


MIRIAM AND THE ROAD TO AREZZO.

~~Short story, GOOD WORDS.~~


MAURICE ROWDON.

Miriam started work at the library with a clear head. She would do it for as long as she wasn't married. Then she'd give it up and, for all she knew, never open a book again. Yet she liked books. She liked their feel, and their warm smell when they were stacked together. But she never really read one. She glanced through some, lingered with others. She wanted---she didn't know what she wanted: but something new, that didn't pin you down, from start to finish. Books seemed to promise this new something but she didn't want to know too much. She wanted it to happen, in life.

The travel books caught her imagination most. She yearned for a place where the sun shone, where the sea was a dense blue and there were shimmering, brown mountains behind; a place where you could go barefoot, where you didn't have to bother what to wear. She was quite happy to bide her time. She was a rather fine-looking, strong girl, with a determined chin and winning, inquisitive, slightly tomboyish eyes.

Yet she liked the dark Bradley streets. She loved walking home from the library at night, after she'd cleared up in the tiny cubicle allotted to her. The lamplights had a curious intimate glow, her footsteps sounded very sharp on the pavement, everything was so crisp and clear

in the winter. She could have skipped for joy just thinking of the cup of tea she was going to have, and the flicker of the tele. Silly! But she was wise enough to know that the best joys are little ones.

She had a few girl-friends: on Friday nights she and a girl called Ruth washed their hair together, at Ruth's place, and on Saturdays they went to a Social at one of the local halls. She was twenty-three. Plenty of time, as her mother said. The assistant-librarian was nice, and she'd got into the habit of going to the Socials with him. He'd even started calling at the house for her, to pick her up. Then he came to tea, and talked to her father while she dressed. He had friendly eyes and an enormous curl of blond hair across his head---his bang, she called it. It annoyed her secretly, that bang; it brought out the tomboyish glint in her eye. And as they got familiar with each other she took to giving it a little pull now and then, very playful---not a bit spiteful, and he always responded bravely, screwing up his eyes in a laugh. This touched her. That was it: he was touching. But not much more. They shared jokes together. At Christmas he kissed her under the mistletoe. And she let her mother and father think they were to be married.

Then the something-new happened. Her father worked at a local engineering firm and told her that a group of young Italians had come over for a study course. The following week she was introduced to one of them, Giuseppe Prato. It was as quick as that. All of a sudden the travel books

she'd been glancing at, the blue sea and the mountains, her irritation with Cyril's bang, all fell into place. Life was serious at last!

She wasn't in love. At least, it didn't seem like that. She had no picture of Italy. She'd never felt romantically about it. As a matter of fact, it was the only country she hadn't read much about. Nor was Giuseppe the proverbial Italian. His hair wasn't very dark, he had rather light eyes and he moved his arms about very little. He didn't fling himself on her.

There was something about him---a kind of passiveness---that appealed to her. He seemed to accept things so wonderfully. Everything. And so quietly. Things seemed to flow round him, and he had a quiet, benevolent curiosity about it all. He was so clear, so right in his instincts. There was nothing unhealthy, nothing even slightly twisted or strange about him. She felt there was a natural way of behaving, and that he had it.

He was never too tired to oblige other people. He wasn't shy, yet he wasn't assertive either. There seemed to be a method in everything he did, but it wasn't thought-out; it was just natural. He was the calmest person she'd ever met. He was like a clear pool inside. He watched every movement she made with his flickering, brown, drowsy eyes, and he seemed to know every line and curve in her face. Yet he was never familiar. She wouldn't have dared pull his hair---she shuddered even to think of it! And yet she could touch him as freely as she liked. Much more so than

with Cyril. There wasn't that embarrassment of touch.

He seemed to admire her terrifically. As a person. He gazed at her thick brown hair that always looked slightly bleached as if she'd just been at the sea, and at her chin, which she always pushed forward in an argument, making him smile. He was so mild---yet she found this mildness more masculine than anything she'd known before. His calm seemed to be born in him---in his glands and tissues, hidden, and it didn't leave him even when he got excited, which he did now and then, out of what she recognised as jealousy. He disliked her seeing Cyril. It rankled with him that they worked together. And she didn't even mind this jealousy. Because that, again, was natural. It was part of love. She realised that for the first time. It was a comfort, knowing what was natural, what you needn't be ashamed of.

