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28th November, 1967.

Dear Maurice,

Thank you very much for your letter. WAITING FOR MELLI sounds very interesting. I don't know of course how far you have got with it and simply on a few lines of description I might have got the whole thing wrong. I think I should, though, raise one faint warning noise. Whether we like it or not, the book trade is pretty conservative and is occasionally a bit reluctant to abandon its long held classifications. Novels are novels, autobiographies are autobiographies and travel books are travel books. A combination of these is apt to throw it into a state of jitters and dismay, from which the easiest way out is not to buy it. Of course any rule can be broken triumphantly if the book itself is outstanding enough, and I most certainly don't want to discourage you from breaking new ground and doing something original. I am just making warning noises in case we have to talk in much the same way when the manuscript arrives. If in fact the book <u>is</u> a personal record, might it not be simpler to make it just that and drop the fictional approach altogether? You may of course have perfectly valid reasons but what you have to say may well be of sufficient interest to stand on its own feet without being supported by a fictional prop.

The third volume of the Italian trilogy also sounds interesting, particularly in view of the reviews of the first two volumes. But the Gollancz angle raises a question in my mind. Are you allowed to offer it to us? The other point is a little delicate but I feel I know you well enough to be frank: has it in fact already been offered to Gollancz?

I am very glad about your two forthcoming books from Collins and Weidenfeld and I hope they are very successful. I do hope this letter does not sound over-cautious and discouraging - that is the last impression I want to make and I am keenly looking forward to the next manuscript from you. Any time you feel like a drink, do give me a ring.

Yours,

Richard

Richard Wadleigh

RW/ak
cc: LAU
CCML

THE LAST ITALY

by

Maurice Rowdon

A diary / Pictures of ~~a~~ old Italy ~~now dead: fire~~

little traffic pause

1.

The Road to Volterra

The road outside hasn't yet been asphalted ~~and is~~ a blinding dusty strip in the morning sunlight. It goes to Volterra. I've seen a salamander twice, darting ~~across the pebbles;~~ ~~and~~ a Little Owl ~~sitting~~ on a milestone ~~in broad daylight~~, staring at me, craning his neck round; ~~also a grass-snake~~, and a weasle. ~~There are~~ Many cuckoos live in the woods above us, ~~and~~ sometimes they sing on the lower note only, three straight notes like a train-hooter – and a perfect time. ~~And~~ nearly always ~~there is~~ a nightingale ~~at night~~, close to our window, at night a voice. ~~quite alone.~~ ~~There are~~ foxes roam in the woods but we never hear ~~one~~ their bark. ~~Sometimes~~ A pheasant or a woodgrouse flaps away close to the house, with an echoing cry of alarm. There are warblers and wheatears and stonechats; many house-martins, but I've only seen one swallow ~~so far.~~ The house-martins investigating, swooped over the house for a few days ~~after we arrived to see what the sudden movement was about~~ when we moved in, but they ~~seem to have~~ quickly lost interest ~~now~~. I was surprised to see a jay ~~yesterday~~ with its wine-coloured breast, flapping down heavily from one

branch to another.

Our house is so ramshackle it looks as if it is growing into the hill. The tiles are mellowed, they glow in the last of the sun. A truck passes and sends up a spray of white powder into the windows. You enter a tiny courtyard with a foul dark well and rotten barn-doors hanging off their hinges, and old carts with their shafts up. There are rusty biscuit tins tied to the rafters with wire, for the pigeons to sit and coo on. There are barrels and broken demijohns and a wine-press. The old stones underfoot are uneven, with cow-piss oozing between them. The gate has gone. Grass grows out of the holes left by the hinges. A corrugated iron roof by the well ruins any chance of prettiness. Plants push up between the dusty bricks of the walls. Bricks are missing--- used to hold down haystacks in the wind. Stucco has peeled away from the house, layers of it. There is a stench of pig. Two sows are sniffing at their low doors, in their dark cabins hardly bigger than themselves. They never see daylight, except when the muck is cleared and their swill thrown in. They squeal to be let out, and gets terrific blows on the nose from a hay-rake.

Upstairs the windows are dark, cobwebbed, and they make you think there are old people peering through them from ages ago, when everything was neat and humming here. The cows shift in the stable with a thump of the hoof, then a soft blowing through the nostrils. Up the steps, which are broken, there are the peasant rooms, but no

peasants. The walls are black with smoke. Some of the beams hang, kept up by the main shaft. There are holes in the roof, and fungoid strips down the wall where the rain has been pouring in. In a dark room where the old lavatory sits---a simple hole in the floor, still stinking---there are hams hanging from the rafters, and bags of white beans, tomatoes ~~hanging~~ in clusters to dry, onions, demijohns of last year's wine with jam-jars over their mouths to keep the mice out, little barrels of vin santo, their tops cemented, and bags of maize for the pigeons, chickens. You can hardly see out of the tiny window. The filthy glass makes the little courtyard below glow vaguely, in the last sun. It is silent.

This is our home. Upstairs the owners---who never come except to take their annual share of the wine and oil and grain---have built a palazzino, a 'little palace' meaning a couple of rooms with crushed-marble floors and a balcony of about six square yards leading from one of them, with real ceilings where the rats and mice play at night. The balcony looks out across the farm belonging to the house, a dipping field of about ten acres, crowded with vines and olive trees and plum trees and pear trees and apple trees and almond trees, all sloping down to a wooded stream, usually dry in the summer. You could look down at this crowded field for hours, as the sun begins to fall. It speaks to you about the past.

A peasant called Bartolino---to us Gino---comes and works it every day. Soon after dawn we hear the cows

thumping out of the barn underneath us, with him quietly swearing at them. Their heavy chains ring together. They blow heavily in the courtyard.

We fixed up a straw mat over the balcony, against the blinding sun. Right underneath is the Volterra road, hardly ever used. People seem to have something against it. Mainly it ruins ~~the~~ chassi- springs with its potholes, and covers the car with a film of dust. But partly it has a reputation for not being safe. Centuries ago wars were fought along it, with the Volterrans.

Above us the hill slopes abruptly, to dense woods thirty or forty kilometres deep, and rocky paths where there are millions of fossils thrown up by volcanic eruptions before history started. A whole sea=bed was suddenly disgorged into the air, it looks like. The path above our house is blinding in the midday sun. It is white with dust and slippery rocks. You have to be careful of the vipers if there hasn't been rain for some time. A dog helps you there. She steps suddenly and sits down. She never sniffs after a snake. Her nose is the one fatal place, where they can bite.

Looking from our balcony we can see a real 'palace', its walls a glowing terracotta, with farmhouses clustered round it, attached to it like servants who slowly got a grip on the master and wouldn't let go until he was suffocated. The 'palace' is in fact on its knees. Its long hall on the first floor, like a tiny ruined ballroom,

is unsafe to walk in for the loose tiles overhead and the shakey floor underfoot. The windows are planked up. We went over it one day. There are rat droppings everywhere, black masses of them. A stink of damp hangs in the air. The 'master' doesn't come here any more. He used to give dances here. The peasants watched from below. There were horses then. A grand guest might drive up in a car. There were vine-pergolas round the house, with benches underneath, and bursting apricot and peach trees, and pomegranates, and a stone fountain which is now grown over with weeds. There were roses, which peep wild through the grass now.

All round this tiny one-house village the vineyards were neat, the land straight-ploughed. The olive trees stood with their pruned branches spread up like an open palm, with a spray of leaves and blossoms between the fingers. In the last war the Germans occupied this 'palace'. One of them was killed by a mortar bomb and they buried him by the footpath under a stone. His wife came after the war to see the spot, when he had already been removed to a cemetery. The Morrocans used the barn as a hospital. Their wounded lay in the hay groaning. The peasants tore down the leafy pergola over their door because troops found it nice to eat under.

I went with Gino to an ugly little house just down the road from us. He said the woman there might help us get the house straight. She opened the door at the top

of the steps in the blinding midday sunlight. It was May. She had the glowing copper face of a gypsy, and smiled carelessly. Her name was Armida. She was to help us, Gino said. Next morning she came and got the kitchen straight. Her husband, Dino, talked to me in the evening. He calls out in a hearty, husky voice. His face is always in a smile, fixed, bright, Etruscan. His head is always lifted, to scent new adventures. He attached himself to us at once. They have a grown-up son who works in a marble-yard at Poggibonsi. Their little house was once a brick-kiln, until the last war, hence its ugliness. Mice scurry about while we sit at table with them, drinking wine. The windows are cracked. Dino says he doesn't care because the house is only theirs for a year. They pay no rent. They will move into 'town', to a new flat, when it is ready. They have been saving for years to pay for it.Armida is doubtful about the move. But Dino, with his quick, scenting air, his endless optimism, knows it will be just the thing.

Armida grew up in the woods. She went everywhere on horseback, as a child---no saddle. Up in the hills behind the woods, on a vast green plateau, a horse-fair was held every year---dancing, drinking, horse-buying. It is dying out now, she says. But we say we shall take her there, to see.

Dino will be a worker when they move to their flat, not a peasant any more. That is, he will be hired by the day. Instead of working until sundown he will knock off

at five sharp, and instead of staring before dawn he will get to work at eight o'clock.

The old crop-sharing system, called mezzadria, is dying, and will soon be ruled out by a government bill. It worked for big families farming hilly, multi-crop farms. It doesn't work for the big mechanised holdings of the future, and for small families which divide up early, with the children going into factories.

Dino was born at the 'palace'. He was one of the peasants who chopped down the vine-pergola in the last war. He and his brother did it. They had nothing against the Germans but didn't want them coming every day, to attract enemy fire. Dino comes to our courtyard in the morning, on his way to the fields, calling up my Italianised name. In the evening we sit with him by what would be the gate if it weren't missing, or we stroll down the road to his house, where his son Sivano is sitting exhausted, with marble-dust in his ears.

There are children at the 'palace'. We hear their voices in the dying light. Gabriella has just started work in 'town', sewing. Her sister Graziella is still at school. They are both dark, pretty, giggling.

A car swishes past on the powdery road, and we all stare at it. Sometimes Dino and Gino call to us from across the fields, to our balcony. There is always some business to be done---we need some wine, or oil, or beans, or a terracotta oil-pot to put earth and geraniums in. Or they need a lift to 'town'. Or

a letter has arrived. Or a telegram. Or we are being called to a *veglia*, a 'wake', which means we sit and talk in the semi-darkness in one of the farmhouses, until midnight or so.

Up the hill there two or three more houses, including that of Paolo the shepherd, at the very top, standing in its own cool plateau at the edge of ~~the~~ woods.

From its farm below the road our house looks like a miniature castle, with massive sloping walls. It might have been a defensive position once, in the middle ages. Every sound falls clear in the valley---the midday bell from 'town', the pad-pad of sheep following Paolo down the rocky path, the hum of a car approaching. Then the silence draws round again.

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In the darkness last night, on the rocky path, we met Gianni. He lives in a house hidden at the edge of the woods, just below Paolo the shepherd. Even in the dark we could see that he was blond in the Italian way, with rather curly hair and freckles. His eyes were large, he had a frank, gay face. He made a sort of speech (the first of many): we must come and see his mother; the air here was invigorating, superior to city-air; his family would make us welcome; we would find them friendly folk; in this part of Tuscany people were open; once you made a friend he was your friend for

life. He shouted all this across the darkness rhetorically, standing on one of the bare, slippery, volcanic stones that mark our hill. His voice rang out in the still air, with the sky clear and bright overhead. We nodded in a bewildered way and the moment his speech was finished he stalked off up the hill with a dramatic 'Felice notte!', the country-way of saying good night--- a happy night to you!

The speech gave no idea of his gaiety, ~~and~~ or of his soft flexible intimacy, ~~&~~ his frolics and puns and devil-may-care laugh. We put him at twenty-two or twenty-three.

We saw his home today. It is a long, humped house with an outdoor brick staircase like ours. The dwelling rooms are above. It must be mediaeval. They hate it--- 'dirty and inconvenient'. A worker from 'town' who happened to be there said with a scowl, 'I wouldn't live up here if you paid me! I'd blow the whole hot up tomorrow.' They can't understand how we can admire it, and they laugh.

He has two brothers, Luigi who works in town at a compressed-wood factory, and Angelo who looks after the farm with his mother. They have oxen, and three or four large fields with grain, vines, olive trees and some fruit. The woods slope up directly from their fields. The wheat is just beginning to get high. Angelo is tall and gangling next to Gianni. He smiles, shows bad teeth. 'A good lad!' his mother says---'He works hard!'

Gianni (who doesn't work hard) smiles and winks at us. She is a tiny, dark, wrinkled woman with blazing eyes and no teeth. She shouts and makes everyone laugh---'Madonna cane---' (a favourite curse)---'where's the sickle?' They work endlessly, even while we are there. She is shrivelled and dried-up with work. She lost her husband in the war and has brought up her three sons alone. She taught one of them to work enough for two, another to work enough for himself and Gianni to play the fool. In a familyyou need everything.

She gets a tiny state pension, about ten pounds a month, for having lost her husband. The peasants all round say that this is why her sons are spoiled, why Gianni won't work. I say he has imagination, and they smile. They say he's clever, yes, but he'll come to nothing. They say that the fat pension robbed the family of its incentive. The father was a fine man. He was leading oxen through the woods, for the Germans. They were pulling an ammunition cart and one of the wheels went over a landmine. The oxen dashed away. The Germans jumped free but the cart blew up and he blew up with it. He was not yet thirty. A woman left on her own is an element of suspicion, fear for the peasants. She is the serpent untempered by a watchful husband. Serpents are hated. They are beaten to death mercilessly in the fields, even the harmless ones. 'Ucch!' the peasants say fastidiously, 'a serpent is a horrible thing!'

She works and works. All she is, all she thinks is work. Perhaps the unyielding eyes of the peasant men keep her at it.

When you pass Gianni's house at meal-time there is the sound of fierce gaiety. The boys bang the table, shout at the top of their voices, sing. She screams at them, toothless. They lift her up in their arms.

Their two oxen are kept roped up in their stalls under the staircase. Gianni calls them 'veal' and, smacking one on the rump, says they will fetch over a hundred and fifty thousand lire each when they're ready. They never see the light of day, never have done. At the age of ten months or so they will die. They tug at their chains. He says some people put them out to pasture, but they fatten better in the stall. He clearly hates them and beats one of them with a switch for breaking away from its chain. The chains are weighted down with iron loads so that they won't move too far. They have just room to turn their heads and look at the door, but they can hardly raise their heads, unless they lie down.

We walk outside to the vines. Gianni wants cleaner work. He strolls along between us, rather poutingly, flicking at the grass with his switch. He has bright eyes that flicker with amusement. He responds to everything with amazing quickness. He has dreams: the land is a drudgery that never stops, he says. It take away your dignity. He hates to get his hands dirty.

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Gino's wine is good---thick and dark. We eat lunch in our tiny kitchen, with the cane sun-curtain right down over the window. Strips of blidning light gleam across the room, enough for us to see by. The afternoon throbs outside.

We put our car in the courtyard below, which is inconvenient for Gino, who has to get his oxen in and out nearly every day. He doesn't say anything, knowing we are paying a rent to his padrona; and we don't at first see the inconvenience. The car keeps getting burst tyres. I keep going down and changing the wheel. Of course he is bursting the tyre each tiem, with a nail. When he and the other peasants see me working at the wheel it seems to draw them closer to me. They are astonished that I can do anything practical. I am no longer in the padrona's feckless and helpless class for them. The car-tyres cease getting punctured. And then I begin to leave the car outside the 'gates'.

Nobody can imagine why we want to live among them. There must be a trick. The padrone, the middle class of the 'town', rather despise us for living among people they have always thought filthy and shameful. They guess that we can have no self-respect.

As yet townspeople are not looking for houses in the country. It will happen in a rush, as life in the cities is less and less bearable.

The peasants are straight, trusting. We go across the valley to the Agnarelli family sometimes. They live

in a house among tall holm-oaks, looking like Austria. There are two brothers who don't get on, with four or five children between them. The women bake bread, put the sign of the cross on it to make it come out well. They do about twenty loaves at a time and the smoke pours up the side of the house, blacking the wall. They complain about their padrone, how he won't put money into the farm. But the poor old swine is weighed down by taxes, they say. They are all communist. It is the only form of self-defence they have.

As we move into June the weather collapses in an uncanny way. Instead of the usual implacable sun rising like a great copper gong in the morning and beginning to weigh heavier and heavier on the earth with remorseless fire in the day, black clouds drift over and a biting wind, with the kind of rain I have never seen in Italy before. The old rain was soft, drenching, from a low, dazzling-white sky overhead. It would rain for an hour, a day, a week, but then the low white mist above would grow brighter and brighter until the sun was clear, and then everything would dry, swiftly, and the great copper gong would begin its visits again.

We had to put a bowl of hot cinders in our bed (hooked on to a wooden hoop), it got so cold. We build wood fires in the kitchen. The midday sun no longer pierces the slats of the cane sunshade. The sky is gloomy, angry. The balcony is chill now, with its sodden straw mat overhead. The road under the house no longer sends up a

fine powder, but the cars hiss past, splashing. Gino swears more when the oxen come out in the morning. The old serenity is gone. The young wheat bends over under the wind, breaks in the hail. The fields look as though fantastic huge birds have been beating over them, flattening the stalks.

It goes on and on. There is a brief hope of the dark clouds parting, the sun pierces for a moment---hot, too hot---but other clouds take over. The old houses that have drowesed under the sun for centuries now begin to let the water through, even the inhabited ones, not only our old wreck. At first the peasants like it. The rain cools the air, and it makes work in the fields easier. On the other hand you have to slop through the muddy ruts. And then too much rain will endanger the wine. It could ruin the wheat. At first it looks like freakish weather. But it goes on and on. The peasnats talk about the atom bomb as being the cause. But they don't really believe it. They begin to say that there are no longer 'seasons' these days. It is a process that has been happening for years, they say. There have been odd cold snaps in May. The Italian sun no longer gilds every experience. The Italian light collapses. But the old light was a matter of air as well. It was a unity of warm, level air and brightness, that did the body good, that made the legs spring along. The warmth and the light went together.

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It has been raining for days with low misty clouds hanging round the house. There are stupendous crackling thunderstorms at night, lasting for hours, sometimes the whole night through, rumbling among the dense clouds. There are sudden blinding flashes, crashes that shake the house. I'm here alone for a few days. Dino tells me he would be frightened to sleep here alone, even in serene weather. He admires me for it. The oxen underneath the bedroom stamp and shift their chains, breathe out with a great puff. When they feel peace they slump down with a thump that echoes through the house. The pigeons flutter their wings suddenly, shift in their loft. The stable underneath makes a sort of central heating. Without the animals the house would be an icebox.

Last night I went to see a film with Gianni. Totò the comic was playing. It thrilled me being in the long bare hall, like a palace dreamed up by people far away, with youths down in the front stalls whistling, shouting, chewing chocolate, smoking, putting their arms out on the back of the seats, crossing their legs over the seats in front.

Before the film we went to Poggibonsi, which two years ago (people say) had ten thousand inhabitants and now has forty thousand, though is an exaggeration. The roads are being torn up, there are smokey trains passing through, an air of hurry and commerce, crowds going to and from work, cars jammed in the sidestreets, the cafés full. Italians love this and their faces look different

there, lively and optimistic. Noise, light, company, these are what they yearn for. Gianni said he went to Poggibonsi for the whores. But the fact is he has no money, for whores or anything else. He free-wheels down the rocky path on his Lambretta to save petrol.

By the time the film was over the clouds had gone away and there was a full moon in a clear and serene sky. The air was brisk and biting, as it is before a dazzling autumn day. The valley looked still, hushed. There were deep shadows under the olive trees, the saplings in the dip were black and mysterious. The lights of the 'town' four kilometres away looked bright like lamps hung out to celebrate something in a biblical country long ago.

When I went to sleep the moonlight pouring into the room through two windows seemed to fix everything, including myself, into a signle motionless unit.

In the morning I watched a hen pecking away outside the wastepipe from our kitchen and thought to myself, 'You'd better look out---the shops sell poisons nowadays---detergents, bleaches.' And later she was dead. There was a great clucking from the other hens which brought me downstairs, and she was just moving her claws for the last time, lying on her side. The others were in their dark house, in silence, and they haven't emerged all day. Their silence is real and active, as I feel when I go through the courtyard. The pigeons too were curious and awed at this death. They gazed towards the corpse from

the barn roof and didn't flap about as usual.

Then Gino the peasant came and threw the corpse away. The pigeons flapped about again and went to and fro from the olive grove across the road as usual. The hen had ceased to die.

The barber on the main square in 'town' today said that the unusual weather was due to experiments in space. He said it had started with the use of spacecraft. The scientists knew it changed the weather but kept quiet about it. There are articles in the paper about how the spacecraft by crossing a radioactive zone called Van Ellen's belt round the earth, two or three humdred miles up, may be disturbing a sort of weather-factory. The barber said that in sixty years he had never known weather like this.

Gianni, on his way to cut forage for the oxen, said he thought the cause wasn't missiles but nuclear weapons.

'There's an enormous explosion,' he said, 'which displaces thousands of acres of air, and moves dense blocks of clouds.'

He made a little speech about it: the missiles were, however, a logical necessity of the exploration of the universe. But the nuclear weapons had no justification.

Paolo the shepherd appeared with a calf seven or eight months old. He had arranged with Gino to keep it overnight in our stable, as it must go for salughtering in the morning. 'People want tender meat nowadays and are prepared to pay for it!' he said. It was a cow-calf---

still tiny and babyish-looking, with loose skin round the neck, and wobbly legs, her eyes wide and round. Today people ate meat as never before, Paolo said. So you had to kill the animals before their time. This calf would fetch twice the price if left to grow for another six months. Not so long ago meat had been a special dish---for Sundays and holidays. That had always been the case in his family. It was how he'd grown up. Now everybody, including his own family, ate meat at least once a day and sometimes twice. The huge cities had to be supported. Somore and more beasts were slaughtered. Itbcouldn't go on, he said, unless they found a way of manufacturing meat in factories. They had found ways of producing wine without grapes so----! Of course the animal feed was pepped up nowadays. What used to take six months, in terms of weight, now took two or three. This couldn't have a good effect on the quality of the meat, which lacked taste and fibre, and in the end it might have a bad effect on the animal raceitself. What was the result when you inseminated cows and reared their young by forced feeding, when you even kept them in batteries like chickens? You needed nature to make bones, liver, tissue, circulation---how far could you play about with her? In the old days you put your animals out to pasture and they were slaughtered when they were strong, heavy, full-grown beasts. The meaty was tastey and substantial, and if the pasture was right it was tender as well. But nowadays there was a madness for meat and the madness had to be satisfied.

