the family do you really talk.

One creature was never made to fear, and never excited fear: the child---the crown of Italian life---the one area of unstinted delight, into which the peasant poured all the happiness which might, given a world that did not thwart him and tame him daily by intimidation, have gone into real life. The child learns early to delight in its sex parts. And those who draw its attention to them have familiar faces which he will know and trust all his life: the only real faces he will ever perhaps recognise. Little wonder that the country's recent liberation caused perplexity---yes, real unrest---when ~~all of a~~ suddenly the outside world, not only other villages but other countries, asked through television and newspapers and highways that joined cities in a few minutes, not to say jet planes, to have their faces recognised as real too. Yet the family remains the only true area of action, as virginity retains its hold as a guarantor of previously unhandled goods in the marriage market. The family means not parents and children but an army of cousins and in-laws who owe their first loyalties to ~~each other~~ <sup>one another</sup>. As for the friend, he is seen at the bar or the cinema, and he is less likely to see into your home than a complete stranger.

For the liberation, while quick, was not wild. It was curbed and slowed down by the very men and women who benefited from it. The surface has changed. Women can earn now, as they can wear trousers and drive a car. But the daughter may still be spied on in the most candid way, by father and brother, and she may very likely condone this. Liberation refers to the outer man, hardly at all to the inner. For the Italian is perhaps the world's deepest and most natural reactionary.

In the preparation of all this the Church played a major part, probing deep into family life and ensuring, with benign tact and forbearance, that hardly a private thought passed through the peasant-mind without a self-warning system---'run back to the fold'---flashing itself on. Little wonder, then, that when the Church's social hold finally cracked after the last war with the pope's threat to excommunicate all communists, a substitute, as authoritarian and patriarchal, had to be found. This is il Partito.

n.p.

Usually, this communist party headquarters<sup>is</sup> a café and a large billiard hall. There you will get the latest party line, and personal advice if you need it, and help. It is the new area of integrity and moral authority, replacing the priest. You will hear, too, about the latest strike, whether you are required to stay at home and work your own plot of land or to 'strike' by not working somebody else's. During the Hungarian rising you were told that Soviet tanks had moved in because 'the Hungarians are so badly organised'. In the recent Middle East war you were told why you must transfer your loyalties from the Jews, whom you admired, to the Arabs, whom you hated: it was because Israel had become a tool of the grande borghesia, a magic phrase now for the peasant-mind. Like the Church, the communist party has to be a comforter (and the impressive list of benefits that brought the Italian peasant level with workers in Northern Europe was due to constant communist pressure and threat) and yet fearful too: a global institution capable of dictating a way of life, with no quarter.

Today young communists for whom fascism is history and the Church simply laughable are getting elected to town councils and in many cases proving more efficient than their predecessors. It has happened to San Gimignano and for the first time farmhouses outside the village may soon be getting adequate water-supply, roads and electricity. There will even be a swimming pool like Colle val d'Elsa's, erected at the Party's expense and looking rather bleak like a pleasure park behind the Iron Curtain. The town council has negotiated the young Guicciardini out of the Rocca or village castle, which his family has occupied for centuries, by discovering in the archives that it was only leased to the family by annual renewal. Yes, Italy is cleaning itself up at a remarkable rate under this new morality, while simultaneously industry, on which the new morality depends for its funds and indeed survival, is turning the land into the vilest and most polluted cesspit in the Mediterranean. The cholera scare of 1973 woke the world up to the real state of affairs in Europe's little garden. And even that was only reported to the newspapers

by half, some say a quarter.