So she let him press for marriage. In the old-fashioned way he went to her father, who looked astonished and uncomfortable, having, as he told her afterwards with a wink, proposed to her mother over a game of cards.

Within five weeks they were sailing for Genoa, married. Giuseppe chose the sea-trip because he wanted the rest: he would have to buckle down to work again as soon as they arrived, there was no time for a honeymoon. He was called ingegnere very respectfully by the other Italians in his group: he'd given ten years of his youth to study, he told her.

They docked at Genoa on a hot, still day, and a cousin of his was waiting for them just beyond the customs' huts, standing in the shade, seeming submerged in it. The heat was immense, like a great static breath, with the sea like a blue pool as far as the eye could see. She lagged behind him gazing at everything---gasping, almost, because it was like walking into one of the books she'd glanced at, a book about the desert. It was much more powerful than anything she'd imagined, though. It just snatched hold of her, the great breath of heat sucked her in, she was lost---that was how she felt. And she was immensely and desperately happy. Giuseppe glanced at her as they walked along, blinking at her doubtfully as if it might not be good enough for her.

The three of them were a crowd in the cousin's tiny car. The cousin didn't address her directly, only stared at her with black eyes, and when he asked a question in Italian Giuseppe replied as briefly as possible, wiping the sweat off his neck with a handkerchief.

"It's so hot!" he said.

"I love it!"

There was a long drive to Arezzo, where Giuseppe had his family. She squeezed his hand and he looked at her sideways in the back of the car, still with his doubtful look. But most of the time she was absorbed in what was going on outside---there was the flurry and fuss of the little cars trying to pass each other on the narrow road; even driving a car was something different here! And there was the dust, the black diesel-fumes from the buses and

lorries, the neat railway crossings, the strange shouts of people at the side of the road, the sudden drops on either side into wonderful valleys of vineyards and olive trees, then the untidy factories which seemed to have none of the grimness of Bradley about them.

Giuseppe went on nodding to his cousin, clicking his tongue lazily to denote a negative, raising his eyebrows slightly to show surprise, as if words were now a pain to him. He only really spoke once, to join his cousin in shouting at an old woman who'd stepped into the road without looking and made them skid to a stop. She thought this easy contact with people was marvellous---even the hostility had something intimate about it, nothing dangerous. The old woman just looked a bit ashamed, a bit angry, then walked on, giving them a slight contemptuous jerk of her shoulder.

She felt she'd been waiting for this kind of thing all her life---a place where people's feelings were on the surface! Suppose she'd never met Giuseppe? When this thought went through her mind she blushed with panic.

She would write her mother a sixteen-page letter that evening. And thank the library for giving her a little send-off party. Ruth had cried at the station. All this seemed so strange to her now that she could hardly remember her name. It felt as if just her body was travelling along. She was free! There was nothing round her, absolutely nothing, that she could call familiar.

"I must learn Italian," she told Giuseppe, feeling

the lack of conversation with his cousin, who was sitting bolt upright behind the steering wheel like a man in church. "How do I say that in Italian?"

"Devo imparare italiano," he said in a clear, mild voice.

She repeated this to the cousin as best she could and he nodded in a quick, frightened way, saying "Brava, brava!", then giving a panic-stricken glance at Giuseppe.

It was sweltering hot by now---the ship had docked at noon---and the sun beat down on the roof of the car. The heat seemed to make all her muscles free for the first time, she felt she could move her face properly, she was herself for the first time in her life! It was like the heat that brings a flower to full bloom. Even her voice had changed. It had got deeper, so it seemed to her. Even in that short time since they left Genoa.

They drove quickly through Florence, which was shuttered-up and empty in the afternoon siesta. Giuseppe promised to bring her back there as soon as possible, and he pointed out all the buildings quickly, without real pleasure: the cathedral that looked so odd to her with its thick stripes, the deserted square with the statue of David in the corner. In a funny way she felt she'd been yearning for that sort of town all her life, and that she'd known about it without ever having had a picture of it in her mind.

Then they were suddenly in Arezzo, grinding and whining up the hill to the narrow, mediaeval streets above the town. And there was the house, squeezed between others, shuttered and tall, with all the famous monuments of the town close

by---all the 'dead' part of the town, Giuseppe said. But for her it was the liveliest place she'd ever seen. The car-hooter brought the family running out and there were tears and shouts and hugs for half-an-hour or more.