'But what a pity!' he said. 'What a pity to send a beast off to slaughter when you could get twice or three times the money for it later!' And he flicked the creature with hisswitch.

What would happen to the animal race? It would degenerate. Disease would start. The doctors, as fast as they got round to one disease, would be faced with another. The effect of overfed meat was also apparent in people. To be healthy for the human digestion meat had to be healthy too. Just as we would go down the drain if we didn't take exercise and never saw the light of day, so will the animals.

Paolo is sharp and wide-eyed, and shows no interest in anything but money. He would sell me and my wife for a thousand lire if he could. When he takes money he makes a kind of gasp. Gianni says he has become quite a rich man in the last few years, calculating every cent, putting cow's milk into his sheep-cheeses and selling his diseased sheep as healthy meat.

He gave us bad cheese the other day. Also he charges us ten lire more per litre of milk than the shops in 'town' do. He gives us the slops. Gianni says quietly, 'Philistine.'

Paolo only talked on the theme of healthy meat because I started him on it. He doesn't give a damn about the animals in fact.

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After a few days of sun it goes on raining, with thunderstorms and wind. Nearly three weeks of it now. It has turned the rocky path above the house into a yellow rushing stream. The water whirls round at the bend outside our courtyard and cascades down to the road. Its endless muffled thunder makes the place feel like Austria. Patches of damp form on our ceilings. We put buckets everywhere to catch the drops.

New potholes appear in the road. Peasants clump past with their great green umbrellas held up, or a coat flung over their heads. Sometimes the rain becomes, icy, smarting, hissing sleet. At night a dozen thunderstorms take place. Lightning flickers in every part of the sky. It is so constant that the countryside is lit up for minutes on end. The thunder is continuous, a rumble that stirs into a clap now and then.

People keep mentioning last winter---the unusual deep snow, the recurrent frosts, over a period of two months. Biting winds as late as April.

Paolo the shepherd won't leave milk any more because we complained to Dino about the cheese he had given us. It wasn't bad really, only too young. Three <u>etti</u> of its weight was liquid.

I met him in 'town'. It was the feast of Corpus Domini. I asked him, 'What about the milk today?' He was dressed in his best, with a neat trilby hat and a feather.

'Ah,' he said, 'I forgot it---today being a holiday.'

They were just strewing flower-petals down the middle of the cobbled street for the procession, which passed like the end of the world. It happens because it happens. A surpliced boy goes in front ringing a bell. There are girls in their first communion white, with veils. The two files on either side grow more adult as they pass. The faces are mournful, fixed with tedium. People tramp, more than walk. It looks like the last procession there will ever be. The sun shines a little, in a big watery sky, brightening the children's faces for a moment. The bishop's canopy passes. There is our landlady, her face drawn down, in yellowish pallor, her shoulders hunched, her feet plodding. And further back there is her daughter, her hair loose all over her shoulders in a way that looks distracted, a little mad. The women are separate from the men. At the back the cathedral's choir master, a heavy youth with a thick jowl and eyes that always stare in the same way, as if they can't see, leads a group of boys in a ragged song, like somnambulists. As soon as the procession is past the town-sweepers appear with their witches brooms to sweep the petals into vivid little piles, and behind them comes the garbage van at a snail's pace. In a moment the street is as clean of flowers--- carefully picked for a week before by townswomen at the edge of our woods---as it was before.

The peasant across the valley who is sometimes

called il mafioso because of his stocky, piratic look told us that at one time, before the war, this procession was a grand, colourful affair, with the main square packed with people. There were mountains of flowers in the church. But the pope of that time decreed that communists were to be excommunicated, he said, so--- per forza! of course!---all the men began to stay away. Now you see the churches half empty, and the Corpus Domini procession is a thing for children, who go carrying their lilies, dressed in their communion white, without knowing quite what it is all about.

'People aren't communist because they don't believe in God,' he said, 'but because they want better lives.'

His eyes shone when he talked about the processions as they used to be.

Gianni again claimed that he goes to Poggibonsi twice a week and spend s thousand lire on a tall, handsome whore with fine legs. He told me, out of earshot of my wife, that she took him home with her, from a bar where they met. He said what a fine thing a woman had---'though not pretty perhaps'. He made a little ironical speech extolling nature for having given thise woman this thing, this 'key to pleasure' ('chiavare', 'to lock', meaning to fornicate). A smile trembled on his lips all the time.

He doesn't like the idea of 'going home' with a girl, he says. 'Going home' means being officially engaged: you approach the girl's father and is he

agrees to your being engaged to her he invites you home, and this is the first of many long tedious visits throughout life. He doesn't want that, he says.

His mother shouts, 'When are you going to marry?' When is he going to get a job? He leaves the cleaning of the stables to Angelo. He is 'rash' and 'forward'. But he has imagination, fantasia. He used to pain madonninas as a child. And they respect this. He has flair, personality. Angelo, who clears out the cowshit, knows he hasn't.

Gianni has a special path to tread, they say, and they don't know what it is. Nor does he.

He came with us all the way to Siena. He suddenly decided to, on the outskirts of 'town'. He seems not to want his brother Luigi to come. His family 'doesn't know about things', he says. He notices everything outside the window as it flashes by---piecemeal, in the Italian way; without a sustained inner theme. And when he isn't noticing things he is asleep like a child, with his hand round our dog's neck.

On the outskirts of Poggibonsi he gets excited at the hideous new factories going up in the fields. 'Bello!' he shouts. 'Bello da vero!' How lovely they are!

Gianni said when we first met him, 'I'm looking for a job. There's no money here. I can't find work.' It was a dark picture. But his padrone is generous

with them, he says. He owns a number of factories in Torino. All the produce of their land---wheat, maize, wine, oil, fruit and vegetables---goes to them. The padrone simply takes forty-seven percent of the money derived from selling cattle (about four head a year). So they have a house which though they despise it is sturdy and dry, for which they pay no rent. They get all the wine and oil they need for the year, plus an income from the cattle. The owner pays the taxes. But for this the family has to work like dogs, but only because it is a dog's life for them, spiritually. Worked out on better they are better off than most industrial working families, though they get no sick benefit or pension. But then many industrial workers are swindled out of it, they say. The lack of any social scheme for the peasants is the reason for the rural strikes that go on all the time. They are so usual that only a few peasants acknowledge them. The work has to be done. Otherwise they starve.

When we got back from Siena it was dark. We found Angelo wotking on the rocky path with Paolo the shepherd. The endless flow of water had blocked the gullies with mud and stone.

Gianni asked to get out of the car fifty yards back. He wanted to visit Pescille, where there are the two young girls. And he knew his brother was working further up the hill. He wanted to avoid reproach. Angelo said quietly to us in the dark-

ness, pushing at his long spade, 'Did my brother come back with you?'

Everyone seems to grudge Gianni these journeys to Siena. I believe he makes much of them. It is a kind of new social position for him. Dino joked about it as Gianni got out of the car. He was standing in the darkness, spare and sunburned, and said to us with a smile, 'If you're going to take him to Siena, take me as well! I love Siena!' (He has never been).

Siena shines for them, distantly. And it has begun to for us too.

Yet everyone has a car or motor-cycle locally. Paolo the shepherd has a Peugot, secondhand. Luigi, Gianni's brother, has a Lambretta. So has Silvano, Dino's son. He is plump, shy and jovial, taking after his mother. Yet they never go to Siena, much less Florence, much less Lucca, Pisa. Dino told us that peasants have only been going to the 'town' since the war, though it is less than four kilometres away. Before then people laughed at them if they saw them in the streets. They were ridiculed away. They wore different clothes, so they always stood out.

Armida is still frightened of 'town', a village of two or three thousand inhabitants. She won't go even for market.

'I must stay with my chickens,' she says. And her husband laughs at her, making her turn her head away with a bashful, stiff movement.

Gino shouted as we were starting out for Siena with Gianni in the back, 'You're not taking him? Let him walk!' Then he laughed in his boyish, throaty way, through cigarette smoke, half-spluttering. He has a thick, soft neck and quick eyes that sometimes look delicate, belying the gruffness of his voice. He has reared tow sons and two daughters. He satisfied the town-dream early, moved there over five years ago. His family is civil, optimistic, the product of all his silent aspirations as he worked in the fields, cursing the oxen and puffing at his cigarettes behind the handplough. He isn't reallya peasant. He worked as a fattore for a time, selling and buying cattle. But it wasn't steady enough. So now he works on a day to day basis for our landlady, who lives in one of the tall houses on the village-square. When she comes to measure the wine she stands by with a little notebook, writing the weights down as the men balance the stake on their shoulders and hang the demijohns between them.

There is rain more or less night and day, with bursts of very hot sunshine. It is dangerous for the vines. Unless they are constantly sprayed with copper sulphate they shrivel with disease. A spot of rain lies cupped in the leaf and the sun than 'boils', and the sickness starts from there. The copper sulphate stops the rain settling.

Paolo the shepherd brings the milk again: down ten lire per litre.

Everybody seems delighted and flattered when Gianni's around. The peasants smile and chuckle--- unwillingly. Silvano, Dino's son, who is stolid, unbends slowly under Gianni's banter. Gianni's lips always quiver with suppressed joy when he talks. He says to us, 'How strange you should have come here! How strange!'

He looks a little Scandinavian. I remember the same look in a young Roman girl---and the same wild clowning nature, with blue eyes that seem to open into space when they laugh. Blond Italians---dashing, reckless people. Gianni's father came from the Veneto, and so (people say) he may have a touch of Austrian blood.

I went cherry-picking with him along narrow dusty lanes high up in the woods, where the sun goes down late. It was just setting when we left, disappearing behind a vast plain, like a table over the world. We passed the lane where his father was killed. They have put an iron cross there, over a marble slab. 'V.... Vittorio, dies here tragically in July, 1941.'

We went on to where his family lived twenty years ago: a grey, tumbledown house with all the bricks showing through broken stucco, its courtyard overgrown with tall grass, the steps up to the door entangled in weeds, cracking with them. A man's jacket was hanging out of an open window. It looked as if it had been there years, bleached with previous suns. We climbed

a tree and picked a basket-full of cherries, not quite ripe because of the late summer. Vines were tangled with the tree. There were clusters of grapes in embryo. They will soon be wild. The olive trees are still kept up, though unless the black dead wood inside the curling bark is cut away and tarred over they will not last many years. Noises came from the woods which I involuntarily thought were traffic noises but they were birds. Everything stands quiet and withheld. The woods are anxious to encroach on these dead farms.

On the way back Gianni was stricken with fear that we'd been seen. Perhaps he should tell someone--it wasn't his land after all. But when we'd got to the road he settled in his seat and laughed.

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In the middle of the rain and thunderstorms a priest said on TV, 'Summer will come---and stay---on June 17th.' That was three days ago: since the morning of the 17th it has been hot with a blazing sun, and the temperature is now normal for this time of year. I've been reluctant to write this down, for fear of tempting the gods to bring the storms back.

Two local guesses about the priest: he has divine insight; he knows somebody who works at a spacecraft launching pad.

Due to the hot weather Gianni is working again.

A day's work makes him disgruntled and resentful. He came after dark yesterday, on the back of Luigi's motor-cycle, to deposit two bags of flour in one of our outhouses. They must be picked up later by Paolo the sheperd and taken up the hill. He tugged at Luigi's sleeve and said, nodding towards me, with his flickering---and this time rather hurt---smile, 'Which of us is the more fortunate, eh? Is he all right or not?' And Luigi disclaimed the question, turning away. The work is an affront to Gianni: a personal insult.

But this morning he came bright and early, as I was washing the dishes. His face was clear and untroubled again. He'd slept well.

There are clouds again. I looked out of the window just now and my firsth thought was, 'I shouldn't have written anything about the weather.' This is how paganism justifies itself. It is in the air here.

And now the sune has gone completely.

Next day the sun was out and resplendent. I lay on the little balcony naked, gazingat the woods that rise above the house.

The butcher said the other say, 'You should go to Certaldo---it's very interesting, the house of Boccaccio, and some wonderful ruins!' Absentmindedly, not really intending it, I said, 'E bello?---is it nice?'

'Bello!' he said in a baffled tone, staring into my eyes with his mouth open. 'No, no, not at all---only the modern can be bello for me!' Solo il moderno!

Gino has long arguments with the oxen when he arrives in the morning. 'Good God---Dio buono!---what the devil have you been doing here?', as he pushes the door open and enters the dark stall. 'Your chains all twisted! And look---look! The mess down there! Up! Up! What a fine night you've had! Porca la Madonna! Dio cane!' (pig-Virgin, God-dog!).

When they're led from the stall to be put under the yoke they look like queens coming out into the light, tall and pure and white, blinking and wondering. They take no notice of his talk.

After he'd taken the yoke off them at lunchtime the taller one stepped up into the stable without waiting, trailing her halter-ropes behind her. Gino watched her in silence and then said quietly, 'All right---now you're going in---what are you going to do?' He meant to say, how was she going to extricate herself from the ropes? And for answer the beast stopped, gazing before her, vast and queenly, letting out an enormous breath, a tower of white in the dark stable, admitting that she was puzzled. And Gino then bent down and untied her.

Paolo the shepherd is going to move soon. He has made 'millions', Gianni told me. He did it by 'sacrifice'. A sheperd's life has no holidays, and Paolo never had less than a hundred sheep at a time. Five years ago 'he was nothing'. He isn't on mezzadria (crop-sharing), like most of the peasants here.

He made his money slowly, trickle by trickle, on his sheep's cheese, his ricotta (butter-milk curd), and his cattle, his sheep and pigs for salughtering. He pays little rent---perhaps sixty thousand lire a year. He has a regular deal with one of the local hotels to supply them with his cheese. Now he'll move to the village and become a butcher.

There are three families on the hill above us--- Paolo the shepherd, Gianni's and a couple working on mezzadria. In a few months time only Gianni's family will be there. The other two are moving away.

Paolo's wife, a pretty young Sicilian woman, has just given birth to a child, and looks exhausted. The cheeses have to be pressed every day, the sheep and cows milked, while she is nursing her child. She has a flinching, self-doubting look, as if yearning for society. 'It's so isolated here!' she says. There is only the forest at the edge of their land; and the sound of pigs rooting close to the house.

Paolo seems quite un-Italian. But then a determined moneymaker never seems to belong anywhere.

Sunset: we walk up the hill and look across to the Elsa valley. The few light clouds are bright yellow, like all the midsummer country afternoons one ever knew as a child. Towards the sea, over the wooded hill, the sky is deep-blue on one side and the colour of the sea itself on the other, an astonishing limpid green. The hills over the Pesa valley are dim and peaceful in the distance. The houses down below, including our own,

shine red. There is a nightingale close to Dino's house directly under us, and a few cicadas, and the raucous sound of frogs, still enjoying the last of the rainpools.

We were surprised to hear later from Dino that he is leaving soon with his family. Then we shall have no near neighbours. His house, the closest to us, will stand empty as the landlord can't find a successor.

Dino's flat will be five miles from his work, on the outskirts of 'town'. It has two bedrooms, a kitchen and bathroom. He works on a vast podere further down the valley. They have machines and the property is paying its way. He is on daily hire and therefore has more ready money in his pocket than the other peasants. He is a worker, as opposed to a contadino, peasant.

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We are after an earthenware coppa or jar and found it standing in the courtyard of a tiny Romanesque church in the hills. These were once used for storing oil and now look nice in a garden. The priest, a small, resentful looking man, crisply said that be'd bought this one from a nearby peasant and didn't want to sell. But, he said, we could try a certain Antonio down the road, in the house beyond the wayside shrine. He had several, and one of them as large as this one.

We went down and inspected the thing in the man's

henhouse---black with filth but still serviceable. He would give it a clean-up, he said. He was a slim, dark, erect young man with hesitant eyes. We asked him to name a price. No, no, he said at once, laughing shyly, he didn't have an idea! He would enquire, and we would enquire, and then we'd meet again after we'd both enquired.

We did enquire but no one had any idea how much an old coppa should cost, now that its function was over. These jars were once made in number at Impruneta near Florence. Priginally they would have cost a few thousand lire. They were only earthenware after all, without much design. We went back to the priest but he was out working. So we plodded on down to Antonio. An Etruscan light breaks on his face as he smiles---yes, he's cleaned the pot, we must come and see it! There it stands, remote, mellow-looking, in the forecourt. How much will we offer? I say five thousand. No, no, una sciocchezza--a trifle! Much too little! How much then? Well, he has heard from the priest up at the church that, well, these things are---well, quite in demand nowadays. We stand there patiently, waiting for the dirge we've heard so often. I ask again, 'How much?' And he says softly, as if he expected to be hit for it, 'Una trentina di mila lire.' About thirty thousand, or twenty quid. The priest, he says, gave that much for his. (Extraordinary, this---a priest in his condition gets forty thousand lire a month at most and has to keep a family on it---his parents, sometimes a sister, actually related to him or

otherwise). He couldn't, by the terms of his own conscience, let it go for less than thirty thousand---certainly not less than twenty-five---or twenty at the very minimum. Such things were precious, he said, and he was sure of being able to sell at his price later on. And, he said, to tell the truth (this meant he was going to tell a lie, which he did), he was only offering it for sale because he was moving house soon and didn't want to take it with him.

So we turn away. 'Niente da fare!' After a few brief goodbyes, during which he offers us something to drink and we refuse, we leave. We decide to offer him fifteen thousand, and go to the priest a third time. Again he's out, working his farm. But just as we are about to go he drives in. He doesn't pause when he sees but goes straight to his door, dressed in an old shirt and trousers, with his sleeves rolled up. Nor does he even turn when we walk over to him. He's used to visitors---in fact, they plague him, as his church is of historic interest.

I ash him about the coppo. What price ought we to pay the peasant? He stands there with his sleeves rolled up, his arms frail and pale underneath the day's sunburn, and then talks: first, he is busy, very busy---and therefore doesn't know as much about these things as he should. Yes, I say, you're very much in giro---you go around a lot.

'No, no!' he is quick to reply. 'I'm not going

round---I work!' And he gives me a sort of fanatical look through his glasses.

'I've offered the peasant five thousand lire,' I say.

At once he says in his dry, hard way, without a trace of charity, 'No, no, five thousand is a sciocchezza! No, no, they're worth very much more than that!'

'I offered him five thousand and he said thirty, so perhaps we both erred, in opposite directions.'

No, no, he didn't think the peasant had erred at all: thirty thousand was quite right. After all, these things were coming into great demand (a lie), his mother told him how every day tourists came and exclaimed over his jar (a lie); the factories weren't producing them any more (a lie); they had great historical interest (a lie).

'The price of a thing,' he says, his glasses flashing wildly, 'depends on who wishes to buy it and who wishes to sell! It depends above all on the need and passion of the person buying! The more he wants a thing the more he has to pay for it!'

'Well how much did you pay for yours then?'

He stares at me for a moment and then to our astonishment makes a quick round gesture with his hand (meaning theft) and says, 'I acquired it.'

Dino and Armida came to us in the evening and sat in our kitchen. We told him about the priest with his trentina di mila lire and he said, 'Jars---Igve got two of them---at least two---beauties!' And he

laughed. 'Why don't you come to me first? Everything is on your doorstep and you go miles away to argue with priests!' Tomorrow morning we would walk together to Pescille and have a look at them.

Next day was Saturday. The valley outside echoed with children, and pigs squealing for their swill. We syrolled along the path to Pescille in the first heat of the day. We were talking about dung for some reason, its use on the soil. I told him how my father had always collected the horsedung from the road outside for his garden---in the days when there were still a few horses in London.

'Ah,' he said, 'then your father must have been peggio (worse) than you?'

'How do you mean?' I asked him.

'I mean, he must have done more work---he was poorer!'

'Yes,' I said, feeling confused. I wanted to say, 'But I work too!' But I stopped. 'Work' here means the fields.

His pots were much better than the priest's or the peasant's. They lay on their sides in the mud by the house where he was born. We rolled them into the stable yard and cleaned them up a bit. The oil had seeped through their bases, but since they would never be used for oil again, that didn't matter. Armida said to me doubtfully, 'They're belli, aren't they?' And Dino echoed her: 'Yes, they're nice!' But until that moment they had thought them rather shameful junk.

That evening Dino asked us what kind of church we belonged to. Were we Christians? He wanted to know about the English and the Germans, how they differed in religion. Yes, I said, they were all Christians. I tried to describe protestantism.

'How do protestants differ from us?' he asked.

I said, 'Mainly in the matter of confession. They don't confess.'

'Ah,' he said quickly, his eyes gleaming in his ruddy, lean face, 'they don't believe the priest has a special position---!'

'Exactly,' I said. 'He's only another man for him. The protestant believes that every man's conscience is his own, that he can't go to another man to free himself from blame but has to find his own way.'

Dino said, 'Then they're more religious than we are! They examine everything they do! <u>That's</u> why foreigners seem so responsible compared with us---so polite and thoughtful! <u>We</u> think, Oh, I can swear and behave badly today because tomorrow I'm going to confess. I know men who think like that,' he said. 'Religion is the reason why they're bad! Can you imagine that?'

We are sending two of his jars to friends. They sent their man over in a small truck to pick them up. We roped them round securely. When Dino asked the man what trees were going to be planted in them he said, 'None. They'll just be put on the terrace. Empty. As ornaments.' Dino looked wistfully surprised.

From being a receptacle for oil to being a vase for trees isn't such a step: but to being just an empty ornament is a step into a new world. There was silence.

Before he drove back the man had lunch with us. He has liquidlyblack eyes, penetrating, and a mild way of speech, reflective and patient. He said there was a feeling of rebellion all over Italy, but 'vague' rebellion: no one was sure what he wanted to rebel against, or indeed if there existed anyone to rebel against; he just wanted to move---into the towns if he lived in the country, to another house if he lived in town. It came from centuries of misuse by the landlords.

'We have to go through that phase,' he said. 'I myself felt rebellion against the landlords once, but I've passed through that now.'

He is paler than the peasants here, though he used to be apeasant himself. And they look up to him---I was aware of that, when Dino and he were talking together. The peasants see something different in him, an advance to which they aspire. He has the air of thinking life out all the time. There isan air of quiet charity about him. If an Italian has a real transformation of experience, which is rare, it is always religious, I think. He took out a crisp note and paid Dino for the jars. Whenever Dino talks about him hém now his eyes glisten with admiration, he shakes his head wonderingly.

Italy is the most unfathomable country in Christendom for me. Her motives, decisions, moods are an enormous pool of mystery, even to the people themselves. There are a thousand explanations---Greek, Etruscan, Roman, Moorish, Phoenician, Christian, Gothic, feudal, inquisitorial, Spanish, Aastrian---far more than any one creature can know.