##### 5. THE CIVIL WAR.

In Naples, they discovered during the epidemic, there were eight rats in the sewers to every head of population. The contents of the sewers (never before examined) were found to contain enough cholera bacteria to infect the entire peninsula. These sewers were built in 1870, and had never been modified. The entire Naples basin was a breeding ground of disease. Mussels, breeding on the seabed and performing a needed function by absorbing the impurities, absorbed the cholera as well. Nor had anyone thought to control industry. Hundreds of cattle had in the course of the previous ten years died in the areas south of Naples because of the poisoned state of the canals leading from the city. The figures of cholera-victims were quoted in Naples and Bari at 100 or more, but some say that thousands were involved, and that the same had happened in previous years without it getting to the press. RAI, Italy's state television, failed to cover the story with anything like thoroughness, and were told so publicly in the columns of the *Corriere della Sera*, Milan's hardhitting rightwing newspaper; RAI demanded the dismissal of the editor-in-chief and filed a lawsuit for damages. The government (after a long time) generously came forward and offered to pay for the depollution of the Naples basin, that is to tackle in one small area a nation-wide problem it had not even begun to recognise in its seriousness.

It was never as bad as that in Tuscany---though, true, the Versilian coast has the highest rate of hepatitis in the world apart from the New York coastline. And the cholera scare brought in some local reforms that filled a few private pockets. For instance, you could no longer buy fresh milk from the village's two milk shops. It had to come from a factory in Siena, pasteurised and packaged.

It cost slightly more to the consumer, and slightly less to the farmer who produced it. As it was a convenient arrangement for the shops, and appealed to the hunger for modernity that hit the village with the liberation, it stayed. The provincial government tried to ban all local fruits and vegetables but it didn't work. You were told in the shops, 'We can't sell any local stuff but we've got excellent local peaches, pears, grapes, and of course all the usual vegetables.' That was as far as the scare touched the village---some ineffectual government rhetoric, and much repetition of the old saw that there were two Italys not one, the north and the south.

But the situation in Naples was only that of Italy writ large. Laws on water-purification have operated in countries north of the Alps since 1900. In Italy they do not yet exist. A factory-owner who is fined for tipping refuse into a river can stay laughing, since the fine is an infinitesimal part (still about 60 dollars) of what filtering machinery would cost. The same with the atmosphere. Anything can be belched into it: a reason why a constant damp haze hangs summer and winter over the fields of Tuscany, and clear days are ~~a phenomenon~~ <sup>rare,</sup> A complete system for dealing with the problem was presented to parliament in 1967---and promptly thrown out. So was any effort to repair the imbalance between north and south. More than 10,000 families are registered as 'poor' in Naples, meaning below the subsistence line. 1000 families are without a roof. There are 300,000 unemployed or underemployed. This was the root of the cholera plague, which chose largely the poor for its victims. It proved another saw, a post-war one, that 'Italy has no government'. But 'better una democrazia marcita than la dittatura' (a rotten democracy is preferable to a dictatorship)---That is, ~~the~~ <sup>an</sup> agreement to exercise no authority in order to avoid the only authority to which the Italian mind is accustomed, namely ~~one that asks no leave.~~ <sup>rule by fear.</sup> This is the stalemate that produces something like civil war, as the two extremes, namely the minority of militants on the left and the right, get angrier. A café in Lido di Camaiore is burned to the

ground---some vendetta involving the proprietor and two youngsters selling *Unità*, the communist party newspaper. A deputy finds his wife and children burned to death in his Rome apartment (lighted petrol was poured under the door). A wealthy publisher is found dead at the foot of a pylon outside Milan, one of his legs blown off and a small truck full of explosives parked nearby. A man under interrogation for 'anarchist' activities is thrown to his death from a window in Milan. A few years later one of the policemen in the room with him at the time is shot dead in the street. The story goes on, month by month, exciting little attention in the rest of the world. Will the liberation be like all those other lesser ones in Italian history---a short respite from tension? Is a communist takeover a serious possibility, or only a stimulant to fascism as it was in the early Twenties? Have the Italian people woken up to the loveliness of the garden they live in only because it is ceasing to be a garden? Will violence seep into their lives as the price to be paid for benessere or prosperity? Is it possible to shake off one master without inheriting a new? Is the disappearance of old fears simply a clearing of the scene for new ones? The villagers feel adequately paid at last, but is this only because money has lost its value? And, most deeply felt, ~~question of all~~, most Italian question of all: are the people always destined to suffer, by some eternal law? will they pay heavier for these benefits than ever they paid for slavery? So, in the village, floodlit at night, always buzzing with tourists, still peaceful, with open-air concerts and operas and plays every year, and an art gallery or two, and every evidence of an increasingly vivid local life, there is a new uneasiness which makes the land-worker, the shopkeeper and the bank-clerk a man under pressure quite as if he were living in the middle of a great city, yet with silence all round him, and scents that should heal, and fields that have barely altered their aspect in five centuries. Not surprising that his smile is sour when a day-tourist tells him it's