There was a great family party that evening. The house was cavernous and cool with painted ceilings and bare rooms, some of them with no furniture at all, though they didn't give an impression of bareness for a moment. Everything echoed with noise, there were flashes of blinding evening light from outside. Giuseppe's mother was in black, rather tall and plump with a long, fine nose, her face always raised calmly, gazing at other people. His father had died some years before and there was a picture of him on the wall with a dusty laurel wreath at the top. And there were several younger sisters, with a crowd of others who were called vaguely relatives, most of them in black as well. They smiled at her distantly yet protectively, backed away when she wanted to pass, sometimes looked into her face with a sudden intimate curiosity. The men were rather slim and sharp, with pale faces, and they drank the wine that was poured them in a gingerly way, with dry, pursed lips, as if they were afraid of offending.

Of course, the language-trouble made it hopeless. They sat at a long table in one of the least bare rooms, where there was a hideous polished sideboard they were evidently proud of, and a huge cake came in from a shop. The red wine was from their own fields, Giuseppe told her, with his

curious lack of enthusiasm; everything the others said seemed to pass over him and his eyes always returned to her with their doubtful look, as if she might get up and run away. They had a vineyard outside the town, he said, and one day he wanted to build a house there, just for the two of them and their children. The air was always fresh there, he added. He sat with his hands cupped together, leaning his elbows on the table, talking quietly, while everybody looked at him with tremendous respect, because of the foreign language being spoken. Then a ~~sister~~^{girl} came over to him and put her arms round his neck, kissing him softly on the cheek, and asked shyly what he'd just said. But he only shook his head, making the negative little click of his tongue as he'd done in the car, and smiling at her wanly and briefly.

Miriam's face got red from the wine. She laughed and leaned on him. But he seemed too uncomfortably conscious of his own family to really let himself go. The cousin who had driven them kept close to her like a bodyguard and tried to give the others the impression that he understood everything she said.

She was determined to learn Italian---she'd do it in a week! And in a week she did get quite a long way. At the end of it she could talk with the women in the kitchen, using her hands a lot. And she stayed in her room for an hour or so every day with her grammar book. He'd fitted her up with a little room overlooking the cobbled yard at the back; so that she could escape the women if she wanted to, he said.

She found herself with the women quite a lot. They were so childish---but childish in the way all adult human beings should be, she thought. Nothing was too simple for them. She felt she could say anything that came into her head. And yet only simple little thoughts came into her head, such as that it was hot, or she felt hungry, or she would like a cake from the local bar.

Two of the sisters took her for a walk down the main street in the evening, obviously very proud of her. The street was always clear of traffic for the evening hours and contained one mass of jostling, laughing, strolling, talking people from one end to the other. It excited her so much the first time that she could hardly talk, only feed her eyes. But they wanted her to talk. If she said nothing they thought she was bored. Everything had to be on the surface here. That was a bit tiresome. She could have no thoughts to herself; apparently she wasn't supposed to have, either.

The letter to her mother wasn't written until the second week. And then she only wrote two pages. It was all too overwhelming for her to put into words. Bradley was almost forgotten. Those brisk, thrilling streets, the faint smell of fish and chips on the corner, the sound of the trolley bus, it was all less vivid to her now than a dream. Who was she? All she seemed to have was a name.

He was quite worried the first week---did she like the town? was the house clean enough? (it was spotless)--- did she find his family...? And there he stumbled and

couldn't find his words. What did he mean? she asked. Well, did she find his family a bit---simple, primitive?

"Simple, yes!" she said with that determination in her chin. "And I wish everybody in the world was like that!"

He gave her a little look of surprise and smiled, and it seemed to make him easier. They wrote letters to her parents together---he sent best wishes to the boys at her father's works. He put a carpet and a little table in her room, and gave her an Italian lesson there every evening before supper, after he came in from the office. People worked late in Italy: from four until about eight or sometimes nine in the evening. After lunch Giuseppe always slept.