Everyone here has something devout (and superstitious) about him---Gianni, Dino, even Paolo the shepherd, even Gino who lives in 'town' and disowns the past. They're all quite clear about it: they don't go to church, nothing would induce them to, but it has nothing to do with the mysterious presence they are aware of all the time, guiding their lives.

Gianni when he enters a church makes a pleasant noisy kiss towards the altar when he is crossing himself, as his hand comes up to his mouth from his chest. The madonnina he painted when he was fourteen is on the wall of his kitchen, with a flashlight bulb under, always alight. An authentic Sienese sweetness pours out of the Child's eyes and the Madonna has something special that makes you look up at her again and again. It is abit stylised---from centuries of style, that has almost crept into the blood, determined the movements of any hand that tries to paint. His drawings of Christ are exact, stern. He hasn't painted or drawn for eight years or more. 'Not enough time,' he says with a laugh.

He looks sad and oddly distracted sometimes. He hasn't been near this house for three days now. I saw him yesterday at Pescille. He came into the stable yard with a quaintly delicate-looking shopping bag in his hand. He was off to 'town', he said. 'Not to work!' Dino shouted with his clear, charitable, objective laugh. 'Strikes aren't necessary for you--- you're on strike every day!' Gianni smiled and turned away, then we saw nothing more of him.

His mother is devout in a natural way, though I imagine she despises the priests like everyone else. She is strict, with patient, darkly flashing eyes that take in everything at a glance, with direct intuition. She is half the size of any of her sons, yet they obey her like slaves.

Swearing and behaving badly are like assaulting his own mother, in Gianni's eyes. This is what stops him.

Every evening when he comes home from work Dino's son Silvano goes to the madonnina at the side of the road and says a quick prayer and crosses himself.

Dino seems to insist on this as an act of decency and uprightness.

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Signor B. and his family came today for a few minutes. He owns a large vineyard near Florence and a wine-factory. He told us he was selling his share of the business, as it was hopeless to try to live by

the land these days. All the houses on his land were empty, there were no longer any peasants. He was obliged to follow the current 'madness' and move to Florence himself. He will find a job there. He said he knows men who have moved to Florence to earn half as much as they used to on the land, and to live in dark, pokey rooms full of the stench of gas-fumes, but they're happier.

He said that among the peasants those who had moved to the city first had made most money. Now there was less demand for indurtial labour. The hunger for city-life didn't come from miseria, he said: 'People want to be machines now.'

Only in one or two optimists like Dino---he is just sixty years old---does the land not create horror. The others feel cheated and insulted. Today I tried to imagine what this horror was. I thought of a time when I worked on the land briefly, to earn a scrap of money. I was digging turf. I watched the mounds of turf rise all round me every day. The work had a fearful blankness about it, even when the sun shone, even at dawn, which I otherwise loved. I hated the land as if it personally insulted me---as I see Gianni doing now. I was working with no one. There was no community, no farmhouse to go back to, and the land wasn't mine. And so it is in Italy. The dream has gone, perhaps longer ago than we think, perhaps centuries ago. There is nothing precious to cling to---nothing gay, no

intimacy. Nothing that flatters the human creature. And the mind is developing another rhythm, another time, that belongs to the city.

The peasants live like dogs. This is true of Gianni, of Dino---they expect no more, but they dream of more. Only the town can give them the flattery and attention they need.

They want a dignity that've always felt thwarted of. This is what 'modern' means for them, and the reason why they'll take half the pay, in town.

We went to Colle Val d'Elsa. There are typical mediaeval lanes, intact, with the houses sheer and flat-walled on either side, containing the minimum number of windows, and those small. Tunnels disappear far under the houses, joining one lane to another. There are hidden squares still not asphalted where people sit outside their doors talking, the women knitting. The streets are clean. A massive villa---occupied now by dozens of families---sits astride the road, dominating two valleys. There is a sense of order and contentment. Down below is the industrial part, with tall chimneys and pastel-coloured blocks of flats. The order and contentment up here is due to the fact that everyone works down there.

Will people want to move down to the industrial parts, away from the reminders of the past? It has happened in Castel Fiorentino. They have left the splendid old houses on the hill, with their secret

arches and barred windows, and gone to embrace the noise and smoke below. What was a wonderful old town ten years ago, with clean cobbled streets, is a slum. And it may happen in Certaldo, with the mediaeval quarter perched inaccessibly on his hill, and the industrial part below.

And then, after twnety or thirty years, or perhaps much sooner, middle-class people will move into the ancient parts, as part of a fashionable swing coming partly from abroad. They will prefer the lack of traffic. The cobbled streets will look smart again. And people will move back into the country, into the old abandoned houses; and furnish the countryside with a new dream. But perhaps that is only a dream, itself.

We went to see Dino's brand-new flat. It stands a little away from the road and overlooks a cornfield, with a view of a corner of the Elsa valley. The walls have to be distempered, the doors and window-frames varnished, then it's ready. Armida has still not seen it and refuses to go until they're actually moving in. Her excuse is always, with a dark, timid look, 'I have too many chicks!'

'Always chicks!' Dino says with a laugh.

He was anxious to know what we thought of it. There is a bathroom with green glazed tiles and a flushing lavatory even a little spray attached to the bath, and next there's a kitchen. He plans to put a bench in the corridor with cushions, to sit and talk in the evening, when the kitchen is too hot. The building was done by an old friend of

his, he said. No architects came into it. He was relieved that we liked it. 'What a calamity if you hadn't!' he said. There's nothing to pay for twenty years---no taxes, rates of any kind: a special government concession, this. We stood gazing out of the windows. Soon he'll be sitting on a real lavatory, lying in his own bath, putting on lights that are strong enough to read by, gazing at television. I tell him, 'A man with his own place is a king!' And he says, 'Yes, yes!', his eyes fixed on me with fierce enthusiasm.

The baths won't be used much, except by the young. The men will use them more than the women, who seem to have an ancient fear of water. Once a week the small water-heaters will be switched on over the bath and the woman will go in to scrub her husband's back. Water, like fresh air, is thought a source of rheumatism. The bathroom is a prestige thing. It has to shine, wait for Sunday visitors. You may go into this prestige thing more deeply if you like by actually taking a bath. But some people simply leave them alone, shining.

The lavatory seats get broken quickly, and slips of newspaper stand on the stool in front of the white throne. You can go into the prestige thing even more deeply by actually having toilet paper. But it has to be used sparingly, and preferably kept for the Sunday visits. Once I had a rented room in Rome and the landlady was astonished at the toilet paper I used. 'What do you do with it?' she asked me. 'We use one or two

pieces a time.'

I think Dino will use the bath and put toilet paper. The seat won't get broken. He seems to have gone into the dream in careful detail. The slam of a fallen lavatory seat is a familiar one in all Italy. They clatter down in flats, hotels. Many of the flats will dispense with them altogether. You sit straight on to the cold china rim.

None of the flats at Dino's has a water tank. When the flow of water from 'town' ceases, which it often does in the summer, your taps are dry.

A fridge will soon be going into Dino's kitchen. He is putting money down for a TV set too. He beams. A new life! Armida will soon forget her chicks, he says. The fridge will be enveloped in a great polythene bag during the winter when it isn't in use. The TV set will get a little cover, with tassles. It will be put to bed at night like a budgerigar.

We left Dino in 'town' and drove back alone. He came to us later that evening and said, 'Town's a beautiful thing!'

He told us he'd been in the café on the square watching TV. 'You find out what's going on in the world!' And he added, 'Here---of course!---you can breathe good air, there are things we all need here, but it's outside the world, we're cut off!'

He didn't want to be right inside the 'town'---just to see it when he opened his eyes in the morning, and

to hear its noises. He wanted to be able to take a stroll into it after work. That was why he'd chosen a place on the outskirts.

In a gravelled courtyard behind his new house, just before we left in the afternoon, he pulled a great bush aside and said, 'Here---look!' It was a wayside shrine, and we were amazed to see that it was the same madonnina that stands at the side of the road here, Our Lady of Pancole.

'A good sign, don't you think?' he said.

He'd only found it after he'd bought the land and planned the house, with three other families also from Pancole, where his parents lived, a small village towards the sea.

He has been on strike for three days: the mezzadri struck several days back, unsuccessfully, and now its the land workers. They're asking for a seven-hour day, which means a forty-two-hour week as Saturday is a full working day, plus a rise a of three hundred lire a day. They say they think they'll get the rise but not the reduction of hours. Dino believes that the strikes will go on until the government produces a decent plan for the land, and there may be violence.

Gianni returned yesterday, looking quiet and numbed. He said he'd been working on the vines. He must have been copper-sulphate spraying. You carry the tank on your back and work a lever up and down, holding the long spray towards the highest leaves. Your head gets spray-

ed an acquamarine blue if the wind is going the wrong way. He hardly smiled.

The work tears him from his real life, which is still in darkness, forming. A day's idleness is enough to bring him to life again. For the peasants all round this just means a taste for idleness.

Dino said last night that he thought the great shame of the Italiancountryside was still the mezzadria system, though he and Gianni's family and Paolo and Gino are free of it. Tuscany, he said, a rich, fertile province, is being abandoned like the desert because of this system, which no longer works either for the padrone or the peasant. The owners have done nothing for their own houses. They let them fall into ruin. They won't put in light or water. There are no bathrooms, even showers, even proper lavatories. People won't work land that doesn't give them a proper living, he said. He himself had a good employer, so he worked hard and willingly. But the hig house on the other side of the valley, where we go to fetch our drinking water, and the group of houses called Pescille, are still mezzadria.

'The people work like dogs, yet their lives are at a standstill!'

One of the padroni, nicknamed Zampa---'paw' or 'hoof'--- because of his limp, never keeps accounts, and always pockets the yield from a sale. His part should be forty-seven percent but it works out at nearer seventy or eighty. The remaining percentage has to feed two families (about seven people) who do all the work. On the

other hand, some say this is untrue, and that Zampa is a good man, and that to do more for his peasants he would have to run the land at a loss, that is, find money elsewhere to finance it. In fact, the 'good' padroni, like Dino's, do derive their capital from other sources and live in town. The small local landlords have no money to invest.

'Why are they all absentee landlords?' I ask. 'Why aren't there men who not only own the land but keep the accounts and pay the wages and arrange the sales, the house-repairs, machinery---real landlords?'

'Ah, you mean the fattori!' he says.

Every landlord has a fattore, a man who administers several pieces of land and takes a percentage for his services. He is what we would call an agent or steward. Farmers in the proper sense don't exist in great number yet. The fattore or agent is absentee as well. He invariably lives in town too.

Padrone, landlord, means signore, gentleman, in Italian: that is, somebody who doesn't work.

Just as the peasants abandon the darmhouse, so the landowners abandon their lovely villas. High and low despise the land.

We begin th see the difference between the mezzadria and the others---like that between light and dark. Whenever we go to the well on the other side of the valley for our drinking water we stop and talk at the big house, where there are the two mezzadria families.

We spend evenings with them, drink their vin santo. But we don't know them by Christian name. They always seem bowed in work. They are shy, speechless, remote, though slowly they gain confidence in us. They don't present themselves to us personally and individually yet. They neither enquire our names nor ask too many questions. Only the smallest child, a boy, do we know by name.

And you can see the difference in the cattle too. The bull at their house is 'bad', has to be castrated soon. The oxen are tied too close to the trough and look---are---overworked. But at Pescille the calves look innocent and undisturbed, as the people there do. A sense of panic and drudgery seems to accompany mèza-dria---transmits itself to the beasts.

A dream no longer surrounds this house for us, now we've lived here some time. It's real for us, untouched by dreams of any kind. I remember how we came early one morning, before we moved in, and stood in the enclosed courtyard looking down the road towards 'town'. The valley was just waking up, and the spring-light sparkled. There was perfect stillness, and a few birds sang in the woods above the house. We could imagine sitting in the courtyard, bringing tables and chairs down. The light would glitter on the windows upstairs of an afternoon. But in fact we only go down to draw filthy rainwater from the well. It is a workplace-- for oxen, hens, bags of grain, empty demijohns, carts and ploughshares, Gino's motor-cycle and our car. As for our rooms, they are flatly real too---the places

where we work, eat, sleep. Gino goes to and fro outside all day. The dog barks at the oxen and frightens them. The country looks the same as before---vast and serene. But there too is no dream. It only enters you---the country: it isn't a matter of sight or pleasure, or indeed anything felt at all. The silence of the country at night is the silence of your own sleep. It isn't the scene of hopes, desires, memories. There is no country idyll. Nothing like Bavaria, the Tyrol, Carinthia. No dreams and follies have been weaved, life hasn't been drunk deep and recklessly. This is the most important thing to know about the Italian countryside. The farm-houses haven't shaken, expanded with fun. Tamed creatures have crouched in them. The Tuscan landlord was hard. Some even of the peasants say he had to be. For some time it worked. People even used to sing at their work, in the golden sun that came up almost every day and never hid far behind the clouds, in the warmth that gushed from the earth.

The valley lies there like a garden. But the only roses are wild ones. There is no hum of talk that you might hear on a Provencal farm, with people sitting round a table. Only animal needs are served here, and perhaps not all these.

We've lost interest in comfort---the little rituals of home. We hardly go into the 'sitting room', il salotto as our landlady calls it. We're either working or at table, eating. The kitchen is where we live, leaning

over thetable, a bottle of wine in front of us, in the dimness, the shade drawn against the sunlight again. Heat has arrived at last. But still there are clouds, lurking. There is a strange mist. It doesn't feel settled.

Dino promises to take us to where he works, several kilometres up the road, on the other side of the valley. 'You'll say it's bello!' he says. But for him it's just there. Yet we feel the same now---no positive delight, even in the shattering early-morning light that pours down on to the vineyards and cornfields opposite. There is only the touch of it on your skin, the glow that lies right inside you. You aren't separate, which you must be for delights. The countryside produces you. It suns brighten you, a datk sky darkens you. You are no longer aware of your place in the world, quite. There is only work in its purity. And one part of the day leads to the next unawares, as things grow in the fields.

Only the priest provides a dream here: he has made such a monopoly of it that humble dreams and follies haven't spread and coalesced among the people naturally, to make delights. Nature bestows, defends, enriches. There's only her to lean on. Well, she seems quite reliable.

Another strike today, this time of the peasants again, the mezzadri. They are all collecting in the 'town' as usual, and there are endless files of motor-scooters outside the south gate.

Early morning: the sunlight pours down, fresh and glittering. I empty some ashes on the dump outside the courtyard. Our dog lies half in the shade, where the fledgling-pigeons are. There is the sound of bees. They have a nest in the broken wall. The whole valley lies dreaming. In any country north of the Alps this would be an idyll.

Gino will take the fledgling-pigeons down soon, before they can fly, and wring their necks and eat them roasted.

Today three men came, dressed in town-suits, with collars and ties. They stepped out of a car and after some murmuring advanced towards the courtyard. A telegram had arrived at the same time and my wife was downstairs signing for it. Our dog, attached to a long rope that extends just to the edge of the courtyard, started barking like mad. The three men drew nearer and stood by what would be the gate if the house wasn't falling to pieces. One was young and plump. Another was slim and dark, and older. And the other, standing between them, was rather shrivelled and tired-looking--- apparently the leader.

He spoke first, with the muzzle of our dog close to his trousers: 'What is this dog doing here?'

We stared and gaped at the impertinence. Armida came on to the balcony with me. We watched my sife gather up the dog's lead and draw the dog inside. The three men advanced further, their faces expressionless.

Some rapid thoughts went through my head: were they police? had they come to arrest somebody? had we done something wrong? They advanced like Italians sure of their power. The leader then stopped in the middle of the courtyard and, looking up at me---he had decided to treat my wife as a shadow, and therefore her removal of the dog as a duty---said he understood that a peasant came to the house every day, and what was his name? Armida answered him with her childish half-smile: Gino was the name, she said.

Where was this Gino now?

He'd gone home, she said.

Had he left a key?

She didn't know.

He then advanced a few more paces and said, taking a piece of paper out of his pocket, 'Voi povete legere?'---can you (plural) read?

Armida shook her had and said an intimidated 'No.'

He turned to me: 'E Lei?'---and you?

I said with a touch of irony, 'Yes, I think I can read,' and the other two made agreeable noises through their hoses, like henchmen, though henchmen hovering between him and me.

He extended the piece of paper: 'Perhaps you can read this then!'

I went downstairs and took the paper from him. It was signed (I thought) by the owner of the house and said, 'These gentlemen ahave my permission to enter the house.'

I tried to hand the paper back to him, not quite understanding, but he held up his hand: 'No, you can keep it.'

There was a silence. He stood there. I stood there. The thoughts were still in my head: had something gone wrong? were these police? had the owner, hitherto a friend, gone mad and decided to throw us out?

I returned indoors with the note. After all, <u>they</u> seemed to know what they were doing, so I could leave them to it. And we went on with our lunch upstairs.

But they continued standing there. Armida remained on the balcony. The leader called up: 'Has the letter been read?' She came into us and repeated it, had the letter been read? I shrugged and said, 'Why, yes, he saw me do it!'

'Well they want to see you again,' she said.

This time---with my mouth full of the best <u>risotto</u> my wife had made for months---I dashed down with the note in my hand.

'This is addressed to no one!' I said. 'Secondly I think you've been very discourteous, you've no right to ask educated people if they can read, or question the existence of my own dog in my own courtyard, I've rented the house and I'm paying good money for it, also the law---Italian law---forbids you entry without my permission, and you haven't asked my permission, the landlady's permission isn't enough!' etc etc.

At this, said in more or less one rush, there was much shuffling and scowling, and the leader replied that

he hadn't known I was acquainted with Italian law.

But, I went on, all this having been said, he could now enter the house courteously, with my permission, which I now courteously gave. But he turned away at this, sweating profusely. No, it was all right, he wouldn't come in.

So they went off again. The youngest of them---at a safe distance---called out that the signore (that is, the leader) had only asked if we spoke Italian because he knew we were foreigners, and secondly that our dog was dangerous---era scritto in faccia, the desire to bite them was written in her face!

A most mysterious incident. Armida said she thought the shirvelled man was il maestro, a schoolmaster in 'town'. And meanwhile we had recognised the slim, silent man as one of the local bank managers. We realised they must have come to view the house for a possible. Or perhaps the schoolmaster was an assessore for mortgages---we knew thw owner wanted one.

All at once we seemed to have had a glimpse into the lower Tuscan seams, where fascism lay. We realised what a superficial part of fascism the politics of it had been. To this day, in Italy, a fascist can be recognised at once. It is a life-thing, a total way of bahaviour. There are several types, but they're all clearly recognisable. It may be a walk, a way of lifting the chin, a peculiar defensive and hurt arrogance, or a brilliance and dash with a dangerous edge. Some of the cleverest

people were drawn to fascism. Or sometimes it is a sort of faded competence and authority, a clipped bitterness of manner. They are of the schoolteacher's generation---the over-fifties.

Yet I know that, being Italian, this man is forgiving and gentle, much like a child, at some point. The terrible thing is what he could provoke others to do, by childish action. He provoked me to anger. Could he provoke me to dreams? What did he provoke as a young man? The Italians have had a dangerous genius since their natural genius was broken three or four centuries ago. He had the petty fascist irony---a small man picking and digging at the world. Fascism was only a game but the rest of the world took it in earnest, for or against. A flick of the wrist and twenty-five million people are dead.

I noticed their fascist technique, so common among the middle class here: the sudden arrival, the arrogant slam of car-doors, the chins pushed forward, the threatening voices. Yet it's a game too. And it's passing away too---with the mezzadria, with the heat that God could be relied on to switch on every day as if He felt a duty to this land.

We met our landlady the day after and she told us we'd done well to send the three signori away. Her daughter had written the note, she said, and then had come to her most shocked afterwards saying we'd refused them entry.

'I'm so glad,' she said, 'but don't tell my daughter so!'

It seems the man was the local schoolmaster: 'an

unpleasant individual', she said. In any case, he had offered her toomlittle for the house!

She speaks with tired eyes that flash dramatically now and then, opening her mouth wide to enunciate her syllables. You can see the same face, sallow and drowsy, her mouth drawn down permanent sorrowing introspection, in the early frescoes, those of the so-called Sienese primitives. When she wraps a scarf round her head to go to church she makes it look like a cowl. The 'town' has hardly changed since the fourteenth century. Its prosperity suddenly ceased and it fell under the heel of Florence because it loved its own internal quarrels more than it hated its real enemies.

After dark we went up to the hill to the other mezzadria family, above Dino's house. Their place is hidden behind cypress trees and used to be a monastery, with a wide natural forecourt of grass and boulders, on the edge of the woods. The house and barn are low-slung, built on rock, centuries old. There are three in the family, a couple and their daughter, who will marry soon.

They were still working in the darkness, getting the forage in. This is the hard part of the season, when first the grass has to be cut and then thr grain. The wheatfields have already turned yellow, with the first real heat, after being olive-grey for so long. In the dark stall, behind the flanks of the oxen, we talked about conditions. They are leaving at the end of the summer like everybody else, the man said.

'Soon the whole countryside will be empty, then where will the food come from?'

He knew of a great *podere* up the road where eighty people or more would soon be leaving. He himself could no longer work eight hectares (nearly twenty-five acres) of hilly land with his wife and daughter alone, and look after the beasts as well. His landlord is good to him, but that doesn't reduce the work. They will go to a smaller *podere*, of two or three hectares, still on *mezzadria*. The woman leaned in the doorway, a rake in her hand, saying she wondered at the food people would soon be expected to eat. The animals no longer live properly, and this meant the meat was bad. Who knew if it wasn't harmful too? She didn't believe in *allevamenti* for chickens (broiler houses). Anybody with a palate could tell a broiler bird at once. All their birds, she said---they'd had nearly a thousand at one time---were healthy and free to peck where they wanted to.

Their voices were tired in the dusk, dry like the grassy air in the barn. We went upstairs with them and sat at table while they ate their late dinner. Their daughter, a tall, handsome, hypochondriac type of girl, told us that at a baker's in 'town' an inspector had found a sack of plaster once. It was used to make up the weight. Many of the bakers used starch, she said, to whiten the loaves. Was that why people had so many complaints nowadays---the liver and stomach and kidneys? The penalty for putting ox's blood in wine to give it

colour was six months' imprisonment, but what about the chemicals that these wine-factories put in? If you drank trade-wine you could feel it circulating round your stomahc like a burning poison. This was the acid they put in. It really did burn yourinsides. Real wine never made itself felt in the stomach like that. If it warmed you, it warmed the whole of you.

The dirge goes on until we are all yawning.