paradise. For paradise, like hell, is inside.

## 6. CONCLUSION.

For a handful of years during Lorenzo de' Medici's government of Florence in the fifteenth century Italy was at peace. It was felt to be an extraordinary thing. A chronicler wrote that the only wars were 'between cats and dogs and birds in the trees'. It ended, suddenly, with the assassination of the Duke of Milan. The country returned to its customary upheavals---state against state, class against class. Yet throughout it all the Italian has retained a formidable balance. Deep in his character lies a safety-valve: his eye is firmly fixed on the question of survival. However rich today, he knows he may have his back to the wall tomorrow. All his real concentration goes into that. The rest is froth---even the upheavals. He is the world's finest improviser, and tightest spender. It is why a valid book on Italian life must be a personal one, about a particular place, because otherwise the carefully chosen public veils behind which he lives (including the veil of upheaval) cannot be pierced (1).

In a most paradoxical way Italy always succeeds in being contemporary. Behind her implacable wall of rhetoric and hypocrisy a disabused intelligence is continually at work, in the remotest village as in the city. Mezzadria, a plainly mediaeval system, survived only because it worked. The Church, or rather its headquarters in Rome, survived because it paid. In Italy there was never much sentimentality towards the past, nor neurotic expectations of an ideal future. Old buildings were disregarded or

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(1) Fascism was one of the great shared public veils. No one was more mortified than Mussolini when 'that monk' as he called Hitler, on the basis of his, Mussolini's, ideas, smashed Europe to pieces!

despised. Yet they weren't torn down. The Italian has other ways of being contemporary than by physical demonstration. And the public veils he chooses---that of an apparently mediaeval system, or an apparently liberated technological one---are only a few of the many he could choose (including diabolical ones). He has always known how terrible it would be, for himself and for the world, if he tore the veils down to reveal HIMSELF! As a festival-organiser in Assisi said to me quietly on the eve of that town's magical Calendimaggio, 'If we ruled the world we'd behave unthinkably---horrifically. In his heart of hearts every Italian knows that.' It tips government continually towards the authoritarian, and society towards the Mafia.

7. LENGTH OF BOOK AND ILLUSTRATIONS.

Length: 80,000 words.

Illustrations: 10 plates, 100 black and white, consisting of photographs of the village and the surrounding country, the old look of the land compared with the new look, the local faces, the peasant<sup>s</sup> at work in the old way and the land-workers of today with tractors, and some reproductions of landscapes by the Siene~~se~~ masters to show how little the land has changed in 5 centuries. The enclosed proofs are by Bill Zimmermann, Rome.