The bedroom was just a place to sleep---an iron bedstead and a narrow strip of carpet at the side like a piece of canvas. He flung himself down at night and was asleep at once. She realised she'd been brought up on the idea that the bedroom is a sanctuary. So she started putting more and more things in her own room. She bought silk covers---the silk was really good and cheap in Italy---, a terracotta jar for branches, and a chair with a leather backrest that was supposed to come from a monastery. The women thought it odd that she should collect branches and stand them in a jar; they watched her with a funny, intimidated expression when she cut the stems at the bottom and stood them in glycerine to preserve the leaves.

The trip to Florence materialised after two months or so. They spent a couple of hours there. Giuseppe used

the visit to go to a contractor's office, while she went round the Palazzo Pitti with a guide-book in her hand; then they raced back for dinner.

He had to work so hard. At the same time it was his passion. Perhaps his only real one. It began to make her sad. She was a bit like one of his sisters for him now. He answered her with a little click of his tongue now.

But he called out her name every evening from the courtyard under her window, when he got out of the car--- "M-ee-riam, M-ee-riam!", with that slight Italian intonation she'd come to love. There were other things than passion, she thought. There were the little animal pleasures---sitting in the spring sun, eating. She began to get careless in her appearance.

The noises outside began to keep her awake at night. Lorries thumped and roared on the road below. But Giuseppe didn't seem to notice. She was alone as she'd never been in her life before, but at the same time less lonely: it was strange.

He seemed to love his charts and designs most. It was their order he loved. He seemed to feel that there was no order in the real world, in his world---only a kind of easy, harmonious mess. And it was true. The meals just drifted into being, the straw brooms went over the tiled floors lazily, as if by accident; the women gave off such a feeling of passiveness, as limp as their handshakes.

If one of the sisters got a little cut pandemonium broke out---the whole world was about to fall and there was no hope for it. She began to understand Giuseppe's love for his charts. They were clear, predictable---hopeful.

He couldn't bear jet-black hair, he told her. He couldn't bear 'Italian' beauty---the olive skin and slight plumpness. That was part of the same thing. He admired her for her clean, almost-bleached hair, her light eyes, her obstinate, clear-cut chin, her cheerful replies.

But he learned to love jet-black hair when she gave birth to a son as dark as a little Neapolitan. There he showed passion! He adored Franco with a kind of drugged, helpless fascination. He rushed in every evening to play with him. There was an intimacy between father and son she'd never seen before---a good bit more than some mothers gave in her own world. Franco was like a little king in the house. Nothing he did succeeded in irritating anybody. He was the first name on everybody's lips in the morning and the last at night. He commanded attention the moment he spoke. And he was astonishingly mature for his age. She realised that a child was a grown-up in embryo, with the same passions and angers and rights, only on a smaller stage. There was no order in him, either. He climbed all over her, and she allowed it, drifting along with the others.

Her relation with the women hadn't really developed since the day she arrived. She was---a woman. And that was that. She cooked, sewed, nursed the child. No more was asked of her. Nor was any more supposed to exist in her. Nor was

it her right to ask for any more. She was just a woman.

One of the sisters got married---the nicest one---and Miriam kept to her room more and more, taking Franco with her. Sometimes she flared up in the silence---she wasn't just a woman! The other women seemed to feel this slight mute rebellion. And they would peep into her room with silly expressions, as if they were looking for something, then make a sickly smile and go away. Just as if she was an object! They seemed to sniff at her! How stupid! she said to herself.

Then Giuseppe looked in one evening with the same look. The women had been 'talking' to him. She nearly jumped out of her skin when she saw that same narrow, disrespectful look on his face. One of his sisters had told him there must be a man she was signalling to from her window every day---what else would a woman want with being alone? A man! She flared up and began shouting at him in English---all her loneliness of the last few months poured out of her while he stood in the doorway shifting his feet about in a frightened way. The women came running heavily up. His mother was in her shapeless black gown that seemed to announce the death of sex, and her hands were covered with flour from making fettuccine. Then Miriam burst into tears. The sisters started crying, too. They wept on each other's shoulders. Yes, yes, she was a straniera, a foreigner, she must be so lonely, yes, yes! And it all ended downstairs in the kitchen (where the women had wanted her all along---she was aware of their victory even through her misty eyes).