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Gianni is lost again in a whirl of work. He came for a few minutes this morning at seven, and he won't be back from work until ten or half-past tonight, when Luigi will fetch him on his motor-scooter. The wheat harvest---the most hated time of year---is just starting. The wheatfields are golden. Many of the fields in the valley have already been reaped. Everybody is up at four now, and in bed not much before eleven, after a quick silent dinner.

The heat goes on, baking and cracking the earth after the stupendous rainfalls. There is great danger of the grapes rotting on their stems in this steamy furnace. Gino has already lost a third of his yield through the hail. Some of the bunches are getting a mildew on them. Dino says this is partly because the vines haven't been sprayed enough. And then they weren't hoed and manured properly in the spring. 'They're hungry.' And also, he syas with a wink, Gino prfers

his town-flat to the land. In fact Gino has a heart-complaint and puffs and blows at the slightest exertion.

He comes to the house at odd times. Sometimes it is nightfall before he feeds the oxen and clears out their dirty straw. The hidden pigs squeal for food. He is the last to cut the grain. His wife and grown-up sons come to help. They sweat at the scythes, look mortified. At night they come stumbling into the yard, speechless, raw-red from the sun, and sit down to a meal like tired wolves, gulping their wine thirstily, smacking their lips. They really hate it. We don(t go near them at this time.

Dino's family has come too---brothers and nephews. Next year, or perhaps the year after, most of the work will be done by machine. But for the moment it is still the scythe. We happened to call on them at nightfall and there was panic inside the little house in case we would come in and hold up the meal. They were like broken animals. You felt you could have thrown them food, like in the zoo. They hate to show themselves in this state. We went off quickly. They hate the world at such times. Soon the machines will take over, not to save them work but because there won(t be enough hands in the fields to work them.

A lot of the grain has ruined. The ears may rot in the sheaf, if it rains. The wet heat may be enough to do it. The hail had already ruined a lot.

Today is St John's Day, and we gave Gianni a present

of three tiny books of reproductions, Dufy, Cezanne, Breughel. He picked up the Dufy first and said quietly, 'How simple the drawing is.'

We went up to his house and had salami and wine with his mother. She leaned over the table, bony and black, with her blazing eyes. She had no appetite these days, she said. She had to force the food down. There was too much work---she always felt better in the winter because there was less work. She has no teeth. We promised to show her how to make a vegetable broth which would give her substance without having to be chewed. But she won't do it. She won't go to the dentist. She eats on her gums, which are now nearly as hard as teeth. Gianni was a serpente, she said. He was never so happy as when he wasn't working! He wanted to find a profession but what? The poor creature! Poverino! He had to work in the fields to bring in a little cash but he was too bright and clever for that work!

Gianni keeps asking me if I know of any better work. Well, we'll go to Rome soon and see if there's anything. I said he might try at one of the airports: good money, the illusion of constant flight without actually moving, the presence of foreigners---perfect ferment for the Italian soul.

We strolled down to Dino's to tell him we were going away for a few days. The atmosphere round his house was still dark and heavy. He came to the foot of the stairs with his brother, as if to warn us not to

come in. Their meal was just beginning. Armida didnT call down to us as usual, and the rest of the family sat huddled at the top of the steps in silence. Sex and flirting are associated with the harvest everywhere. There are long traditions of harvest merriment, it is the crown of the farming year. But not here. Or perhaps simply--- not now.

We heard Silvano call down to his father with a growl to come up and eat his food. As we were walking away we heard Armida scream at him, her mouth full, 'Maiala (female pig), why can't you come when you're called?'

They all sit down to eat. Not to feast together, just to eat. In a few moments it will be all over, they'll be on their feet again to prepare for the last act of the unwanted day---throwing themselves on a bare bed.

Dino's brother had a word for it. He said, 'This is an ugly moment for us---è un brutto momento.' They had to sell the grain at low prices he said. The millers abused the situation because of the sudden great supply, now that there were vast wheat-farms in the north, mechanised. The family no longer wants the farming. The farm no longer wants the family.

2.

'The End of the World'

We were only away four or five days but everything looked strange to us when we got back. The house had its old musty, disused smell. We flung open the shutters, took chairs out on the balcony again, started the fridge which makes the lights blink and fade every few moments. Gino said it had been quite hot---in somma, he added. He always says this, with his peculiar bull-like duck of the head: by in somma he means 'more or less'. We found ourselves staring across the Elsa valley again. The silence enters the body slowly. It comes down the hill on the breeze, through the woords, a cool breath rustling the trees.

Most of the grain is in now. Dino's is in sheaves--- what they call barche, stacks piled rather like Arab mud-huts, the ears pointing inwards, to protect them from the rain. Our own grain isn't finished yet. Gino has decided to do the rest by machine. His fattore agreed to hire one. So he scythes paths for the tractor to turn along. And then he must scythe close to the vines and olive trees, where the tractor can't reach. Not an

ear must be missed.

We feel rested after the sea. The resorts were crowded and sticky, with cars clustering the narrow roads.

Late in the evening, after dark, I heard Angelo coming up the road with his two oxen. The wheels scraped and rumbled over the stones. He cried, 'Va! Via! Va! Camina! Cam-i-na! Va! Forza! Forza!' Sometimes it is in a low voice, encouragingly, and then with sharpness as the wheels take a steep incline. These words echo across the valley all day, wherever a pair of oxen are pulling. Angelo says 'Va, va, va' in a strangely deep and absent way, as if the past was talking. I followed him up the hill, hearing his soft cries and the scrape of the wheels all the way. Half way up I met Gianni and Luigi on the motor-scooter. I told Gianni I'd caught a chill at the sea he shouted burlesquely, waving his arms, 'You should have stayed here with us! You're better off here! We have aria pura---and peace---we're free from diseases here--- don't leave us again!'

He'd become thinner in the last few days, his face was bronzed. All their grain is in now. He said the work had cost him two kilos of weight. And now they were off to enjoy themselves. The air was soft all round. The 'town' lights shone in the distance, like a crown held up. I walked on up and came to their house just as Angelo was turning into the stableyard

with his oxen. It was past ten and his mother was still working, bringing in forage. The bull-calves made a great din when their mothers walked into the stall, and the fattest of them broke loose from his chain and fed at the nipple, pushing his head up with terrific force. Angelo indulges this and gives the beast an affectionate smack on the rump---'He's fatter than the other one because he gets more complimenti---more affection--he always manages to get free!' If an animal didn't get proper affection, he said, it didn't put on weight and its meat was less choice.

After the oxen were haltered to their troughs he had to help bring in the forage. The electric bulb failed in the hot, dark stable, and they used a candle. Then there was the cutting of the grass at a circular scythe worked by turning a handle---first the soft clover and maize-leaves for the young, and then the coarser, dryer grass for the grown oxen. Angelo turned the wheel while his mother fed the grass into the chute in great armfulls, plunging forward with her whole tiny body, that only seems skin and bone. Angelo was elated, a bit drunk, and swung the wheel carelessly, telling his mother that the grass was no good, too dry! He'd been working at another podere all day, and the company seems to have gone to his head. He almost never goes to 'town'. His face is long and striking, in the stark Etruscan manner, not goodlooking like Gianni's. When he's dressed up on Sundays in a super suit he looks like an actor, with

his dark oily hair and straight back and eyes that flash. Only his rotten teeth, and the fact that he gabbles all the time out of sheer awkwardness at being dressed up, show that he's Angelo after all.

They gave me a glass of wine and piled me up with fresh eggs, and I began to walk down again.

In the meantime our dog, which is on heat, had escaped and I had to walk up and down the hill in the dead of night calling her name and peering about among the bushes and trees. I went to the top of the hill where Paolo lives, in a rambling, tumbledown farmhouse, but didn't go into his courtyard for fear of alarming him and also perhaps getting some gunshot in myear. Then I gave up and came down. The reult would be a litter of mongrels---but--oh well! I went to bed. After an hour or so she appeared, with a mean, yellow-looking half-breed in tow, Paolo's 'hunting dog', trailing a long chain that sounded like all the prisoners in Fidelio.

I felt hot from wine, overtired. The nightingale who always perches close to our bedroom window made his familiar call: one long, soaring whistle and a few warbles, then silence; just the beginning of a song---- never more.

The moment I heard his brief call I felt better and fell asleep.

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At half-past five this morning, soon after we woke up, there was a sudden storm. A fierce wind swept through the house. We rushed about closing doors and shutters, getting things in off the terrace. Our dog was terrified and kept close to us. Water cascaded down off the roof in a great chute. Our rainwater well filled up in no time. There were blinding flashes of lightning. Then, as we lay in bed waiting for it to stop, we heard the first dawn bird sing, and the clouds began to draw away.

Dino had gone to work at four, though it was Sunday (strikes have delayed the harvest and make overtime necessary), and we watched him tramping back at seven soaked through, his food basket untouched. Gianni came down later and said he'd been saturated from head to foot in a few moments. The storm was like the <u>finimondo</u>, the end of the world. He'd been building <u>barche</u> of wheat-sheaves and couldn't leave them before the 'roofs' were on. At four that morning, when he'd started work, the sky had been clear and there'd been bright stars. Dawn brought the storm. Hecsaid he'd arrived home at one in the morning from 'town'. Then he hadn't been able to sleep for the great heat and the mosquitoes. He lay smoking, then he leaned out of the window. Now and then he gave his brother Luigi a good kick, he said, for sleeping so soundly.

It isn't real July weather. The usual heat hasn't come, though there are bursts of wet sirocco heat that seem to come from the sea. The coast this year is much

hotter than inland. Yet the Val d'Elsa is usually one of the dryest and most torrid zones north of Rome. They say that half Italy's grain has been lost this year through the abnormal winter and the heavy spring rains.

One of the oxen here is sick with tuberculosis, and Gino has had to sell her at a loss of forty thousand lire. But she is still there in her stall, looking delicate and apprehensive. The padrona complains about it in her singing, wan, mediaeval way.

She has been putting a fine story about that this house is a 'villa', even a 'palazzo'---meaning that we pay a pittance. I scotch her stories by saying we are 'camping' here---it's just like being in a tent. When I explained to a shopkeeper yesterday that far from having a bathroom in the 'villa' we had no water and little electric light, and no lavatory to speak of, he seemed relieved. He'd been worried that the general conspiracy to charge the foreigner fancy prices might have been undermined. 'If' he said, 'you'd like a really nice place another year, four rooms with a bathroom, kitchen and all conveniences, in town too, I have it. Beautifully furnished. No camping there.' I asked him how much and he made the classical Italian reply which never differs so much as by a word, in whatever province you happen to be: 'Ah, quello non posso dire---that I can't say. But certainly we would come to some arrangement...'

My 'camping' story seems to have got to the landlady. When I passed her daughter in the square today

I asked after her mother.

'Very well,' she said. 'She's gone on holiday.'

'Where?'

'Camping!' And she flounced off.

Real July weather has settled in---or rather is here for the moment. The rocky path up the hill is blinding white. The cicadas are deafening, echoing across the valley. But there is always a cool breeze coming down from the woods, and therefore from the sea. This breeze is cold in the evening: unusually so, even after a stifling day. There seems to be another weather interfering with the real Italian one.

When I walk up the hill I scan the path in front of me for snakes. The vipers can go right across your path, as they can't see or hear. People say there are more vipers about now because pigs no longer roam through the woods, tended by young girls with sticks, as you used to see them. Pigs ate the vipers. They are immune to their poison.

The heat makes the uphill walk slower: our dog plods along with head drooping, tongue hanging out. There are great yells from a peasant at the foot of the valley, egging his oxen about as he shakes in his iron seat. 'Dio buono, camina! Madonna troia!'

Yesterday we saw Gino's fattore. He is to be a go-between for the landlady and us. There are misunderstandings about when to pay the rent and to whom, about the pozzo nero (the 'black well' or swewer which is always overflowing under our bedroom window), and lastly---the

biggest bone of contention, on which I refuse to yield---the bill for 'disinfecting' the house, that is whitewashing the walls previous to our entry, which she would like me to pay. As Armida says, 'It isn't as if you can take the whitewashed walls with you when you leave.' The fattore told me with a clear, confidential look that he was sure he could settle matters properly. I think he underestimates his padrona. Anyway, I paid him two months' rent. She is setting up a great moan about the sick ox, he told us. It should never have happened, she says. 'But we're all losers on that deal,' he murmured. 'And she's right, misfortunes shouldn't happen.'

There are rarely two or three days without a storm now. Sudden chills come into the air, like the cold currents you feel in the sea sometimes. The sun isn't safe as it usually is from May onwards. It seems 'sick.' 'Il cielo è malatto', people says---the sky is sick.

In a moment the sky can cloud over.

We walked in the thick woods. A path winds between cornfields and lava-rocks and saplings, and comes out at the top of a hill, from which you can see a densely wooded mass of hills one after the other stretching inland. Gianni's brother says we must come up and have a merenda with them at the edge of the woods. Merenda means snack or picnic. It is such a lovely word. But the thing itself wouldn't be done with relish. We would snatch at a lump of salami and drink a glass of wine, probably standing; and then make off. We

sat in Gianni's kitchen a few days ago and ate a few mouthfuls, washed it down with some excellent wine, and afterwards I suddenly thought, 'We've just had a merenda!' So everything passes, without relish. The Italians are so ancient, not in time but in feeling; it is their quality, always was. They're ancient like cicadas or salamanders. There isn't real tender regard for the human creature in them: no fliratations, delight, folly. And as soon as you've said that you have to withdraw it. There is nothing like their dolcezza, the sweetness you see in the Sienese masters. It isn't at the centre of their lives but it is somewhere, hoerving, all the time. It gushes out towards children.

On our walk we saw a great wall sticking up from one of the wooded valleys, broken and jagged, surrounded by thick undergrowth. Beyond it lay what they call 'the old castle', a group of farmhouses perched on a bare hill. Paolo's brother lives there, we are told. He also is a shepherd. And there are ruins. But what ruins we can't make out. Is the jagged wall part of them? I read a in a guidebook that a Florentine princess was once imprisoned in a castle near here by her own family. She fell in love with the wrong man. She died there, partly from sadness. The woods hug it remoreslessly, waiting to bring it all down, absorbing even the sunlight into their darkness.

We took the obvious road towards it. Mist and clouds floated in the valley. It climbed up and up,

dominating the strange, stirring hills below Volterra, which look as though a massive freezing wave had passed over them and ruffled them. After the dark woods there were sudden bright fields, laid out like a map as far as we could see. We asked for Castel Vecchio and were told we'd passed it. There had been a path to the left we hadn't noticed. We went back and found it, sloping down between trees, parting from the road surreptitiously, at an angle, as if it didn't want to be found. We noticed a shepherd, his face much like Paolo's, and guessed he must be the brother. The path began to hug the side of the hill, rather in the style of an Etruscan approach, secret and protected. There before us, after a turn, shining on the crest of a hill, lay not an old castle but two farmhouses, with rolling hills beyond them as far as Castel Fiorentino. We asked two peasants leaning on their sticks in the courtyard, 'Is this Castel Vecchio?'

Yes it was. Were we after the ruins? Yes we were. Ah well, they were further on, along a path at the side of the houses. It went through woods, over rocks and streams. It took about an hour, they said.

'But what are these towers?' I asked them.

Ah, that they couldn't say! But certainly they were interesting for those who 'understood' such things. There were holes in the ground---tombs, people said.

'They must be Etruscan,' I told them.

They shrugged, and one of them said with a smile that he'd never ventured inside one. He was always

afraid the roof would fall in, and also there was danger of vipers---they lurked in holes, under stones, and he wasn't in a hurry to be bitten by a viper! Once, he said, a lawyer---'a small, fat man'---had spent a month there looking at the ruins day by day, a book in his hand. And when they had asked him what there was of interest in the 'towers' he only said quietly, with a smile, 'You wouldn't understand---non capite, voi!'

We must come another day, they said, because it was already too late in the afternoon to start penetrating the woods. It wouldn't do for a cristiano to get lost there! They made faces and laughed.

Was Paolo's brother there? we asked. Yes, he lived there, and he'd just taken his sheep up the road. We explained that we lived near Paolo and got our milk from him. Then we must be the foreigners who'd taken the house at the foot of the hill where Paolo lived? Yes, they'd heard! Apparently the news had got across the vast, pathless, wooded valley, to their isolated post.

They talked about the war. Moroccan troops had been there---fearful fellows, they said, who cut off ears and never spared Germans when they caught them---they cut their throats from ear to ear. English and American troops had also been there: they had bartered wine and eggs for tinned food and sugar. A German had stayed up a tree with a machine-gun for two or three days, until the English or Americans brought the tree down from under him.

They spoke as if the war had been the last thing to

really happen there. They seemed to feel that those troops were still young, and soldiering somewhere else. They talked about the Moroccans and their French officers as if their faces were still before them. Youth, they said, is 'unmindful' in war. Boys lose their sense of family. Homes, crops, other people's belongings are meaningless to them.

It was getting chilly. As we went away they sat with their eyes still on us, calm and inquisitive. Perhaps we seemed to them only another aspect of the war-experience that had fallen into the silence so few years ago, when the sky was golden.

A letter came from the landlady---an answer to my conference with her fattore. Will I please not take our business to 'third parties' to settle? But I shall. Her words run close together in one round, breathless scrawl, as if from centuries of cajolement and legal wrangling. She won't specify precisely what she thinks I owe her, over and above the agreed rent: if you define your position too closely you can't move out of it later. A wise Italian instinct, this.

When we go to see her she talks about the pope, and her son who lives far away, and how intolerably untidy her dauhgter is, and about the religious experience she has had. She once saw her son---the image passed across her mind as she was standing before a madonnina---and later that day she heard he'd had an accident. She talks rhetorically, opening her mouth wide, with flashes

of humour and dry irony. By the time she finishes we are tired and toohungry to think about bills. We've been wrangling mildly for two months now. Some deep Italian wrangles go on for five, fifteen years. Sometimes they go from one generation to another, abolishing time.

Paolo brought us milk yesterday that went sour at once. This followed an affable conversation with him. The peasants approach each other in a hard way, for this reason. They almost never have 'wakes' with each other. We are the catalyst that brings them together in the evening. Otherwise they stay in families. The young bring themtogether sometimes. Gianni flirts with the two girls at Pescille. There may be a dance improvised in the rough courtyard, to the radio. We say we shall have a dance one day but it comes to nothing.

Gianni brought down a live chicken and a basket-full of marrows for us. Gino says, trying to make a laugh out of it, that we're spoiling him, by always taking him in the car. Silvano said yesterday---not realising what he'd said until he'd said it---that Gianni occupies the 'dog's place' in our car.

The girl up the hill, who lives with her parents in a slough of work from dawn till dusk, gets moral about Gianni. 'Even <u>signori</u> have work to do,' she tells him. 'Why leave everything to your mother?'

Gianni's lips show signs of ungoverned childhood passion. It was the first thing I noticed about him. They are the shape of lips closed hungrily round a

nipple. He was still going to his mother for milk at the age of seven or eight, he says with a smile. Extra flesh has formed on his mouth. He says he will have a little operation sometime.

'I took too much milk,' he shouts, 'and then I sucked my thumb!'

We took our bread over to the Agnarelli family this morning for baking. They have an oven outside and our two loaves will go in with the rest. They all gape at the wholemeal flour. Why isn't it white? Yet they grow and cut and thresh the whole grain themselves. They take it to the mill where it is stripped of the germ and returned to them in bags of flour (white) or else a promissory note for a year's supply of white bread. Fewer and fewer peasants are baking their own bread now. The flour they use looks rather like French podwer. They say wistfully, 'Who knows it it's our grain we get back?' They give the wheat to chickens. In the winter the oxen get wholemeal flour mixed with water. They suck it up hungrily. All the old stone mills have closed down. One bakery with wood-ovens remains in the 'town'.

The craze for bleached white bread only hit Italy after the last war. The priest at Racciano who looks like Luther told us that the 'American's---a generic name for the other side in the war---brought it in. 'Since then,' he said, 'we won't touch the dark stuff. This is lighter, easier to digest.' He says the dark stuff means poverty for them.

The peasants look unhealthy on the whole. They are burned by the sun, but it doesn't go deep. They fill themselves with stodgy masses of spaghetti and indigestible white bread. If they buy their bread in 'town' it is invariably undercooked, to save fuel.

The weather is strange again. Every afternoon at roughly the same time the clouds draw up from the eastern horizon and a storm approaches slowly, rumbling. The lightning darts down on the fields, with deafening claps of thunder. The rain is sudden, brief, torrential. Then there is a clear evening. It happens every day--- a fine, hot mroning, the storm, and then the serene evening sky.

There was a slight earth-tremor along the coast a few days.ago.

Gianni told us that a streak of lightning had come within a few steps of his mother when she was bringing in grass. He was standing by the house and it struck between them. The noise was immense. He asked her if she was frightened and she said, 'No, I didn't even see it!'

Last night there was an opera in the 'town' square. During each interval there was vholent hammering and sceneshifting, as if builders had taken the town hall over. Lacking a curtain they hit on the savage idea of shining arc-lamps in to our faces, to blind us to the sceneshifting. There was a woman conductor wreathed in a tight black gown down to her feet. It made her look snakey and bizarre. Her conducting oroduced a kind of

school performance. She appeared on the stage with the principal singers at the end of each act, like their schoolmistress. Her movements were round and graceful, and sometimes her hips moved in a dancing way, like in a foxtrot. It was Verdi, but minus the drama: a shell. We nodded and dozed. In the ballroom scene the chorus knocked together like farmers bidding for livestock. The men's idea of aristocratic fun was to tie paper streamers round the necks of the women, who then bared their teeth in an aristocratic laugh while they were being throttled. The conspirators were dressed in shiny green night-dresses and sleeping caps, like old women out of Dickens, with swords and daggers underneath. In the minuet they formed a crowd so that you couldn't see the dance itself---for the good reason that it wasn't going on. Whenever the tenor got applause his face broke into a delightful boxer's grin. The music was all there but the conductor seemed to be teaching it to the orchestra as she went along, morally---here were the notes, this is how it was written and this was how it must be played: obvious! When she did interpret the music it was 'emotion', showing-off. But luckily she got tired of that very early. The soprano sang like Armida calling her chickens. In passionate moments she was like Armida being tickled. When the tenor was dying at the end the chorus looked on like farmers in a slaughter house. The thing dragged on until one in the morning. Gianni was with us, dressed up to the nines. Two seats away sat the <u>fattore</u> who had found us our house---he

roared 'Brava!' after one of the soprano's arias as if she'd struck a clever bargain at the cattle market (admiring her without thinking her honest). The smell with which everyone was impregnated---sweet grass, volcanic soil and cow-shit---drifted across the open auditorium towards the gasping singers and mingled with the cheap cigarette smoke. All the people with windows looking on to the square had their lights turned off, by special request of the town hall, so as not to interfere with the performance, but being Italian they kept on finding things to visit these rooms for, and every few moments a light went up self-effacingly and then out again. Flags were draped out of the windows above the stage for the last scene. At curtain call the stage was a chaos. The principal characters got mixed up with the stagehands, while the applause thundered through the night. The bass, who got the biggest hand of the evening, had a thermos flask with him and was busily opening it.