ROUGH CHAPTER BREAK-DOWN

1. An introduction, as above: a description of the great social change which came about in Italy from 1960, and the consequent change in attitudes. The greatest change since Roman times.
2. A description of the village, and some glances at the Tuscan geography---Poggibonsi, Certaldo, Colle val d'Elsa and the mother-town of the colline senese, Siena. The village is situated in Chianti country but not 'classical'.
3. An introduction to the main characters in the book, the local peasants: their looks, their nicknames, their homes, their memories and forebodings.
4. The state of agriculture before 1960, and Tuscan farming traditions: the bull-oxen the chief means of locomotion on the land, the cow for milk and breeding, the offspring for cattle. No grazing land; grass cut and taken to the cattle-shed for further cutting. The crops; the styles of planting---vines, olive trees; willows for tying back the pruned vine-shoots in the spring. The grain-, wine- and oil-harvests; the year's activities---spring pruning and hoeing, the summer spraying, the cellar-work of the autumn. The inherited knowledge of the seasons, when to plant, at what stage of the moon etc.
5. The collapse of agriculture after the last war due to the state's over-concentration on industrial policies, designed to give Italy a new look as a modern state. Yet Italy still had more workers on the land than any other European state including grain-rich France.
6. The big 'liberation' that happened when the urban middle class began moving into the cheap farmhouses and converting them into weekend pleasure haunts. Their investment in new vineyards and olive groves, with heavy subsidisation from the state, which had woken up to the lucrative possibilities of exploiting land-space to the full instead of planting vines according to the 'tree system' or on unmanageable slopes. The quality of the wine went down, the price up; and the wine crooks began to abound.
7. The rapid physical change the local landscape went through, with slopes bulldozed and rationalised. It was as drastic as the change in the peasant's life. He became a land-worker, starting work at eight and ending at five, compared to dawn-to-dusk work of the old days.

And he now lives in a town apartment with his Box and his Fridge, rather perplexed that the middle class should have moved into the despised country. With difficulty he gets used to self-respect. The fear in which he used to live, and the Church's role in this. Still today, no one likes to talk about the Devil disrespectfully.

8. The role of the trade unions and the communist party. They bring the peasant level with workers in the rest of Europe, with a national health scheme, pensions, paid holidays etc. The communist party also provided a new centre of social life and moral guidance, displacing the Church in this. A glance at the village's partito.

9. The unexpected nervous complications introduced by prosperity and long leisure hours. 'People aren't so friendly'. The high incidence of heart failure and cancer. Car accidents claim local victims: all contribute to certain disillusion. Violence felt to be approaching the village. Foreboding together with the sense of freedom: 'we used to worry so much'. The new village organisation: young communists in charge. But the old status quo, like the old fascist laws and the old weighting of the legal system towards the powerful are still there, and the older ex-peasants are aware that none of this liberation may be more than a passing recognition of pressures from abroad.

10. The conclusion as above. Neither the miseria of the old world nor the benessere of the new shake the formidable balance that the Italian has achieved through the centuries. He has been in too much trouble ever to sit back and take it easy. His new attitudes (including---perhaps especially---his communism) are simply public veils over a life led much as it always was, with the eye firmly fixed on the question of survival, and day to day practical realities. Even the hidden 'civil war' in which he finds himself, between extremists of the left and the right, is only a continuation of the upheavals that have rocked Italy since the decline of the Roman empire: these upheavals too are in the end subsidiary, as each man looks after himself and his own, and lets the rest of the world go to that ever-present witness of Italian affairs, the Devil.

This story of how the liberation happened to San Gimignano will unfold strictly in descriptions of people and their homes, quoting conversations and incidents and many 'wakes' over the last ten or twelve years, with the occasional support of a wider glance at the whole of Italy, and some history when necessary, a mention of what the newspapers said, and some local statistics.

PREVIOUS BOOKS BY MAURICE ROWDON ON ITALIAN SUBJECTS

ITALIAN SKETCHES (GOLLANCZ)

A ROMAN STREET (GOLLANCZ)

COLLINS COMPANION GUIDE TO UMBRIA

THE FALL OF VENICE (WEIDENFELD/PRAEGER)