But her mute rebellion grew, and she began to feel a prisoner in the house. He nearly always went out alone--- there was a contractor to see, a discussion at the local café. And he must always go to the café alone: it was a man's place, he said, much as he deplored it. She could go on Sundays, with him and the child, for a few minutes: everybody did the same. But the idea of her sitting in a café alone---even with one of the sisters---was so ludicrous that she didn't question it: it was just one of the laws.

The nights got worse for her: she was sensitive to every sound---the sounds she'd thought so natural and easy at the beginning. People would come and 'talk&---shout--- in the street outside, in the dead of the night. The lorries thumped and roared on the roadway below. She began to yearn for those little considerations people show to each other, and which make life exciting. But there she was---a woman; Giuseppe was a man---and there was nothing further to explore. They'd explored everything. There was just eating, sleeping, church on Sundays, the bell that tolled for the dead, a little walk on Saturdays with the eyes of the young men all over her as if they'd never seen a woman before. And everything so closed---so little real talk, so little exploration!

Yet she loved it still---she loved the cavernous rooms and the smell of frying garlic in the morning, the scent of the olive groves from outside the town, the maize hanging to dry in the courtyard below, the long, red tomatoes left to ripen in the sun, the rich smell of the wine casks when they

arrived full from the country in October.

Her father set the flame to the haystack without meaning to. He wrote saying that they wanted to see her and that he'd saved up enough money to pay for air-tickets for her and the child, if Giuseppe could pay for his. They must come for Christmas. There was to be no discussion, he said---he'd set his heart on it. Of course, she ran to Giuseppe with the news, terrifically excited. The trip would change everything! But he was rather numb, a bit removed. He wasn't excited in the least. The thought of seeing her father again didn't seem to excite him---even interest him. Yet he was always talking about Bradley to his friends. There was just no excitement at meeting other people. Other people, it seemed, didn't have the power of surprise: they were your 'mother' or your 'father' or your 'wife'---all finished and set and without any surprises. The basic thrill and excitement of life was missing. It cast a drowsy indifference over everything, and she felt limp, helpless---as the women looked.

He began to give her reasons against the trip, with a kind of pout. He couldn't leave his work, for one thing. And then the journey: surely that was bad for the child? The journey might upset him. A child? she asked. He'd be thrilled! She said it with her chin pushed forward. But Giuseppe was afraid of the motion of the plane, and the women were even more afraid. Then the 'change', he said---the child might not like that, either. It was so cold in Bradley. Freezing! And the women shuddered.

So she took a bus to Siena and bought two air-tickets with the money her father had sent her. Then she returned to the house without a word to anybody.

A few days before Christmas she broke the news---she was going---and all hell broke lose. He shouted, almost cried, walked up and down her room frantically, bit his fingers in a strange way, made little crooning noises; all she could do was to watch him spellbound. It was a side she'd never seen before. But the women seemed to take it for granted. And at the end of the scene he suddenly looked at her with exhausted, clear eyes and said, "Where did you get the money?"

"From my father."

"I'm sorry we can't go this time, M-ee-riam!"

"But I am going!" she cried.

Again he broke lose. She couldn't go, he said, because she was now Italian. It was against the law. Italian women could only leave their country with their husband's consent. They could only get a passport with their husband's consent. If they left the conjugal roof they were committing an offence; a husband could do it but not a wife. That was Italian law.

And all she did when he told her this was to give him a quiet look of contempt. And to her surprise that worked. He blinked and looked away, and said, "All right, M-ee-riam, go if you want to." And he went downstairs to tell the women not to mention the subject again.

She expected the women to resent her but they didn't; there was even a tinge of new respect. She'd asserted her-

self successfully, as perhaps they'd wanted to a thousand times.

She and Franco flew over on the morning of Christmas Eve. Bradley was crisp and exciting, she was thrilled by the cosy, glowing lights in the shops, the Christmas tree in the department store and the Father Christmas who handed Franco a little parcel out of a bin glittering with tinsel. There was even a fall of snow. Franco began to talk English, inexplicably. She watched television with him every evening---it seemed to full of interest and curiosity about other people!

Above all, she was doing things again. She was talking and being listened to. She could sit in her favourite tea-room with Ruth for an hour---two---if she wanted to! She took Franco to two pantomimes, she spent three whole afternoons getting presents, going by taxi. There was no noise at night. The world seemed to sleep peacefully. People were so considerate. You could actually cross the road without being afraid for your life!