They got the music right, more or less. Being Verdi performed by oxen, there was something natural about it: but of course oxen have no sense of drama.

It made me think, 'No sense of aristocracy, no art.'

Aristocracy means the ability to show yourself naked (that is, in any state) to the world: to be a living and walking denial of original sin. It was knocked out of Italian life by the Counter Reformation three hundred years ago. Yet it started in Italy, imported from Greece. It emerged, the Greek influence, in Christ-

ianity. And then Christianity stamped it out on its own doorstep. The Church took over from the princes and the dukes. The art went down. The Italian imagination wallowed briefly in baroque, then petered out, tamed.

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Another strike of the mezzadri. There were dozens of motor-cycles outside the south gate. They are asking for some form of peasant ownership: the state should take over the responsibilities of the landlord. Gianni and I passed a field where the wheat lay uncut. The thick, golden ears were drooping.

He came in the evening and gave us a speech on the need for agraian reform: grain production in Italy had gone down unbelievably in the last few years, he said. As more and more people left the land and less wine, wheat, barley, oil, livestock were produced, so prices went up. As a result of the higher prices the workers made more pay demands, and this sent the prices up still further. End result: chaos! He said we needed a system like in Russia, where the state controlled everything. I said to this that the state could be a xx cruel landlord too: with which he promptly agreed. (Once he has made a speech he will often agree with the opposite argument: the speech was only a rhetorical exercise which mustn't be interrupted, like a statue sculpted not for its truth but for martial and monumental ends).

The communist party, where Gianni learned all this,

has its headquarters in the lesser of the two halves of 'town'. The main square has one socially OK road leading out of it, and another less OK road leading from the other side. The CP headquarters are in a deep-bowelled shop, with a bar just inside the doorway. In the evenings and on week-ends it throbs with juke-box music and its doorway is crammed with men. Some of them bring out chairs to stare into the narrow roadway. When there are lots of toursists the communist youths stare into the roadway as if they had timed the revolution for next morning and the tourists (traditionally rich and without a care in the world, even when they are self-evidently working class) were the forces of reaction whose is all but over.

The CP has taken over the functions of the Church. It is the place where the smallest man's troubles will be heard, where justice is meted out privately. It is a club. Dino, when you ask him where he is off to in the evening, will say, '<u>Al partito</u>!'---to the party. No one we know would hardly dare not to be a member. Its card is a certificate of decency.

It gradually went round the local party that we were 'all right'. In the old days the Church would have had to give the same social approval. Some social power doe still lie with the Church. Not even party members could disregard the social verdict of a priest entirely. In the strangest way, which only Italy in her secret heart could explain, the two work closely together.

They provide a double spearhead to find out if people are prepotente, arrogant, too forward. Natural arrogance has to be tamed in the Italian. It has been tamed historically and it is tamed again in every child. An old wisdom shows that it has been the source of terrific violence all over the peninsula. Italy has shaken with its results for centuries. So the first thing you learn when you live among them is to bide your time in a disagreement, and maintain a show of respect for the other man. Rispetto is an always more used word. You hear it on TV---in the documentaries about southern Italy: 'respect!', 'the employers show us no respect!', 'we must have respect!' Foreigners have 'respect' for each other---not Italians: you hear it all the time. A great fight is going on for respect. It is pushing the old Italy under.

Nobody seems to want to buy the hundreds of hectares of fertile land that are being abandoned. Paolo the shepherd dreams of being a butcher, but with the same money he could buy a piece of land which would never lose its value. The fattori---the agents who in any other country would be the new class of landlords now---are simply entrepreneurs who have flats and houses in town and want to stay there, with as little direct dealing with the hard-headed peasants as possible. Peasants will wrangle for hoursover a kilo of sugar. They are on their guard; it is in their blood, at a time when society is entering a liquid-money, industrial stage, from an agricultural, virtually feudal one.

I watch the pigeons outside. The two squabs are

dark and soft-feathered, and are fed by their parents until they have a breast full of food. They are then ready to fly. But they pester their mother to bring them food as before, pecking at her neck. She refuses. And they are constrained first to fly, and then to begin pecking of their own accord---to 'do their own shopping', as Gino says.

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We drove to the sea through Volterra and found a scrappy bathing place called The Little Boat where the beach had an amazing brilliance, like white bone shining in the sea. This is because of a soda factory near by, which empties its waste into the sea. They've made a pleasant dark restaurant of wood, low and wide like a plantation house. The sun was misty and burned quickly. The usual storm came up inland, reaching us early in the afternoon, with a little rain. As we were strolling along the beach a young girl ran up to us from a convent group and astonished us by saying, '<u>Per penitenza siete di carnagione bianca</u>'---'as a penance, you have white skins'--- the hurried back to the other girls with a giggle. When we walked past them later they were all saying their <u>Ave Marias</u> solemnly. She probably did it for a bet. We got home with the signs of our penance burned away by the sun. The courtayard was a blaze of yellow light, and the tall cypress outside was like a great black cone against the brightness of the haystack at its side. Apparently no

rain had fallen. The sun was just going down.

The big threshing machines have been at work. They creak and rattle their way towards the farms at a snail's pace, great red-painted affairs with belts and wheels like a child's invetntion. They spew out the waste chaff through a long pipe, and pack the straw into wired bales. They seem a stunningly labour-saving thing for this region.

Paolo the shepherd came by with four sheep and tried to steer them into one of our empty pighouses with a stick. They were badly frightened and one scaped, but returned from alarm at finding herself alone. He had to carry them in one by one, holding them by the rump and the scruff of the neck. And there they stayed, in darkness, with hardly room to turn in, all night. I put a tin of water in, and they drank thirstily, with a long, noiseless, sucking motion. In the morning they were loaded on to a truck with other goats and sheep---thrown roughly in like bags of grain. They are for tinned meat, being sick animals, so Paolo tells us. The words 'for tinning' seem to be interchangeable for 'sick' where animals are concerned.

Gianni sense our concern about the sheep and laughs. The chicken he brought us last week is still walking about the courtyard alive. Our excuse is that we want it to lay eggs, but he says it's too young, and probably male. The other hens resent the newcomer and take a peck at it now and then.

When we were sitting down to the evening meal Gino called up from the courtyard and the dog started barking

like mad. The Luther-like priest was below. It was his first visit. He has the tiny cura to which our house belongs, his village being a kilometre away---a cluster of houses the colour of the earth, on top of a hill. He saw I was eating and said he wouldn't disturb us but would wait in the courtyard until we were ready--- there was no hurry. He spoke calmly and quietly, with timid glances. He is a pale, thin man in his late forties, and moves in a pained way, more a monk than a priest. Dino told us he was the son of a peasant, had worked in the fields as a child. And he was good---so good! The word 'good' always carries a slight inference of ineptitude in Italian. There is even a proverb connecting the two.

We insisted on his coming upstairs, and he sat with us at table on the balcony overlooking the road, with a glass of Gino's wine in front of him. He had brought us a bag of pears, the first ones of the season, small and green, from his own trees.

One of the first questions was, were we catholics? No, protestants.

'But the same Christ,' I added.

I told him 'protestant' really meant we were in--- that we found oursleves in---a certain 'historical situation'. It meant nothing in terms of real belief. History had cut us off from Rome in such a way that while we felt at home in an Italian church we didn't belong.

He said he'd been reading a book of meditations by

a Dutch priest that afternoon, in which it was written that to try to bring the different churches together was 'an act of God'. In the ecumenical council in Rome, he said, they were discussing the possibility of the queen of England agreeing to the status of political head of state while acknowledging the pope as the head of christianity. He spoke in a strangely simple way---as if the queen would in some way be forgiven her past. And protestants, he hoped, would be 'received' into the Church.

'That would be wonderful,' he said, 'to bring all the churches together' (under Rome).

He looked at the wholemeal bread we were eating and asked in a curious way, 'Is that special bread?'. I think he was quite prepared to hear that it was protestant ritual bread. We told him we had it mixed ourselves. 'German' bread, we called it.

'Invece noi---', he said, 'now we on the other hand have a different habit. We eat it white. We're used to it.'

When we got to the dessert stage we asked him to join us and offered him some peccorino cheese and one of his own pears. To our surprise he said calmly, 'I'll try your bread---just a little slice.' I cut him two varieities, one baked at a 'town' bakery and the other from the Agnarelli's across the valley. He didn't like either. He said they tasted of the 'seed' of the wheat.

Gianni joined and made a polite nod at the priest, with 'Buona sera, reverendo';

'Yes,' Gianni said, 'I believe white bread is lacking in vitamins---it has none of the substance of theirs---!', pointing to the wholemeal slices on the table.

'Our priest doesn't think so,' I said.

'No,' the priest replied, 'it's a question of habit--- bread for us is white, and I don't think we could ever get used to the other.'

Gianni was restless in his presence. He kept looking acfoss the valley in a yearning sort of way, as if fro freedom. The priest gave him a kindly but constrained and perhaps wary smile whenever he spoke. Gianni got up from his chair frequently and looked over the balcony, lit a cigarette, tapped his foot on the ground.

'Gianni is seen at church very little,' the priest said with a smile, pale and quiet. 'I don't think he's been since childhood---' And he turned a questioning look at him.

Gianni smiled charmingly and said nothing. I broke in with, 'But he's religious.'

'Oh yes,' said the priest doubtfully. 'He's good. His mother's a fine woman, brought him up well. She's really religious. She's done everything for her children,' and he gave Gianni another quick look.

He returned to our first subject and said he was interested in what I'd said about our finding ourselves in an 'historical situation'. He gave us what seems to be the official Italian version of Henry VIII: that this king asked the pope for a divorce from Catherine, but of

course the pope wasn't able to grant it, the honest fellow. And then through 'patriotism' Henry had cut himself off from Rome and declared himself spiritual head of England.

Only ten or so people come to his Sunday morning mass, he said with the traceof a determined look, as if he'd long ago got used to the hurt this offered him. He felt himself lucky to have these ten, he said. They were all wo,en and children. Even fewer came to his church in the hills, where he holds mass two hours later.

Clearly, he can't understand it. He seems to try to, his head a little on one side. The Christian story is so clear to him: why should people want to offer it offence? It seems a story of respectability for him--- touched with simple grace and goodness. Obey and respect those above you. And all round him there are people who refuse to fio that.

He asked if we'd met the family up the hill, the couple we rarely see, with the daughter. Yes, we'd met them, but they were always sunk in work, I said, having eight hectares of land to look after. He paused, as he nearly always does after a statement, to let it enter his head slowly and painfully, then, 'Ah yes,' he said, 'they have a lot of work. Too much.' And, 'Now <u>they're</u> religious people. They come to church. They're good. Very responsible.'

Yet to me they seem less good, in their hearts, than other people here. I nodded non-commitally: after all,

how could I know? But my impression remains.

We must come to see him in the evening, he said, to sample his wine and watch TV. He would take us round some of his little churches---one of them went back nine hundred years. He has a fourteenth-century wooden crucifix in his sacristy, he says.

We felt settled by his visit. It made us feel safer. This is still the power of the Church. We belong. His visit is watched by the peasants. It gives satisfaction, means we have values. But we mustn't become church-cats either. That would blacken us at once. A nice balance is the Italian ideal.

And he was the first person of leisure we'd spoken to for months. Only the Church purveys a dream in the Italian countryside. It governs and administers the power to dream. It brings the only feeling of a culture that the fields allow themselves. And so, at this time when the Church is cut off from people, there is no dream. The land lies waiting and very still. Only the tiny church, and the pastor's house hugging it like a miniature villa, is a possible starting place for idylls, fancy.

After he'd got into his car with the last good bye he pushed open the door and called out to me, 'Here!', in his slow way, as if waiting to be rebuffed. 'I've brought you something to read.'

He gave me three magazines, two of which dealt with the past life of the new pope in the insipid way of Italian

ecclesiastical humbug. It was part church-politics, part state-politics, mixed together in a dirty mess of propaganda that a duck wouldn't swallow.

What can the priest offer Gianni that Gianni wouldnT scoff at and disdain? Well his own frailty and goodness. These are enough perhaps. But apart from that only old maid's tales, such as that if you spell God with a small 'g' you are showing Him disrespect, or that if you stand on your feet and say the angelus at twenty minutes past dusk you are more religious than someone who doesn't. No one will swallow the pathetic stuff any more.

It is because of Gianni's goodness, and Dino's, and Gino's, that every church in Italy hasn't been rased to the ground. And, paradoxically, this goodness of theirs was given to them by the Church.

The Church is at the climax of an internal reformation. Its mumbojumbo, its petty hierarchies, its dogged philistine exclusions, its club morality, are disappearing to save the story of Christ from becoming an item in the encyklopedia.

The storm this afternoon brought more rain than usual and less lightning. The heat is all inside the house now. The storm seems to move from place to place every day, according to a timetable. First, while the sun is still strong, at lunchtime, there is the first rumble of thunder. We take in everything from the balcony--- chairs, tablecloth, cushions. Then the sun gets mistier and hotter, as the thunder draws near, in the course of

about an hour. The storm itself breaks sluggishly, with perhaps only one or two fierce moments. The clouds lie over the valley until early evening, when sunlight returns for the last red glow. The effect of the rain is to make a thick heat-mist the next morning. It seeps along the valley and turns the 'town' into a shadow hanging on clouds, burnished by the sun like a medallion suspended from the sky.

Another strike of the mezzadri. Gianni told us about a big meeting he'd been to in Siena, organised by the communists. He gave another of his speeches. He said that while it was right to work, and to work hard, it was wrong to work hard when there wasn't a crust of bread at home. Was it right, he asked me, sipping his vin santo, that the man who cultivated the land and did all the chores should give half his produce to someone who did nothing? Here I interrupted. I said that the mezzadro system he worked under didn't seem so bad as his employers took none of the produce, and less than half the proceeds from the cattle. But he only smiled at me connivingly. The speaker at the meeting, he said, had been molto in gamba, 'very capable', and knew as much about the rural situation as any peasant. The man had told them, with some humour, about the 'tired and overworked ox' that started its journey in the Marche at a hundred and fifty lire a kilo and ended in Rome at one thousand, five hundred lire a kilo and was renamed 'veal'.

'Marvellous the transmigrations that take place

nowadays!' the speaker had said.

And then there were the taxes and levies on the land that went into government coffers and never came out again. Millions upon millions of lire had been put into a 'fund' to provide the peasants with pensions and medical benefits, and to modernise the land. At the end of this month the government would have to account for this 'fund' and how it had been spent, but the government couldn't! The 'fund' had been 'lost' by a certain Secretary General---a nation's agricultural future had been 'lost'! Where had they been 'lost', those millions? into whose pockets had they been 'lost'? had they been 'lost' into nice villas in the country, with swimming pools and servants, into various 'land-modernisation schemes' which were private in nature and benefitted only a handfull of rich and unworthy people who should be dragged before the bar of law and indicted for the equivalent of treason?

No wonder, Gianni said, that 'we communists' have such success at the elections, when things like that go on. 'And the Church can't help us! They just follow on. Now they're reforming themselves---because they've got to.'

A wonderful humanity plays on Gianni's face sometimes, when he gazes into the distance. The light was almost finished as he talked on the balcony, and the valley on the other side of the road lay still and shadowy. Guido Agnarelli who was passing below in his heavy boots

called up to us. We stood talking to him. He'd been to a riunione in 'town', he said, a meeting connected with the strikes. He has been ill with kidney trouble and looks thinner, less like the 'brigand'. He spoke in a tired and disgruntled way. He doesn't like the idea of separating from his brother.

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At about ten last night we felt a tremor under the earth that lasted ten or twenty seconds. We had just gone to bed. At first, half dozing, I had the illusion that we were still in Rome and that this was the rumble of a truck in the street below, shaking our palazzo. Then I realised we were in hushed countryside.

Today we heard that at dawn there had been an earthquake in Yugolsavia killing, according to first reports, about five thousand people.

Later there were reports of earth tremors along the Italian coast close to France.

Dino told us that Guido Agnarelli and his brother, with their families, are leaving this valley. Their old padrone---whom they call a crook, while Dino calls him ' a nice old stick'---will be left with a large house and a podere of over ten hectares with no one to work it. He asked Dino despairingly today, 'What can I do to keep them there? I haven't the money to employ workers by the day. Where can I find another family? Why are

they moving? I'll give them anything! But I can't give them my blood!' And Dino's answer was, with his broad optimistic smile, 'Town's the fashion now!'

We spent the next evening with Guido and his brother but they said nothing about the move. We talked about the last war. Suddenly Guido burst out with, 'The trouble with Mussolini was that there was only one of him! There ought to have been fifty thousand Mussolinis! People need to be told, do this, or backs to the wall! Then you'd see them fly!' And he flung his brother a resentful look.

The brother, who is tall and thin and said to be 'nervous' (that is, given to anger), replied in a mild way, 'Oh, you know, Mussolini made a big mistake getting mixed up with a German madman, and trying to create a world empire.'

'That's right,' his wife said, 'he ought to have put Italy in order first.'

When they leave---and if no one takes their place--= nearly the whole valley between here and 'town', apart from the <u>podere</u> belonging to Pescille, will be abandoned soil, used for sheep grazing at best, if the shepherds don't all decide to move as well. For miles around, the vineyards have begun to deteriorate. There are almost no young people working the land today.

Guido looks more and more disgruntled. When we strolled over there this evening we found him lying on a grass bank by the house, silence, slumped in the dusk.

'Hullo,' he said softly. 'We've just eaten. I'm taking the cool air.'

He hates to leave. I can't understand why they don't go to their landlord and make a deal. Guido would do it but his brother wants to become a bricklayer in 'town'. He talks about industries as if they will save everything. He asks, 'Why can't factories be built round the town? Why are there regulations limiting factories to the outskirts, just to preserve the panorama?'

Because of tourism, we say: because factories can be put anywhere; and because they're ugly, which the panormama isn't.

'But,' he goes on, 'I'd like to know something, and I've heard the point discussed in piazza, how is it that people can plant as many trees as they like? Pines, for instance? A whole forest of pines has been planted just outside the town in recent years, and this has begun to obscure the panormama. Why are they allowed and factories not?'

Pines and splendid panoramas aren't a contradiction, we say, but factories and panoramas are. Pines can be cut down, and they don't pollute the air.

'And then,' I said, 'we've destroyed enough already. Where I was born there wasn't a tree in sight, the sky was always dark with smoke, we were supposed to live like machines.'

But this is lost on them. They simply gaze at me. Industries mean il progresso. These are interchangeable

words for them. Unlike the English labouring classes whonfought industry step by step and smashed the machines, the Italians await it with excitement. Only certain people in the middle class see the danger signal.

Dino asked us to come to see his new flat again, this time in honour of Armida's first visit. Now the walls are finished and the doors are screwed on.

When you ask Armida what she feels about moving she never replies, only shrugs and makes a slight puzzled smile. We took along a bottle of spumante as a surprise, and when they were looking through the rooms I opened it with an enormous pop which brought them hurrying into the kitchen. Itwas sticky muck, aerated sugar-water, an Italian 'champange that was never near a vineyard in its life. The explosion was so loud that nothing natural could have caused it. It no more warmed our hearts than a laboratory experiment.

Armida was doubtful all the time, peering about the place at the bright new taps and shining tiles and marble floors and little plastic shutters. When Dino asked her 'to say a word'---in his erect, laughing way, his head thrown back stiffly, she simply turned her head away like a young girl.

She wanted to inspect the other three flats in the building, to see if they were better. She came to the conclusion that they were, though Dino's rooms have the best view and are on the ground floor. She found a tiny defect in the bathroom and Dino gave her an admiring look, saying he'd passed it by a hundred times.

From one of the windows overlooking the valley he pointed out Pescille in the distance, shining red. And near by he pointed out a small modernised house. 'That belongs to a pilot. He's leaving and he's letting the land go to waste---he doesn't care!' His hand swept across half the valley.

Armida seemed faintly distracted and sad on the way back. The bathroom, she complained, was ' so small' (never having had a bathroom in her life, even a bath). I think she means small as <u>figura</u>---as a thing to display.

What will she do without her chickens? After we dropped her at home we heard calling them lovingly, for half an hour or more, as if to celebrate her return. She has over a hundred of them. She cuts grass in the field oppsoite our fouse for her rabbits. She walks by with a load balanced on her head every day. It means nothing for her to bring drinking water from half a mile away on her shoulders---two cans hanging from a staff. We do it too, but we fill two large plastic containers that will last us several days.

We promised our priest that we would be at his Sunday mass and we went with Gianni. The church is no bigger than a barn. The fifteenth-century crucifix he'd told us about hung over the altar, black and smooth as ebony. There were six others in the congregation, women and girls, and two boy servers, <u>sacristani</u>, with white smocks shoved untidily over their ordinary clothes.

Our priest looked even more like a monk. He spoke softly and remotely, as he does in conversation, his

face pale, distraught. One of the boy servers had the job of reading from a scrappy pamphlet, which describes every step in the mass in Italian. Latin is now out. 'The priest now says a prayer of gratitude... To your knees... We will now say together... Stand up... The pater noster, on your knees... Stand up... The priest now offers bread and wine, which turns to the flesh of Christ. On your knees.' He read it haltingly, like an illegible shopping list, and every time he made a mistake he looked up and turned a most delightful broad smile towards one of the girls in the congregation, as if he'd done it for her, to please. Some times there was a long pause while the priest, half bowed at the altar, turned and whispered to him what he should read next, and there followed long seconds of page-turning and finger-licking and shrugging and signing, then, in the shopping-list voice, 'Let us pray.' For an hour or more we were bobbing up and down like corks.

Afterwards we walked round the empty church and our priest showed us the sacristy. He told us that the prized crucifix had come to the village only a century and a half ago---the priest of that time had bought if off one of Napoleon's troops. In the sacristy we found another crucifix which he said was made of plaster and 'insratistic' but if anything it is nicer than the other one and is actually made of wood. A thick layer of plaster is spread over the wood to take colours. He showed us his vestments, which are surprisingly splendid-- a whole wardrobe. There were magnificent brasses candel-

abra. He gave me more magazines, with their veneer of devout concern. Oneof them contained an attack on André Gide as 'shameless', a scurrilous paragraph on a man 'who calls himself a communist, yet has a chauffeur', and'a diagnosis of communism in Italy' which made no mention of the agraian problem or the government fund which is said to have been 'lost'.