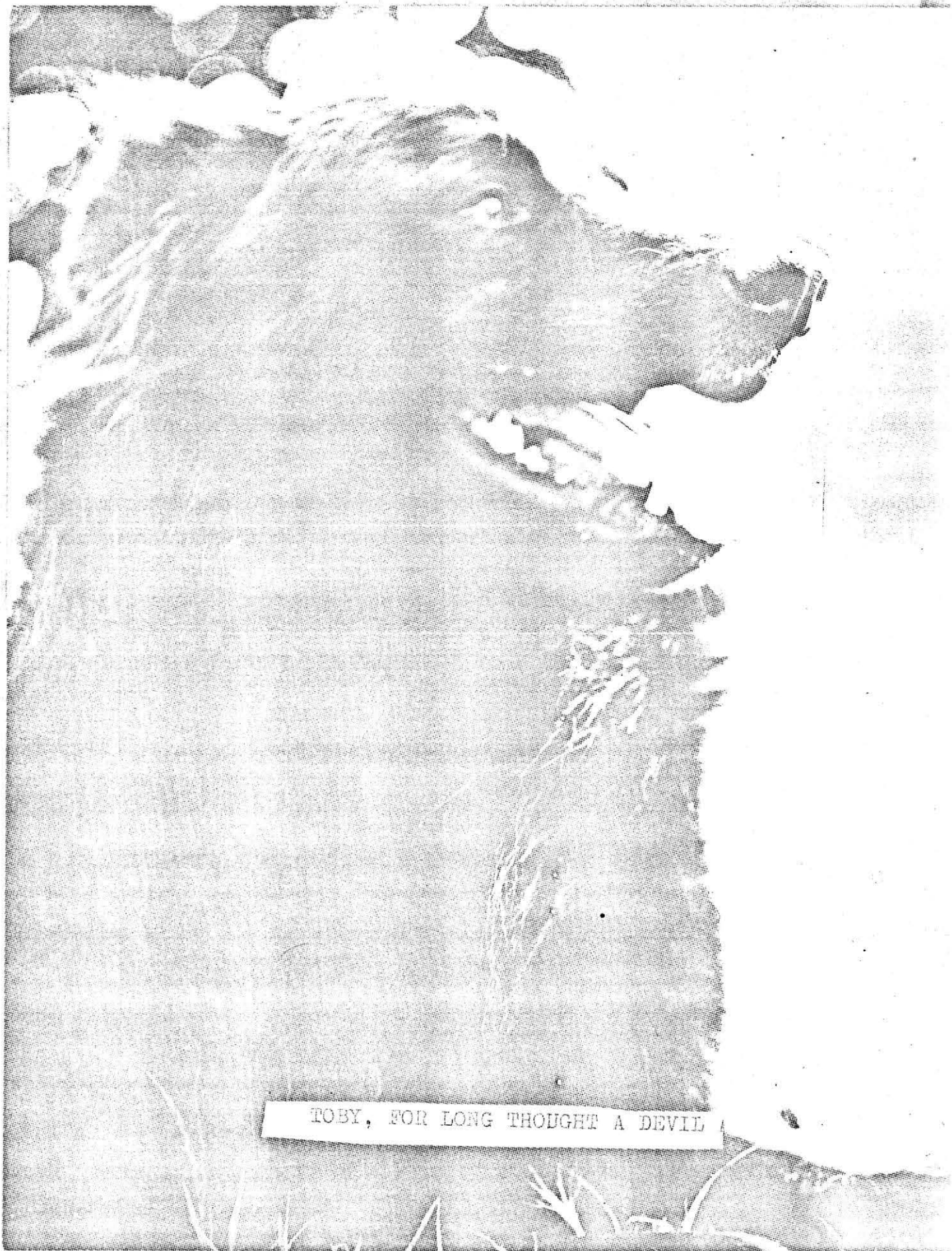
LORENZO THE MAGNIFICENT (WEIDENFELD/REGNERY)

FORTHCOMING

LEONARDO DA VINCI (WEIDENFELD GREAT LIVES)



DINO PASTICINNI, WHOSE NICKNAMES ARE GANGA, BONGINI AND PASTICCIO, IN THAT ORDER OF IMPORTANCE.



TOBY, FOR LONG THOUGHT A DEVIL



Watching the sun go down in the aia or courtyard, once used for threshing and the drying of maize, now for sun bathing. In the distance a new concentrated vineyard on a formerly steep and rugged slope.



THE AUTHOR AT WORK UNDER HIS VINE PERGOLA