She went to the library and spent a whole afternoon talking to Cyril. Ruth had married, and the plan was for her and her husband to spend Christmas at Miriam's place. They pulled crackers, found two sixpences in the Christmas pudding, ate mince-pies at tea-time, filled a stocking for Franco---she'd forgotten just how exciting life could be in all these intimate little things.

Christmas passed and she found she couldn't bear to leave:

not just yet. She wrote to Giuseppe saying she wanted to stay just a month more, to get back her 'old spirit'. The letter wrote itself really, and she posted it with a blind feeling, little realising what a huge decision she'd just made.

He wrote back at once---a sad, quiet letter. To her surprise he told her to stay longer: he was making 'changes', and he would write to her about them later on. Meanwhile he sent her all his love---they would be happy together now.

She was puzzled, but her new life was too full for it to bother her long. She bustled about all day helping her mother, seeing Ruth, going to the library, fitting Franco up with new clothes. One sentence in Giuseppe's letter puzzled her most: 'you were right', he'd said.

The weeks passed quickly. But she began to yearn for the sun; that was the first thing. She missed that glow outside her window like a great golden bell hanging there nearly every morning when she woke up. And the courtyard with its cobbles, the taste of red wine, the veal cooked in Marsala, the egg-plant baked with mozzarella cheese... She was a forger here, too: she realised that. When she touched the vegetables at the market, which everybody did in Italy, the man shot her an offended glance. When she asked a shop if they could send a boy to the house with her shopping bag they stared at her as if she was mad. No, they didn't 'deliver'! Some shops 'delivered', others didn't. It seemed to be all rules here! And she felt a

flush of indignation like the one she'd felt against the women. How stupid! But what world did she belong to?

Giuseppe went on writing her letters. For him, for his family, she'd walked out. But he didn't blame her for this. In every letter he said she was 'quite right'. She'd walked out on the old, 'dead' Italy. He didn't like the life there himself, and he'd always felt it wouldn't be good enough for her, he said. She felt like replying, 'No, no, no, how wrong you are', but she left it; she was too tired. She wrote about other things instead. Then suddenly, one chill, grey morning, she got an express letter from saying that he'd managed to contact someone who knew of jobs in England, and he hoped to be seeing her soon. She panicked---he was coming to England---! She rushed to the post office and telegraphed him to keep his job, she was coming back with Franco at once. Then she started packing, in a frenzy, with her mother helping her. But while she was in the middle of it a message came from the library---someone was phoning her from Italy. It was Giuseppe. He'd clinched everything, he said, he was flying over in a few days and she must stay where she was. She tried to argue but he said it was too late, the contract had been signed. For five years. In Preston. A house went with the job. She could have wept on the spot, and she dragged her feet home and sat for an hour in the front room crying her eyes out, with Franco holding her hand. There! She'd done it! She'd done it now! And she did so love Italy!

The absurd part of it was that Giuseppe was extraordinarily

grateful to her. It was a fine job he'd got himself, he told her at the airport---one he wouldn't have dared dream about even a month before. And she'd done it for him, really!

The house in Preston was small and pleasant, with a garden. Giuseppe looked round at everything with curiosity. Just as she loved the heat he loved the cold! And the order fascinated him---his cheque arrived like clockwork at the end of the month, he admired the smooth, quiet way Englishmen worked, never doing more than was good for them. He began to look on her as a person again, with a new respect; he actually asked her what she'd been doing in the day. And they went out together---to friends, or the theatre. He was everything she wanted him to be. A little bit tamed perhaps... But after all he was a foreigner here.

She found herself going to the local library a lot, and then---after a word from Bradley, through Cyril---they offered her a part-time job. It completed her new life as a whole person, not just a woman. Once again she stacked books and pinned the new dust-jackets on a felt notice-board. She actually began reading the travel books from cover to cover. She 'devoured' them, Giuseppe said. And Italy was the subject she devoured most. She was astonished how she could have lived in Arezzo all that time without seeing the Piera della Francesca frescoes, which were supposed to be some of the finest things in Italy, or Petrarach's birthplace.

At its best, their life was like a dream, pleasant and

exciting. It left a strange yearning, that was all.
Sometimes---it was a quick, shamefaced idea that came and went---
she felt she wasn't appreciated enough, just as a woman.

Rome, 1962