He showed us an arch of red bricks in the wall of his house. It was the relic of a mediaeval hostel, he said. At that time the narrow track we were standing on had been a pilgrim's road to Rome. Probably it went from monastery to monastery across the hills. The tiny village lay silent round us. We went to his house, attached to the church, and met his sister. You go into a cool hall with a bare room beyond where the TV sits. No books or easy chairs, no signs of thinking. The kitchen as always is the centre of life, with an old inglenook big enough to sit in.

'There,' he said, poiting at it with the slightest ripple of pleasure across his face,' is where I like to be best of all, in the winter.' His sister affectionately dusted some chalk off his sleeve.

His mind seems to lurk somewhere behind his words, undeveloped. Not one new idea seemed to have entered his life, changed him. He seems an easier dupe of publicity than the peasants. This is what they like about him---his innocence. It means they can discount him, need not fear him.

He's numbed. Something has been erased from his account of life. The debit and credit figures of experience aren't entered any more.

For the first time in many days it hasn't clouded over in the afternoon or rumbled with distant thunder. The heat mist (which began to spread a harmful fungus among the vines) has disappeared and the day is clear and still, with the first faint suggestion of autumn. The sunlight glitters like water. We can see right across the valley as far as the hills above Siena--- not a good sign. The summer is passing before it came into being. July isn't yet out.

The ox with tuberculosis is still here and refuses to put on weight, in spite of bran and wholewheat and linseed added to her grass diet. She has a sensitive, wide-eyed air. She dislikes being alone and is against being moved around. All Gino's efforts to sell her have failed, though he told us some time back that a deal had already been made. So she stays. The other oxen are bought and sold but she stays. She eats little when she's alone in the stall, but the moment another ox comes in she feeds heartily again. I think she knows our sounds---the dog, the car, the sound of the cans when I bring polluted water from the well for washing up.

Now she has two other oxen with her. They do the work and she's the guest. This morning I went in and spoke to her, and she looked round in her wondering, slightly fretful way, the whites of her eyes showing. And she made me a sort of grunt. When we were away

for two nights recently she didn't eat. Half an hour after we were back, with our familiar sounds, she put back several loads of forage.

When I told Gino that the classical treatment for tuberculosis was plenty of air, and that it was ridiculous to expect a creature to mend in darkness night and day, he shook his head quietly and said,'Well, you see, it isn't our habit to keep them out of doors.' Partly this means he would feel ridiculous if he did keep her outside. But partly he doesn't want to treat her as a living creature. The peasants hide from considering their animals as creatures, because then there is the obligation of considering what kindness they owe them.

Gianni sat in the back of the car and gave me another speech---on whores this time. He said he hadn't touched one since his army days. There were three reasons against having a whore: first, they cost money; second, you had to wear a contraceptive; and third they didn't give a damn for you.

Later he strolled up the hill with us and we sat at the side of the rocky path, in the stillness of the afternoon. Round us there were sea-shells of every size, some of them barely fossilised, so that you could break them in your hand. They make it seem that the sea was here only yesterday. Yet the sea is over eighty kilometres off. At Gianni's housethe earth is a flaming red. This was due to the earth being burned by lava in the prehistoric eruptions. There is the same flaming earth near Siena, in the plains, where the lava flowed most,

hence 'Siena red'. We found a snail, completely fossilised.

We talked about these things until we felt giddy--- the Ice Age, the prehistoric animals that stalked or flew about, the eruptions, the fierce earthquakes that threw up whole mountain ranges. It was warm and sunny, and we gazed drowsily across the valley. Gianni said he'd seen lots of films on the subject. He jumped to his feet and showed us how a dinosaur looked as it disappeared slowly into a crack in the earth. '<u>Paurosa</u>!' he creid. 'Fearful!' His eyes seem blue when he talks like this, though they aren't: they seem to have the sea in them. He too looks Etruscan, as I imagine the Etruscans. And, strangest of all, he has their slight smile on his face, naturally, in repose. If you sculptured his head it would have the same smile as the Etruscan head---as the Apollo of Veii.

When you think of those dark, cold ages before the human creature, you see we're one people: the Etruscans were only yesterday.

Gino told us that he'd been called to a 'conference' by the landlady. She said she couldn't continue the farm as it is now, with him taking two thousand lire a day and producing nothing like that in yield. He on his side said that he was unable to manage all the work alone, especially during the wheat-harvest and the <u>vendemmia</u> (wine harvest). She was still angry at having a sick ox. He must sell it, she says, sell it quickly, quickly.

But instead he sells one of theothers, because it is pregant, and buys another two for little more than the same price.

The farm here yields hardly enough wine, oil, wheat, fruit or vegetables to justify transporting it to the market, or paying taxes on it,, much less making improvements. The sale of the oxen probably covers Gino's wages---just. She says she will leave the land to go to ruin like everyone else. Gino asks her, in that case might he rent the land for his own use on an annual basis? But she won't hear of it, as it would only bring her forty or fifty thousand lire a year. She will be forced to it perhaps. All the abandoned land is being let in this way, gradually, to indifidual peasants. They will return as owners, and so perhaps the land will readjust itself in time.

Even running this farm, just keeping the plants going, seems impossible. The landlady can't afford bags of copper sulphate and sulphur for the spraying, nor the manure and fertiliser, even if Gino had time to do all the hoeing he should. In pruning the vines he leaves too long a stem before tying back---a technique that produces a bigger yield this year but weakens the plant for next. You can look after three or four hectares of land if you live on the spot, but he doesn't. Most of his work is emergency work, to stop the worst happening.

When rain threatens, the church bells start ringing

like mad. Usually Don Dino sends his sister into the bell tower to do the pulling.

'Who knows,' he said to me one day with a wistful look, 'if it doesn't set up some sort of vibration and disperse the clouds.' He also said, 'You see, people believed that the devil caused storms. The devil was in the black clouds.' He looked into the sky, squinting. I felt he hadn't quite given up the idea.

The ancient rite will die soon if it goes on raining like this, unpredictably and almost every day. A spot of rain in the dog days was thought a danger before, to the vines. But now all they can do is shrug and spray harder than ever before.

When the black clouds come the peasants light fires too. Smoke drifts over the fields. This is said to keep off the hail.

Both owners and peasants seem to derive a malicious pleasure from abandoning the land. It is an ancient revenge on each other, though it ruins them both.

They seem frightened to think, either side. Nothing could be sillier than having a farm hardly bigger than a field devoted to a dozen different crops, fruits and vegetables, yet dependent on one man alone, without machinery. To cap this, two or three oxen need a mountain of forage twice a day and leave the stall for perhaps seven whole days in a month, for ploughing and cutting and hauling. If whole farms were turned over to wine they could conceivably be worked by one or two men, and would

yield far more, even at the present low prices which genuine wine (as opposed to chemically treated wine) is fetching. Everyone is talking these things over. 'Concentrated'vineyards will come in, easy to hoe with hand machinery, in dense files, not spaced in terraces with crops between them. On the other hand crops sewn between vines do them good. You plant maize one year, wheat the next, beans after that. It keeps the earth frehs. And then there are stories that the concentrated vineyards are more prone to disease, and give spectacular yields for a limited time whereas the old vines last forty years without any trouble.

Multi-crop farming was designed to supply a large family with all it needed. Three generations worked the land simultaneously from one farmhouse. But the sons are in factories, workshops now. The children are at school. Machines and one-crop farming go together, the one making the other economical. On the other hand machines are difficult to handle in small, hilly country. So bulldozing has to be done. Hills have to smoothed down, valleys built up. It is starting already.

We asked Dino why Paolo the shepherd didn't buy a decent piece of land at the present throw-away prices and work it himself, instead of getting a butcher's shop in competition with a dozen other better-experienced men in the same town, and he said, 'Because the land is dirty work.'

Apparently the Agnarelli brothers did go to their landlord with a proposition. This proposition, natur-

ally, was that he should give them a higher percentage than the official fifty three percent of the mezzadria system. But he threw up his hands and said that even now he could barely pay his taxes or buy the fertilisers, the concime for feeding the cattle and the fowl, or mend their roofs. At a higher percentage he would have to sell everything. But he agreed to buy them a tractor, which will halve their work in the summer and spare the over-worked oxen. If you lay down thirty percent of the price of any machine, the government will loan you the rest at a tiny percentage.

A speaker in town said that our civilisation now depends on a cohesive agriculture, that is a real country life again. The Anglo-Saxons have turned the country-side into a factory. The result is disease, degeneration of animal vigour and stock, the poisoning of the earth and above all the breeding of vast city populations detached from the realities of of life. The answers have to be different from the Anglo-Saxons ones: based on what men need, not on puritan calculations of 'economy'.

It is amazing to what extent the old Italy had a satisfactory system of life. While mezzadria flourished the farms were like jewels, set out on the hills like a great fertile jigsaw puzzle of green and grey and red. Willow trees burst out red every few hundred yards. By the early spring they were ready to be snipped off in long strands to tie the pruned vine-stems down with. The earth was ploughed in impeccable parallel lines.

The men burst with health. Some people say that Italy always did well, even in the war. There was always something to be found to eat and drink. Even in the south, people say, the sun healed much of the deprivation. You can't look at unemployment figures as you can in other countries, and judge from them. The Neapolitans, for instance, like to take a job for a few weeks, or months, then throw it up and kick their heels for a bit and then look round for something else. They won't be machines. They want to go on savouring life. Their ability to savour life is one of the most extraordinary survivals in a country which has become industrial and copes with about thirty million foreign tourists a year. Then there are the plentiful church holidays, the Republic days and Independence days and Victory days. This strange land keeps a style of life among its poorest which only deliberately self-liberated people in other lands achieve. They keep their palates and, underneath the drudgery, a personal, selfish freedom. Every Italian is a vagrant. Every Italian wanders on the face of the earth, alone. He has no friends. When you know that you know Italy.

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The fattore came on behalf of the landlady and peeped into the downstairs or 'peasant' rooms. He is negotiating with a family to take occupation in Jan-

uary, he says, and to rent the land and half the house. Gino will rent part of the land and work in with them.

We're doubtful if it will work out, and the fattore seems doubtful too. It may be a sort of political move on her part to get us to take the whole house over, but I don't think so.

The wheat is being brought in from our farm in sheafs and laid down where there is a flat, sandy space outside, to form a massa, a great round stack. Then in a week or ten days the threshing machine will come creaking along and the grain will be beaten from the straw, and the straw-blocks will be stacked under the cypress tree, to shine fresh at its side.

The fields are cleared of their sheafs in rotation, everyone helping the other in neighbourly groups. They start soon after dawn and go on until past dusk. The equivalent of our Harvest Home comes when the machine is actually here: a long table is put in the barn (here it will go into Gino's kitchen) and twelve or fifteen exhausted people sit down to eat, with plenty of wine. I don't think it will be much of a celebration though.

It turns out that the 'peasant family' negotiating to come to this house is Guido Agnarelli or 'the brigand'. He was helping with the massa this morning and told us.

The priest stopped in 'town' this morning and gave me more literature, with a bag of fruit from his own trees--- plums and pears. His goodness makes him press everything on me, but at the same time he gives the magazines a wistful

look, like a child in a sweetshop, not having read them himself yet. And I accordingly tell him to keep some. He had his book of meditations with him and said he'd found the passage dealing with the 'schism'nin England, when Henry V111 sacked the monasteries. He stood fingering through the book, looking for it. But he couldn't find it and said he would show it to me when we came to watch His TV one evening. Tomorrow is the feast day of the 'town' saint, with a sung mass and lots of flowers, and he recommends us to go. There will be an orchestra in the cathedral. I'm sure he feels we're ripe for Rome. We're 'good' people, that is ripe to become Christians, that is catholics. A non-catholic isn't really a Christian in Italy. Christian means 'human being'. So a non-catholic is slightly less than a human being.

Gianni sat on our terrace in the darkness while a chicken was roasting in the oven for him. His mother hasn't an oven so he brought it down to my wife. He and Luigi, with Silvano and three others, are going to the sea tomoorrow (the saint's feast day) and have hired a car and driver. He and Luigi fuss like old women. Should they take a small suitcase? how are they going to get all the 'luggae' into the car? what about plates and knives and forks? will they need salt? should they take wine? It makes it like a childhood trip. Their talk makes the kitchen glow. They are to leave at half past six in the morning. The chicken is roasted in silver paper---we tell them this is a good succulent way. Ours is the only gas oven

this side of the valley. Otherwise it would have meant building a wood fire over at Pescille, where they are all still busy stacking the wheat.

Gianni gave us a speech about women. Tuscan women were much 'easier' than those in the south. You could get friendly with a Tuscan woman. If she liked you she made it easy for you. You might be with her for three months without once 'going to her house', that is, getting engaged to her. In that time she might let you be intimate with her. But if she did you warned all your friends not to think of her as a possible wife. You told them, 'I've <u>been</u> with her. And for her to go with me she must have been with plenty of others too.' You will tell your friends about her in any case, because whenever you have sex you boast about it afterwards, you expose the woman involved. More, if the womanhas permitted intimacy this rules out even marriage between you and her: intimacy before betrothal is the death of a woman's reputation.

At half past six in the morning they still hadn't gone. I strolled up the rocky path and there were festive sounds from below---Gianni calling, Silcano asking something urgent. At last the car doors slammed and there was a great collective shout, the day seemed all space and sunlight, with that special gleaming magic of a voyage---and they drove off. <u>Ciao!</u> The women waved.

There are more thunderstorms, with heavy rain: but at dawn now. The other night we watched a cloud

hanging over the Sienese hills, under a full moon, with lightning flashing inside it like a storm-scene in a play. The valley with its endless groves, its single vines like shadows, twined round a tree, look haunted and in a peculiar way ravished. We could even see the 'town' in the lightning, perched on its hill like a piece of carved rock, gaunt and unbending.

Inthe dead of the night the valley is so still that it seems the most unbelievable madness to suppose that we could 'master' it for a moment, the silence of outer space.

Our priest took us to the tiny hill-village of Montepulcro, where there are only two families left, and a shepherd. It was stormy and the wind swept across the muddy path below the church. The clouds were dark, moving swiftly. The road to the village rises steeply between wheatfields and cypresses. The biggest house lies abandoned, its windows shuttered, with planks nailed across. Not long ago fifteen people lived in it.
We could see across a deep valley to the country south of Siena, with its small hill towns clear in the brooding storm-darkness. Don Dino pointed out the towering jagged ruin that sticks out of the earth by the Colle val d'Elsa-Volterra road, and told us that in the middle ages it had been a look-out post commanding the whole valley, during the sporadic wars with Volterra.

We were to meet the priest of Montepulcro and he came out of his house calm and smiling as soon as he heard the

car. He looks like a peasant, lean and weather-beaten, with shrewd, unyielding eyes under blondish eyebrows. Don Dino looks frail and unhealthy by him, a bag of bone and sinew. The church-house is the only one in good repair, and we peep into a pleasant-looking study--his 'office'---as we pass. First we had to see the church, which is bare apart from a copy of a Sienese altar, and a Madonna and Child with St Michael slaying the dragon, and St Peter. The walls are painted (cement underneath) in imitation of the black and white stone motif of the cathedrals in Siena and Florence. The priest complains ina voice hardly more than a whisper that the rain comes in from the bell-tower, and he shows us the dtreams of damp down the wall. The wind is so strong up here, he says in his disturbingly insincere sootto voce, that there is no way of stopping the rain penetrating. There has never been such weather before, he says. The tower had never in all its history been put to such a test. In the old traditional waether an earthquake might have brought it down but never wind or rain.

He was aching to talk politics. The moment we were in the open air again he pointed to the abandoned house and said, still in his whisper, 'There were four families there not above two years ago!' He added more loudly, 'They're all going away, the peasants. This will be a dead village soon. And why? Economics? NO!' His face became sharp and fierce. 'Psychological! It's all psychological! They want the town, they want

the industries---they think they do, at least!'

Our priest nodded palely, seeming to only half-listen.

'Soon there'll be a crisis!' the other man said. 'And God only knows if we'll pass it safely!' Not in our country only, I believe, but everywhere.'

Take meat, he went on: the production us going down swiftly, the stalls are empty; with the land not being worked to full capacity there isn't the forage to feed the animals, even if there is the labour to look after them. So the butcher's shops are open only four days a week now in some places: soon it might be only two days, then one, then---! But there could be such plenty as to make you go green in the face thinking about it! If, for instance, the valley below produced a hundred thousand quintali of wine instead of a thousand or ten thousand, it could be sold more cheaply, in bulk, perhaps even for half the price it was sold at now. The work would be incomparably less, and so would the overheads. The dozen separate farms that comprised this valley at present were ' a dozen luxuries' we could ill afford. With low prices we could make the countryside habitable again. Cooperatives were the answer.

He was about to demonstrate how this would be when Don Dino said in his soft voice, 'Yes, people are drift=ing into the towns now, they find life more amusing there and ---'

The other priest pounced on him with his sharp look,

touched with the slightest of grim smiles, 'No, no! You haven't understood. Let me explain. There is no cinema up here. Agreed?' Yes, our priest agreed obediently. 'Well, then, we put a cinema here! But at fifty lire a seat instead of one or two hundred. The result is that not only people in this village come to the cinema but those from the town as well, because it's half the usual price, for the same film, and perhaps in a better auditorium!'

Our priest nodded: yes, he understood the analogy.

'Now then,' the other man went on, 'put yourfields under a similar programme and you cut your prices automatically! The demand is there---the supply's only a matter of intelligence!'

To which Don Dino nodded palely and said, shivering in the bitter July wind, 'Let's go inside shall we?'

The other mannled the way, swift and erect, his head forward, still buried in his theme. The 'office' he led us to was cool and silent, with lace curtains over the windows and a heavy velveteen cloth on the table. There was a large straight-backed armchair covered with bright cushions at the head of the table, 'for the bishop is heever came.' And he offered this to my wife with a gracious gesture.

As soon as we were seated he started again. 'Everything comes from the earth---there's nothing you can mention that doesn't involve the earth at somestage in its production---so if you abandon the earth you

abandon your life!'

His eyes glanced about the room, sometimes blindly and sometimes piercingly. Outside, the wind howled as it might on a winter's night. And our priest sat meekly by the table, rather rigid, gazing across at his friend---whose soul he seems to fear for.

Then the other man launched into the famous affair of the 'lost' agricultural funds. 'Five hundred miliard lire' (about three hundred million pounds) 'collected in taxes from the countryside cannot be traced! Perhaps a fifth part might be recovered, but the rest has disappeared---some say into the Secretary General's pocket, some say into various government departments which happen to be in debt, some say into new industrial schemes from which certain ministers stand to profit!'

Don Dino deprecated this, raising his fragile bony hand for a moment: 'Is that quite certain?'

'Yes!' the other priest shouted ferociously, his voice ringing across the room in a strange passionate scream, quite different from his ecclesiastical whisper. 'It is! Quite certain! The department can't account for five hundred miliard lire! And they call it a government! Thiefs! Ladri! Ladri!' And he pounded the table. 'They should be brought to law! There should be the severest penalty for stealing from government funds---which means stealing from the people!'

Our priest's lips quivered a little at this. 'Oh dear,' he murmured, 'mistakes are bound to happen.

Of course, there are scandals. They happen in every country.'

'But five hundred miliard? A mistake? A mighty mistake that was! The man had the cheque on his desk and it was lost under the blotting paper I suppose! It was no mistake! It was a design! It was a deliberate criminal's design---to steal from the people. You're simple, Don Dino! Tu sei troppo semplice!'

Our priest put his hand up again, shrugging slightly, but couldn't get a word in.

'Mistakes aren't bound to happen!' the other man went on. 'But they will happen if they're not punished! The maximum penalty, that's what it needs!'

'I suppese,' our priest said to this, His lips still quivering slightly, 'poeple should be killed, like they are in Russia. We don't want that!'

'But it isn't only in Russia that people are punished for thecrimes they committ! It's England, France, everywhere in the civilised world---the maximum penalty for stealing from the people!'

Don Dino turned to us with a little smile---'My friend has rather strong opinions.' He added, 'He works on the land himself.'

Apparently the other priest has a large podere of sixty or seventy hectares, and he has followed his own doctrine thoroughly by putting the land under a programme. The result is, according the peasants, that he's making a lot of money.

I told him about our farm, that it would soon be abandoned like the rest; or with luck it might be rented for a paltry sum. Wouldn't it be better to turn it over to one crop, I asked---say, wine? And his answer was, with a mysterious and rather excited smile, that it was all a question of money, that the people who owned the land invariably had no money or else were unwilling to put it back into the land. You needed money to change the crop in that way, he said, because you needed time. If you wanted to turn it over to olives for instance you had to wait for between five and ten years for a good yield from the trees. And wine took about five years. Although the mezzadria system was psychologically unpopular at the moment (because the peasant has the impression that he gives half his yearly produce to an idler), it was the best agricultural system ever devised, for fairness and efficiency.

'The actual dividend reaped from this system by a good landowner is about six or seven percent of the produce, after taxes, equipment, new plants, repairs have been paid for: about the same percentage as a clever business man gets on his capital. I pay out eighteen thousand lire a day in wages, to eight or nine workers. I have no mezzadri. With large farms, producing massive supplies, the mezzadria system is unqorkable. But the country might return to it. After all, people have left the land in great numbers twice before in Italian history---once in Roman times and once in the middle ages, and both times they came

back. What I can't understand is that young people actually want to give up the chance of a healthy life out of doors! How marvellous,' he said, his narrow, rather Chinese eyes shining, 'to be out there under God's sun, getting brown, with things growing all round you! What could be better than that?'

He quoted two brothers he knew---one worked in the valley below, the other in a factory in a nearby town. And when you compared their faces, he said, it was like comparing a piece of dried chalk with a plump, ripe fruit! And in the end this would all lead to disease and poor human stock. The countryside had to be made exciting again, he said, and unfortunately 'a government of thiefs and liars' was incompetent to do anything except line its own pockets.

Don Dino turned to us and said, quoting the name of a high government official, 'Now <u>there's</u> a good man. A real Christian, with some excellent ideas,' at which the other priest nodded ironically, with a little twinkle in his eye, and said with a laugh, 'The biggest liar of all!'

As we got into Don Dino's tiny car again the other priest watched us calmly, his arms folded, a slight satisfied smile on his lips. He was so different from our Don Dino. The peasants only respect him in a gingerly and distant way. They laugh with him, they admire him, but Don Dino is more their idea of what a priest should be. They say of Don Dino, 'There aren't a hundred like

in all Italy.'

Dino tells us of the Montepulcro priest, with a laugh, that he likes his women. 'Watch your wife when he's about---no woman's safe with that prelate!' And others call him a communist. I've never heard a priest scream his sermons as vehemently as this one. He sometimes preaches in the catherdral. The health of the fields surges through his body. His voice rasps, cuts. His face shines red, bronze in the dim light of the church, with Ghirlandaio frescoes glowing from the walls. The congregation shifts about, yawns, the children make their little noises. Vehement sermons are simply a performance in Italy. They have all been heard before. They aren't associated with serious action. They are just words. His words shriek down the church, exhorting the people to change. Eyes sometimes glance up at him lazily, half open. The words are just form. At a communist party meeting it would be different. There the words are meant to mean. In church they are a kind of music. Communist or not you like to hear the old music now and then, with the children nicely dressed up. Every family saves for the children's communion. It never costs less than between fifty and a hundred pounds per child. Anybody who didn't provide for his child in this way would be an unthinkable barbarian. A photograph of the child in white, standing at the altar, hands clasped in prayer, must go on to the veneer-wood sideboard.

Dino said that the Montepulcro prelate had been

caught with his trousers down one day, literally. The husband had come in at the front and he had jumped out of the window at the back. He ran across the field holding his cassock up like a skirt, with bare legs underneath.

Sometimes you see him in one of the 'town' restaurants with some of his workers, red with oily food and wine, laughing. He is a little sensitive at not being taken seriously as a man, because a preist. He carries his serious themes inside him like secrets, which make his eyes gleam. He seems to burn secretly from being misunderstood. Or perhaps he burns secretly from being understood all too well.

On the way back from Montepulcro our priest murmured, 'Yes, it's true what he says. The government have a plan for the country now, but it's too late. We needed it long ago. Now everybody has left. We have a proverb about the government, we say they are closing the stable door after the horse has bolted. You see, there are no amusements in the country. No TV, no cinema orbars---often no electricity, water.' And he added, sadly, 'Even for country priests it's boring. There isn't really enough for us to do, you see.'

That evening I had a long argument with Gianni. The night was stormy and rather cold. It began by his putting a strange question to me. He'd been talking to one of the peasants at Pescille who claims that the white smoke from the chimney at St Peters in Rome, when a new

pope is elected, means that God has made his choice.

At first I didn't understand, and Gianni repeated the stages of the argument carefully: 'Firts, when a pope dies a new pope is elected. Right?'

'Yes.'

'Well, then cardinals come to Rome to elect him.'

'Yes.'

'And when they vote, their papers are put in a stove and burned. If the smoke outside, which can be seen from St Peter's Square, is black, it means the election has been unsuccessful, in other words that the cardinals haven't agreed on who should be the pope.' Correct?'

'Yes.'

'Very well, then, did Christ do the selecting or the cardinals?' And he stopped. I was still no nearer to understanding.

He tried it again.

'Who exactly elects the pope?' he asked.

'The cardinals,' We said.

'Yes, but suppose three cardinals nominate one man, five another, ten another---what happens then?'

'Well,' we said, 'no pope is elected. They couldn't agree among themselves. And they have to agree before the new pope can be made.'

'So the pope is made by the cardinals?' Gianni asked.

'Yes, of course!'

'And not by God?'

'But how by God?' we asked.

'Put it this way,' he said. 'How does the black smoke come?'

'By the paper,' we answered. 'The election papers.'

'And the white smoke?'

'By straw, to show that the election was successful.'

'Then thedifference between the black and the white smoke is made by the material used---something different in the stove?'

'Yes.'

'There,' Gianni said, 'you see, I was right. I argued with that man for an hour this morning. I didn't say I knew he was wrong, I just said I thought he was, that I couldn't believe him. And it seems I was right. You see, he said that when God came across the name he wanted he turned the black smoke into white miraculously, and then everybody understood what pope he wanted.'

The man had got very heated about it, he said. He had told Gianni that therewas absolutely no doubt in the matter---his father, his grandfather and his great grandfather before him had all said the same.

It is easy to see what people used to be taught.

Then we somehow got on to politics. He said that the agreement just made between America and Russia and England not to have any more atomic tests was a great step forward. I said it wasn't anything of the kind. It was a hurried agreement to try to stop other powers making a stock of bombs and thus threatening the division of world power between America and Russia. I said it

was a desparate attempt to freeze the present balance of political power inherent in possessing bombs. Also America and Russia now had more bombs than they needed. Thirdly, further atomic tests were useless, since no quicker or more effective system of blowing up vast areas of the earth could be devised. Therefore nothing was lost militarily or politically by either side in the agreement; and they both gained by being called saviours, in as spurious a publicity as had ever existed under nazism.

Gianni said to this that any disarmament was good, to which I said that this wasn't disarmament. I called him a dupe of publicity and reminded him that one of these saviours of mankind had a year or two before exploded twenty-one bombs on twenty-one successive days, and that the other saviour had exploded a hydrogen bomb in the stratosphere while knowing that it would cause the most devastating magnetic strosm all over the earth. I said that space craft were the newweapons. Gianni let out a yell and a laugh, and said, 'Surely you don't believe that satellites are for military use?' I asked him what he thought they were for and he said, 'To discover another planet.'

Outisde, the wind swept hard sleet against the windows, like on a December night. Gino had flung a tarpaulin over the massa, to stop the wheat from rotting inside.

3.

Evacuation.

The last few days have been full of the sound of threshing, like a strange beast coughing regularly. The towering red machine with its chutes and turning cables came to our courtyard before dawn this morning. It fills the air with a fine dust, a pleasant wheaty smell. The Agnarelli children came over and are helping with the baling of the straw. They fix the wires in strips and the machine does the rest, binding the oblong blocks round. Guido Agnarelli and his tiny wife Emma and Gino are at the topf ot the massa forking wheat on to the conveyer belt which then tumbles it into the puffing machine. Gianni sets the sacks at the taps where the separated grain pours out. Guido's brother and Armanda (from the Pescille farm) haul the straw blocks into a new stack with hooks, as they tumble off the belt. The hardest work is at the top of the massa, forking, and they change every hour or so. The machine only stops briefly at lunchtime. As its hire is paid

by the hour, not a second must be wasted. So this too has the enjoyment squeezed out of it, because of concepts of mean economy derived from the misria of the past.

At the end of the day the new haystack is neat and symmetrical. A pile of chaff nearly as high as the house has formed just outside out bedroom window. At one time this was given to the animals to eat, mixed with other foods, but now it joins the silo. There are dozens of sacks filled with grain in the courtyard, already being divided 53%-47% between the landlady (represented by the fattore) and Gino. Tallies are being made in little books by the head machinist: he has to send in a bill later. Everybody is raw-red from the sun, but under a veil of yellow chaff-dust. Nobody speaks. Movements are heavy. The silence is tremendous when the engine shuts down.

Two tables are set up in Gino's kitchen by the women. It is dark. We eat pasta with meat sauce, then chicken and fried veal, with some of last year's wine. The talk is soft and desultory. Not even Gianni jokes. But after two or three glasses of wine tongues atart moving. The fattore talks to us about his son, who is training as a civil pilot. His presence and ours put a polite edge on what would otherwise be mostly silent gorging. The women stand by with their great saucepans and frying pans. This is the most expensive item of the day. It is the expected form of payment for working in with your neighbour. Next day you eat precisely the sam meal at another

farm. Nothing but the best wine is expected. And there must be at least two meat courses, usually chicken and veal or beef.

There is great awe of the machine: it excites and captivate s evryone. They serve it willingly and hurriedly. The men who bring it try to look like magicians, because this is how they're regarded. They peer into the thing mysteriously, saying nothing, while the peasants hurry round them in a flattered way. The noise enslaves them. It means hope, movement. Like roads, it points to freedom.

The meal passed quickly, without a climax of merriment, only munching and quiet talk, and chuckling. When it was over we took Gino's family back to 'town' and sat in their tiny flat for a few minutes. Both their sons were there: polite, reticent youths, with hardly a trace of the peasant any more. Town-life is more colto, everyone says---more cultivated. Their kitchen is spotless. Gino's sons work in a wood factory, and helping on the land is a penance for them, a descent into the past. It means a day stripped of self-respect.

Immediately after the meal the threshing machine moves off, wobbling and creaking down the bouldery path to the road, its lights on. It clatters in the still night for at least an hour, crawling towards another farm where it will be lodged for the night. The mechanics will be back before dawn, and at first light the coughing sound will start again.

The night is clear, but with storm-clouds gathering inland. The threshing on most of the other farms was done in bad weather, with rain and bitter winds.

Gianni complains about the heavy meals at threshing time: sometimes twice a day---chicken and pasta, steak or veal.

'I can't stand so much meat!' he says temperamentally Then, 'Stanco, stanco!'---he's tired. And he throws himself down on our divan and promptly falls asleep like a child.

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The storms have gone and the air is sparkling and clear, as it usually is much later in the year. People say there have been earth-tremors in Tuscany, in the Romagna and Emilia, bgt we felt nothing. A man tolld me that at the sea he watched three separate storms from a hill, close to each other, like clouds with dozens of fireworks inside them.

Gianni barges in to the courtyard every hour or so in the morning. He whistles, clowns, sings. At home he walks up and down the kitchen steps with a humourous, half-anguished restlessness. When he fidgets his mother shouts, 'Vagabondo! Haven't you work to do?' Whenever he shouts q question up to the kitchen she screams angrily, 'Madonna cane! Che vuoi, li giù?'---what the devil do you want down there?

Last week he told us secretively that he'd found a job. He was to drive a truck. It meant leavingg at dawn. But at half past six the next morning he was in our courtyard again. The truck had 'broken down'. When would it be ready again? On Sunday.

But on Sunday it turned to Monday. Then it seemed forgotten.

But one day, perhaps when the summer is over, he'll suddenly appear and say, 'I've been truck-driving for a week!'

Sometimes he goes from house to house in the valley, talking, sitting. I walked with him to Pescille yesterday and he suddenly lifted up my hand and walked me along as if we were a royal couple in a Tudor play, his steps long and light, while the peasants chuckled at us. Sometimes our talk is fiercely hilarious, in replies and answers that are rapped out in a strange, mad logic, as if we had rehearsed it before. He imitates anger, haughtiness, indignation.

The days are dull again, with brief, light falls of rain. There isn't thunder any more, but the land broods under a thick sky. We went to the sea, and along a narrow strip of the coast there was hot sunlight, like a blazing corridor down the sand.

Now there is the annual fever of <u>ferragosto</u>: August 15 is called the Feast of the Assumption, but the time belongs to the people, really to their paganism; it

brings out an ancient restlessness. Best to be in the cities at this time, as they are empty and silent. The 'town' swarms with people who don't seem to know why they are there.

Again there is a crisp touch of autumn in the air. It makes me think of Rome---the glow of lights on dark mornings. When it rises the sun shows bright red trees in the woods above us. It plucks out the red quite suddenly, like a stage-light. The leaves have turned in the last few weeks. Yet this ought to be the hottest time of the year.

We sat at the top of our hill and watched the threshing at a farmhouse far below---the same machine that came to us a week back. People fed the chute with sheaves in the same unresting way, hurried by the sound of the machine. They looked like puppets. Most hard work here is done in a joyless fever. That is the Tuscan way.

The machine went on pounding with its odd hoarse cough, while the women hurried to and fro from the house. You could see their excitement, the unusual way in which they hurried. The work was almost finished. The straw was piled into a neat stack the size of a barn. Then the machine died down, the cables and chutes were dismantled, the tractor with the engien that had worked everything crawled away. The meal would now be ready in the dark house, and instead of a glowing, memorable supper, that the children would remember with awe, they would eat with grunts, smacking their lips and reaching for bread,

and when the last mouthful was down and the cigarettes were lit, that would be the end, and they would get up to go. They say about the Tuscan that he doesn't linger over his meals. He eats to work. Whereas in Rome you could write a history of every meal.

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Last night, while the sky over us was clear and the crickets throbbed calmly, there were sudden flashes from the direction of the coast, so bright that they lit up the dusty roadway like a full moon. When they ceased for a moment the darkness seemed uncannily dense. There wasn't a sound of thunder, not the slightest distant rumble. It was like continuous fireworks along the whole length of the coast. We were walking back from Dino's, and the path was lighted for us the whole way. At the same time, on the other side of the clear sky, there was a storm, a single dark cloud perched in the air above Florence, flashing intermittently.

The sea-storm was drawing inland fast but it took nearly two hours to reach us. The silent flashes became brighter. We could see the wooded slope outside our bedroom window under a continuous silver light.

The crickets stopped suddenly, just a moment before the soft rain came. There was a first rumble of thunder, but it was muffled, high in the air, behind clouds. This was the nature of the flashes too---they were 'summer

lightning', diffused and glowing. There were no sharp crashes, no crackling or reverberating explosions as in the earlier storms of the year. The rumbles got nearer and nearer, until they were almost overhead, with the flashes going on irrespective of them. Then they passed further inland. There was suddenly an avalanche of rain, the windows swung open, the wind whistled through the house, doors banged. As suddenly it was calm again. The rumbling was no longer heard. At the moment when everything felt safe again the crickets began to chirp.

There were slight earth-tremors this week, near Foggia this time.

I walked Gianni up the hill. His mother was wrapped in a man's winter jacket, though it was hot. She says she gets cold however hot it is. Upstairs in the kitchen we drank a glass of wine together, and Gianni sat dandling Paolo's child on his knee. We went to the little nursery garden and he cut small marrows, beans, tomatoes for me to take home. His mother put two eggs into my hand.

'He's a <u>birbante</u>!' she shouted, flinging a glance at him. 'A wretch! He does nothing! I've suffered today---going to town on foot, to get my pension! He's bad---everybody says it, even the cat!'

Angelo stood gazing across the yard, smiling. 'The doctor gave her some pills today,' he said. 'It's the stomach.'

I told her, 'Gianni's good---you've a clever son!'

At which shr burst out, 'That only means he's turned

you into a birbante as well!'

'Why don't you take him?' she asked. 'If you like him so much---employ him, take him into your home as a son!' She added quickly, 'Are you afraid he'll seduce your wife?'

'No,' I said.

'Well, then, take him in!'

'He's too old,' I said, laughing. 'He's twenty three!'

'What difference does it make? He's got good arms! You can get plenty of work out of him, if you like him so much! I don't want him!', and she and Angelo went quickly back to their work in the barn, he turning the wheel while she fed the cutter with bundles of grass.

Suddenly five goats appear just outside our 'gate', under the shade of the old cypress. Paolo brought them down. Two of them are pure white. Then more appear, from Pescille. They stamp their pretty, obstinate feet. They frown through their hair and make their mildly petulant bleat. They are so pleased to meet each other---it seems they're strangers. They sniff each other pleasantly and the latest comer make shis 'how do you do' to the others one by one. Afterwards he does a charming mock battle with them in turn. They spring up on their hind legs, half turning in the air, and come down with deeo thud on their front paws and clap their horns together. Then they look at each other intimately as if to say, 'It's good to be here, isn't it?' They are off to market to be sold---for milking, not slaughtering.

A young pig arrives in the courtyard, his new home.

He buries his head in the straw and won't look at anyone: he breathes hard. The journey in the truck, and his having just been castrated, terrify him. He lies there, stricken. He buries his head in a delicate, sorrowing way. People are horribly cruel to animals when they believe they have no souls.

I notice that all young things---dogs, children---gravitate towards Gianni. He tricks them, jokes, laughs, tickles them. Paolo's little child weeps bitterly if anyone says, 'Gianni's naughty!' She won't have it. It is against all the evidence.

In our field below the road you can feel the past, how the wines and the bamboo-stalks in the gully and the mossy boulders that protrude out of clover and grass, and the rough yellow paths that wind down from the house, have been there for centuries with the heat drenching through them, the sunlight golden on the terracotta palazzo of Pescille that borders it. Now it is only a reminder. Its special soothing dip is ~~xx~~ unowned. The gold has been melted out of it by the endless rains. It looks like the garden of a ruined house. It has a different story to tell you at each time of day---golden, sparkling, bright in the morning, mellow and still in the afternoon, cool, secretive in the evening, but these things aren't its character any more, only shadows that pass across it.

The 'hunting'season has nearly started: the first Sunday in September. We were woken at dawn by 'hunters'

stamping about in rubber boots outside, with yapping half-breed dogs round them. They're supposed to be training the dogs to point. God knows how this can be done with mongrels, and in woods so thick that you can hardly walk through them, let alone sight a quarry. They keep to the edge of the woods, close to our house, because pagan fears linger as strong as they ever were. And they seem to want an audience more than a prey. They're all townspeople, or from one of the villages. A peasant has no time to play. They love to stride along a tarred road with a gun slung over their shoulders, their boots---turned down at the ankle for extra effect--- making a solemn thudding noise. They pay twelve thousand lire a year for their licence and are lucky to bag a couple of hares. For weeks now they've been preparing capanne, cabins in the woods. But even these are safely near the road, though the woods are twenty or thirty kilometres deep.

The 'hunting' has an undertone of fascism, though it existed in exactly the same form long before fascism was thought of. Few Italians can resist the fascination of a firearm. It make a bang (its greatest recommendation), it can kill without risk or effort to the killer, and it endows you with a war-like and masculine appearance. When he shoots he is really taking revenge on a lifelong sense of being ineffectual. Fascism was that revenge on a bigger scale.

The first Sunday will be a pandemonium from dawn

onwards, Gianni says. They will park outside our courtyard, perhaps inside too---motorcycles, cars, scooters and pop-popping three-wheelers. Nothing is private unless you put up a notice to say it is, and for this you have to pay the government money. The 'hunter' may stride through any property, any garden he wishes, provided it has no fence or barbed wire round it (minimum height five feet).

It is cold and dark, yet we're still in August. We have just heard that during the strange storms a few nights ago a tornado swept along the coast and rooted up trees, tore motor-boats out of the sea and flung them on to the beach. It could be seen approaching inland like a vast cloud stretching down to sea-level.

A postcard came from Gianni saying he was sorry to have 'missed' us: from Messina, in Sicily.

The sound of Armida singing---a snatch of an old song, at seven o'clock in the morning. It makes everything still and spacious. Then she calls to her chicks. The valley lies under a shallow mist, with piercing warm sunshine, after the cold tramontana or mountain breeze last night. For a moment there isn't a sound of a car or cycle, no engine of any kind. The valley lies in its original quiet---a few birds sing briefly, there is the metallic sound of a spade from Pescille, someone turning the earth over.

The exciting sound of cantering hoofs. The dentist

from Poggibonsi rides past on his white horse. He takes a ride every morning before breakfast. The hoofs sound busy, passionate, absorbed in their own pace.

Before the war everything here was on horseback or was horsedrawn. Every farm had a horse or two. Dino told me that the road outside was always clattering with hoofs and wooden wheels. One or two barouche-like carts go past on market morning, the wheels rumbling.

The Agnarelli farm looks fine and idyllic on the other side of the valley in the early-morning sunshine, with the mist drifting by, through its great holm oaks. It stands on a raised island, with a steep drop to the fields. But the idyll is false. The Italian aristocracies were always urban. They didn't leave fine traces on the countryside, a sense of the idyll, as they did in England and France.

We met the landlord of the white house up the hill. He lives and works in Florence. He made a brilliant attack on the present state of things in a loud, ringing voice, his eyes popping out of his head. He said he'd seen a TV programme about how to feed the increasing populations of the world. It seemed there were great possibilities---millions of acres of land remain uncultivated---marshland, tropical bush, desert, the sea-bed.

He struck his hand on the table smartly: 'We sit and watch this nonsense on our screens and outside---'

he turned towards the window, with Pescille below---
'there are thousands of acres of our own land idle---
perhaps the richest land in the world, basking in the
richest climate---and we have to go to trppical lands
three thousand miles away to find our food! What
idiocy! There's more than enough food for all of us
outside in those fields! We sit watching these programmes
while we squander the inheritance of centuries---the
vines we inherited are going rotten, the olive trees are
unpruned! And we call ourselves intelligent, we say
we've advanced, we send our children to school to listen
to this nonsense while the facts under their noses are
withheld from them!'

He said that only Mussolini had dared to tackle the problem, thirty years ago, and foresaw what would happen. You hear this echoed by the peasants as well, whether they&re communist or not. He knew 'how to treat the Italians', they are 'an undisciplined people.'

The collapse of fascism struck down an energetic, intelligent, unpleasant class of men. You can see them sitting about the squares today---men with nearly distinguished faces, idle, malevolent, embittered: semi-intellectuals, semi-gentlemen. They would like to do violence to life again perhaps---but they can't break free from their own timeless natures. Reform is simply against the Italian genius. Their attempts at it---like fascism---end in disaster. They don't believe in the world and the flesh sufficiently.

It turns what they do believe into rhetoric. All Italian life outside Rome has this rhetorical overtone. This gives foreigners the mistaken impression that Italy is sentimental, because of her rhetorical pleasure in sentiment.

Foreigners are the signori who bless places by their presence. They bless the hated countryside, the hated antique houses. Our presence in this valley had produced a rash of enquiries for land 'to build a villa on'. The enquiries are rhetorical. So would the villas be, if they were built. Their rooms would be showpieces.

Only Rome is unrhetorical. Rhetoric is provincial, the fear of vulgarity. This is why Gianni makes set speeches: he is flying above the basic vulgar chaos.

Rhetoric is so powerful that it may lead a man to eat what he dislikes and enjoy it more than what he likes. The peasants who live near the dentist of Poggibonsi talk about his riding before breakfast with a certain puzzlement. They say, 'Yes, he rides for amusement! It diverts him!' They can't really understand why he doesn't go by car. But if he put on a uniform, with shining black boots, and had a retinue of attendants, they would understand. It would be rhetorical, he would be making a fine figura.

Today began bright and cold, with a thin mist veiling the land. Then there were the usual clouds, with the sun appearing now and then. Some of the clouds were black, fierce-looking. There was no growing heat as

usual on an August day. The invigorating chill remained. Sometimes you feel it is a summer sciroccо, because of the warm stillness; then it seems November. Now thunder is rumbling in the distance, and a storm seems to be drawing near.

Guido Agnarelli brought the yeast over for our bread and told us that the agreement for him to move into this house in January was already fixed. All the produce will be his. He will give our landlady the tiny sum of fifty thousand lire a year, hardly enough to pay the taxes. He told us that his brother will be leaving the land for good---he'll start as a builder's mate, earning three thousand lire a day instead of the two thousand he would get as a labourer on daily hire.

'I'd do that myself,' Guido said, 'but I'm too old to change.

The peasants don't seem to realise what vast knowledge they have, about the crops. They count it nothing. They assume that I, being educated, know just as much as they do about how to till the rows for vines, prune the olives, cast the seed, beat the bean-pods when they're dry with flays, tend the cattle at night when they give birth, feed the hundreds of geese and ducks and chickens, transfer the first wine and to vats and squeeze the juice of dry, sweet grapes into it. They know the influence of the moon---how the wine in the barrels rises at full moon, filling the glass bowl at the top. They know not to plant when there is no moon. They

know the signs of the sky. But the collapse of the seasons is toppling their work. Their predictions no longer work. They can no longer reliably read the sky. Anything may happen at any time. There could be a storm, a sudden avalanche of rain in a clearish sky, followed by fierce sunlight bringing disease to the vines. And so it seems that even God is against their going on with the old work.

We had a chat about food, in the darkness of the courtyard. Guido said he would put the food-adulterators 'up against the wall' (a favourite expression of his, though he's the mildest man on earth). Most of the manufacturers laughed at the fines imposed on them he said. Their profits were so big that they could afford a periodical fine. At one time, he said, he used to buy his wine in town, but then he began to wonder why he always felt bad. He had cramps in his stomach. These stopped soon after he began drinking his own produce. He stillwondered if that wine was what had given him kidney trouble.

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The first Sunday of September: the 'hunting' season is on us. All day there have been motor-cycles and cars outside the house. At dawn the woods began to reverberate with thuds and thumps, from various types of cartridge. At about noon they began to retire, with

hares, pheasants and rabbits hanging from their belts. Dino's brother got a hare soon after dawn. The first day's carnage is always the greatest---the animals aren't expecting you.

Dino described how a dog follows the pheasant's scent. The pheasant believes she is being followed by the eye, and thinks it enough to wriggle under leaves and bracken, and lie there quietly. But the dog stands stock still, close to thwhere she lies, waiting for the hunter's signal to leap forward; the pheasant flies up in panic and you shoot. This is the theory anyway. The hunters and their mongrels make such an unbelievable din that the pheasants are warned wèll in advance. Like Cyrano de Bergerac's nose, the hunter's noise precedes him by a quarter of an hour.

The season began unofficially last night. Just after we got to bed a scooter stopped outside the courtyard and we heard a hunter plod slowly past our bedroom window in his rubber boots. A few minutes later a shot rang out at the edge of the woods, followed by another. There was bright moonlight. Shooting at night is a grave offence. You may shoot after sunrise and before dusk. The penalty is the loss of your licence or even imprisonment. The road below is was being patrolled by keepers at the time. We wondered about this wild, lonely hunter, bent on his quarry in the moonlight. Drunk, perhaps. Or one of the keepers.

All evening there had been an atmosphere of zero

hour. In 'town' there were groups of rubber-booted warriors, youths were polishing their guns. There was a lot of talk about the carnage to take place the next day---hands being rubbed, conniving glances being exchanged. All false: sad, mean, underneath. Another little bit of rhetoric. Gianni, if we catch a hare in our headlights, shouts at once, 'Drive fast! Fast! Kill it!' An animal means by definition that which is to be killed. Smilingly the peasants say that Christ laid it down--- animals for us to eat, green things for animals to eat. Smilingly the priests had let this be known. That Christ never said any such thing is absolved by the smile.

The cabins in the woods will be used for shooting birds. When the first 'heavy' hunting has died down the men with slimmer rifles will plod up the path to their cabins, to sit hidden behind reeds. They will take cages of female blackbirds and thrushes with them. These will sing like heaven let loose. And male birds will be drawn ecstatically down to them, and will be shot.

Meat-eating in Italy has an obsessive side, due to centuries of miseria. Traditionally the peasant watched the landowner eat meat. He had an occasional rabbit ot chicken himself. Daily meat-eating is a symbol of the new prosperity. On the whole vegetarianism is thought stupendously iditotic and unthinkable. Pity for animals is largely absurd. Everyone refers to la povera bestia, meaning that some thought and charity are due to creatures

which lack souls. Wanton cruelty is ruled out. At the same time animals are not thought to suffer as men suffer. When they behave with more delicacy and decency than men, this is noticed and some confused philosophising takes place.

Killing animals is also in the nature of revenge. They are in the same world as the spirits of the woods, as devils and all dark things. Animals are close to the hellish regions. Part of the cleverness---and the real wisdom--of the Church was that it taught men to be so afraid of the dark, of solitude, of nature as to think of devoutness as a sound policy of survival. In a bedroom at night you shut the windows tight against the bad spirits. In a world like that you feel you need God. Flouting the Church meant exposing yourselves to these bad things that poured in from the 'inanimate' world of animals and growing things. The Church retained an extraordinary hold on the Italian mind until well on in the twentieth century by the expedient of perpetuating pagan attitudes.

The 'hunter' shoots into the dark region of his fears and disgusts. Sometimes he uses a sort of submachine gun, spraying bullets like a Chicago bandit, only with the amiable difference that he is playing.

And some people say that hunting is his only escape from a suffocating family life. He is shooting at his mother in law.

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Don Dino, our priest, brought along two ordinands from the English College in Rome. We sat on our balcony drinking tea, talking half in English and half in Italian. Don Dino cautiously leaves his tea---he isn't used to it, he says. Protestantism, tea and wholemeal bread mean a strange and violent world for him. We all laugh at the gingerly way he pushes the cup aside.

At noon he stood us up and said the angelus, reading from his prayer book. I noticed how much freer the English were. They really seem the children of protestantism, compared with him, though they are as 'Roman' as he is. They joke about some of the saints, with mild impatience, and actually seem to be thinking out their religion. Don Dino seems never to have thought in his life, only to have accepted and followed. You can see that their consciences are alive.

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After two bright, sparkling days---the first in September---the sky fills broodingly again. There were black clouds and alternate stuffy heat and freshness. During those first bright days you could feel the other weather coming, in a peculiar nervous expectation, like an electrical throbbing in your body. When the first massive clouds came the air went stock still, the pressure was enormous, with sudden shafts of burning and blinding sunlight. There was a brief storm and then

came a light autumnal rain of the sort you get in the mountains, making a mournful dripping from the leaves and a mist that drifts through the branches. People are irritable, eyeing the leaden-grey clouds. Sometimes the sky is swift, sometimes fixed sullenly.

Yet the heat hasn't gone, for all the rain. We decided to go to the sea but turned back at Volterra. There were low, misty clouds across the whole barren range of salt-hills east of the town. We found a tiny lake far below the road, with a hill sticking up at its side like a monstrous ant-heap, sheer on all sides. We sheltered from the rain in a peasant house and the onwer pointed out the abandoned houses all round: a fine palazzo surrounded by cypresses on the other side of the valley---abandoned, together with its tenant houses. Of about three hundred peasants who used to live in the area fewer than thirty remain. At one time the farm up the road had forty or fifty head of cattle, but now there were hardly more than three.

Suddenly, in the middle of the night, a fierce wind started up---doors and windows slammed, there was a booming noise down the chimney. The trees outside bent over. Branches flew off. The cracks in the windows whined. We rushed to take the geranium vases down from the balcony walls. It was quite dark---three or four o'clock. After twenty minutes it stopped so suddenly that we could hardly believe that it had taken place, and the night was still and warm again, with heavy clouds.

The pitter-patter of rain on the tiles is usual now. Sometimes it gives way to the thunder of hail. The lights are cut off.

We got a load of gunshot in our bedroom window this afternoon but luckily the shitters were closed. I rushed to the window and shouted down, 'Vagabondi! che fanno? vuoi ammazzarci?' etc. I realised they couldn't hear a thing as they were sitting on their motor cycles with the engines still on. There were three of them. They sat there like clowns out of Shakespeare. I dashed down to the road and pinned on one, a pale, surly-looking Pulcinello.

'Did you fire just then?'

'Fire? Fire?' He looked as if he didn't know what a gun was.

The other two looked more homely and I turned to them: 'Did you fire?'

Yes, they had fired and ---madonna la troia!---they had missed! The bird had got away! They knew it was wounded but it had limped away. They kicked through the bushes to within a foot of our bedroom window.

'Do you realise that you just now fired into our window?'

'What?' They gaped, their eyes still blazing from the excitement of the chase.

Then they came to. 'Impossible!' one of them said. 'I fired there!' And he pointed straight at the bedroom window.

'It made a hole this big,' I said, making a hole the size of a potato with my fingers.

'So you've taken this old house, have you?' the homely man asked. 'I've seen you in town.'

'I can't find it!' yelled the other one, kicking about in the macchia. 'I know I wounded it. A blackbird! Madonna cane!'

Then he calmed down. They turned their cycles round and with a cheerful good-evening rode off.

The hunting makes the woods seem gloomy and savage, especially with the iron clouds overhead. A peculiar clowning trio comes at dawn. They call out to each other dramatically through the trees while their dogs yap and squeal. When they bag something one of them makes a sort of high-pitched croon as if Harlequin had hit him over the head with a rubber truncheon. You expect mechanical tears to squirt out of his eyes. 'Woo-hoo-ooo-hoo-hoo!' he goes.

Gianni came back looking exhausted and pale after a week on the road. I asked him to return in the evening--- 'Come and tell us all about it, what you saw in Sicily, the people you met.' He looked puzzled by this, but he came dutifully. At once he plunged into a set recital that lasted an hour. It was a kind of school-résumé of provincial differences in the South. I suppose he thought that was what I wanted. When it was over I asked him, did he get enough exercise? Oh yes, he got enough exercise, unloading and then reloading the

truck every few hundred kilometres. And then there were the halts on the road.

Three or four minutes later he said that one of the troubles was, you didn't get enough exercise. You were leaning over a wheel all the time.

'And all that filth they serve up in the restaurants, especially the meat---the further south you go the worse it is. You wonder if it's not a dog or a cat you're eating. One of our drivers can't work any more---he's gone down with stomach trouble, his nerves are wrecked!' He then made a speech about youth. 'Youth today isn't satisfied with a piece of bread and a bar of chocolate on it as a treat like it used to be. We aren't so easily satisfied, not like our mothers and fathers!'

I asked him, supposing the government made a good deal for agriculture and increased daily-hire earnings to, say, three or four thousand lire, would he come back to the land? Yes, yes! He'd return gladly if he could make a decent living---as good as a factory-worker could have. The land would then represent a <u>future</u> for him, not something to fall back on when his luck was down.

I described the farms in Germany with their huge elm trees, the horses and tall wooden houses, the sense you got there, not only in the south, in Bavaria, but close to Hamburg as well, of a great thriving land-tradition which had got stronger through industries, not weaker. There were familes, I said, with ten or eleven

children. The young still worked the land, because it was a solid and even rich life.

'Ah yes!' he said. 'In Russia too! The peasants get a good deal there too!'

Russia means the land of happy peasant-owners, in Italy. Dino's father-in-law has Stalin's picture on his bedroom wall. It balances the madonnina over the bed--- it is the male dream that the Church failed to provide. In some houses it replaces the madonnina altogether.

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It is suddenly cold. The rain pours down steadily, with low grey skies and drifting mists. We need winter clothes, though it is only the first week in September. The hills beyond the valley, towards Siena, look barren and chill. In an hour's time it could be hot. A still, clear night can cloud over in a few minutes and a storm suddenly rise. The peasants say, 'One can't understand antyhing any more!', meaning the sky. Non si capisce niente!

There are said to have been floods in Trieste, snow along the Alto-Adige.

Italy gives way completely to the weather: interiors are bare, waiting for a shaft of sunlight to gild them. Sunlight is part of the Italian character, necessary wlike water. In the rain everything waits---the trees, the houses, people. It is dark and still all day, with the

slow rain. But people are mildly excited too, by the abnormality. At market yesterday there was an atmosphere of hilarity. The rain brings intimacy, and no work. The hired workers like Dino stay at home, and aren't paid. That brings a holiday feeling. He told me that last winter, because of the endless rain and cold, everybody ran up bills at the shops---they weren't earning. They 'planted nails', as the Italian calls debts---piantavano chiodi! Some, he added with his honest, wistful smile, were good enough to honour their bills when they were earning again, but others---took their custom elsewhere...

Angelo came down yesterday wrapped in a brown overcoat, with water dripping from his nose, and asked if we could take his mother into 'town'. We said yes, and we waited for her. But the rain began pouring down in a fantastic avalanche, and she didn't come. He told us that Gianni was in Sardinia, with another load of furniture. He probably meant Sicily. It was better this way, he said---with Gianni earning enough to pay for his own cigarettes and a suit of clothes now and then. He, Angelo, worked the land but there was never enough money to 'put aside.' Money still means savings in the peasant world, not spending material.

We call our latest pig Giacomo. Gino lets him out to roam the field below the road for perhaps an hour a day. At the end of this eventful life, in four or five months' time, he will have his throat cut, with five or six men leaning on him, and bleed to death, screaming.

But more and more they are substituting the slaughterer's pistol for this method.

Some snatches of quite strong sunlight today. But there is none of the usual September calm. The air is weak and damp. Mist drifts across the hills north of Siena. I walked down into the vineyard this morning and the grapes are still far behind. They should be a deep crimson colour now. The white ones should be yellow and plump, but they are all still pale. If there is really strong sunlight for the rest of September some wine might come out of it, about ten degrees of alcohol in strength, but otherwise it will be hopeless. Dino has found us some wine of thirteen and a half degrees which we can store for two or three years. On the whole peasants don't like matured wine. They say it's too 'flat', too heavy. They like the young wine which is still vivacious and sparkling. They are sceptical about our wine lasting as many as three years.

Gianni appeared briefly again, with a brand-new wristwatch. He has been to Calabria. He already talks about the 'old days' when we joked together, as if they were deep in the past. He looked matter of fact. He made no speeches. To keep himself awake for night-driving he'd drunk seventeen cups of coffee one day, he said. Since much of the coffee is ground barley, <u>orzo</u>, its stimulating effect is small. Their grain at home had been threshed the week before, he told us, and we'd missed their harvest supper. 'But it wouldn't have

been any good without me!' he added gaily.

The weather seems to be settling into winter, and winter clothes feel more and more comfortable, though it is not yet the third week in September. A certain grim nullity begins to settle on people, as if what charm they had, which was really very little, is going into hibernation. Only Dino keeps his bright smile. His whole face is a smile, always, not just his mouth.

Today Giacomo was so happy to be let out of his dungeon that he ran full tilt down the road towards Volterra and Gino had to chase after him. He then did the same across the field. He has a witty turn of mind. The other day he ran into the cattlehouse to inspect it, and when Gino chased him out he climbed up the steps to our entrance, sniffing madly. He got a kick in the side of the face for that, which made him squeal. Gino says he won't let him out again. He makes too much 'fuss'. So he must spend the rest of his short life in darkness, with just room to move round in. He can hardly support himself on his back legs as it is, through over-feeding and over-confinement.

We went to Lucca for the <u>festa</u> of the Santo Volto when crucifixes and banners and even tall altar-pieces are brought from churches all over the town's province--- from Pisa and Massa Carrara and Viareggio---to be drawn in procession. We arrived when the candles were already alight---hundreds of tiny tapers framing the windows and porches and arches and even rooftops, in a twinkling mass

that made the town look like the most exquisite wedding cake ever made. The traffic was barred, and waiting crowds with that special intimate Lucchese humour surged through the narrow streets. We parked the car on top of the immense wall that has preserved the town's intimacy for centuries, and will renew it when traffic is barred once and for all. The wonderful overladen shops and busy cafés glowed on either side. The theatre, a quiet, sedate, baroque building, looked like a miniature palace under its candlelight, standing behind a square that seemed made for cockaded soldiers to parade in. S. Michele had great flaming tapers behind its tiers of pillars and arches, so that it seemed to float and roll in flames with a strange and wild movement. We passed the little church of S. Frediano, humped and modest, lying under one-arc-lamp, neglected by the festa, watching humbly and a little gloweringly. The cafés were full. People were crowded at the windows and balconies. The baker shops were selling ring-shaped sweet loaves with currants in them. On the square before the cathedral there were stalls for doughnuts and toys and sweets. The procession was forming up in different parts of the town. The night was clear and warm, and we were in our summer clothes again. People were sweeping into the town from all the gates, hurrying.

Then the ordinary lights went out. We stood in front of one of the doughnut stalls, with the hot fat-smoke in our faces, and the owner unscrewed the electric bulb over our heads. The procession started. A band

struck up. The hum of voices grew louder. The crowds surged. There were children in arms, old men, staring young women, boys close together, priests. And the first toppling cross came slowly along, above people's heads, borne like a treasure, swaying slightly, high in the air, clasped in the arms of a single man, making him bend his knees with the effort, while two others stood close to relieve him of it every few yards. And this man made a strange slow dance with the cross in his arms, so that it turned in the air, the dead Christ seemed to jig, the crucifixion had become the victory, the joy. Christ seemed to bow and leap. He was black, jet-black, and shining, and they had draped a golden robe round his middle, with a tassle dangling down, so that he swayed and danced in the air with a strange ecstatic grief, clothed delicately and thoughtfully like a marvellous child. Then came banners and smaller crosses, and men in black cloaks with pointed hoods like monsters of the Klu Klux Klan, and thick candles held high above, on sticks, followed by a joyous farting band. And again there was a toppling Christ, this time with sprays of gold leaf pouring out from his arms in great tinkling globes as he swayed along, a shower of light in the darkness, the gold swathing his broken and patient body round with colour.

The procession swept along with one raucous band after another, clashing and echoing in the night. There were monks, priests, servers, youths dressed as

mediaeval soldiers with long hair that mad e their faces look real and dark and virile. And suddenly, as one of the last crosses passed, swaying above its bearer like a tower, there came a burst of light and smoke and shattering noise from one of the roofs as fireworks went up, making a silver blaze over the town like the eye of a great animal watching and flashing. And as each new cross passed people clapped and cheered. The crowd was thick and hot. Bells rang out. There was the wildness of faith, delicate and loud and joyful in harmonious contradiction, with masses of sound and colour and light, the kind of worshop that to its shame the Church put out, in safety-first.

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The rain has let up and again the hunters are out at dawn, prowling round the house like stage detectives and calling to their dogs. There is little game left, after the first day's massacre. Hardly a shot rings out.

We recognised one of the noisiest of the dawn marauders: the village carpenter, a thin, pale man. I got my desk from him, for very little. At the top of the hill we saw a little gathering of hunters in their usual gear, standing about military commanders. They reminded me of photographs of fascist officers from the last war, standing at the edge of woods before an attack.

The wet weather produces a certain surliness in them. The other day we were standing at Pescille talking to one of the families, about eight of us on the road, and a hunter passed on a scooter in his pantomime gear. He draw to a stop at our side and murmured with an unpleasantly abashed smile, 'The road is public, you know.' We smiled at him and said, 'There's enough room for you,' and he drove unsteadily on towards his kill.

The other day, in the gloomy weather, I drove over one of our pigeons, coming into the courtyard. The tyre must have pinioned one of her wings, drawn her under. Her mate flew quickly up, with an unusual rushing movement which I noticed inside the car without realising what I'd done. We got out and went upstairs, and only there, after a few minutes, when I happened to look out of the window casually, did I see the pigeon sunk into the mud, almost flat. The male was in the nest and I could see his rear feathers moving as he sat nervously over the young. I went down and scooped the creature up in a newspaper, for Gino to see. There wasn't a scratch on her body---I realised by her darker markings that she was the female. I climbed up to the nest and found the tiny, featherless squabs, sitting huddled together. I wasn't sure that the male would continue to look after them. I shall get him another female, but only after these young are reared. He would desert them if mated again too soon.

All the following morning he didn't appear. Gino said that almost certainly he was out finding food. And later I found him sitting placidly in the nest with the squabs under him. He didn't stir when I looked in.

It made feel gloomy and restless. Sometimes he appraoches the female of the other couple and the male walks firmly across his path, puffing his breast.

Dino took me to the local wine factory. In the entrance there were hundreds of fiaschi of red and white wine, lined up like painted soldiers. Further inside there were girls standing at a moving belt, looking tired and bored, with pale faces. It was towards the end of the day. A printed schedule on the wall gave closing time as six o'clock, but it was nearly seven. The employer can exact longer hours---'Let's just finish these bottles so that we can get them loaded'---because there are more women than jobs for them.

The girls were pasting red and golden labels on the fiaschi as they jerked past. There was a young man called 'the chemist'. The fiaschi emerged from a circulating platform, where they were filled mechanically from taps. Here an old man was sitting, thein and tight-faced, with sharp but strangely naked and lifeless eyes. Like the girls he was very pale. He leaned on a stick, as he took cleaned bottles of the belt and fixed them under the taps. I took him for a peasant but Dino said, 'The owner.'

The old man showed us round while the girls looked on listlessly, like condemned prisoners. There were thick hosepipes issuing from cement vats, and these supplied the taps.

'So clean!' the owner said proudly, and Dino echoed him: 'Clean, clean!'

The chemist's little office was pointed out. 'Here,' Dino whispered to me, 'is where they do the fixing.' I looked in and saw small bottles marked 'Pure Alcohol', 'Red Carbolic Acid', 'Sulphuric Acid.'

In the corridors between the tall cement vats there were sacks of pulverised citric and ascorbic acid, used to correct the low acid content of the wine and not harmful in themselves. I noticed that the hosepipe feeding the circular platform with wine didn't in fact come from the cement vats at all but passed through a wall to a half-hidden tank on the roof outside. I saw that access to this could only be reached through the owner's private quarters above. I asked was this hidden tank to 'cool' the wine before it went into the bottles? But the owner brushed the question aside vaguely---no, no it was only another tank, a sort of subsidiary tank, they were going to remove it soon (but it was new). I formed the idea that this was how the chemicals reached the wine, without any apparent presence of chemical substances in the factory itself. If an inspector came round all you would have to do is to disconnect the pipe and run it straight through the vats. The inspector would know

perfectly well what had gone on but he might not feel inclined to press the point.

When Dino said, out of earshot to the workers, 'Now show us how you make wine from water!', the old man smiled with a quick, gleeful, roguish expression and nodded, '_Si fa, si fa!_'---yes, yes, it's done, wine _is_ made from water! But today he couldn't show us how. On a Sunday. We must come on a Sunday. And he gave us a confidential glance. He seems to drink the stuff himself. He took down some of his own _vernaccia_ or white wine while we were there, gulping it greedily. I took a cautious sip and it tasted authentic. He told us that he produced over a thousand litres a day, and two truckloads a week went south, to Rome and Caserta. He sends big consignments abroad, as far as America. He showed us two gleaming machines for filtering the wine and said proudly, 'They cost six millions each.' The work of constructing the factory on 'modern' lines, out of barns, cost him sixty million lire. The firm was now worth twice that sum, about eighty thousand pounds.

'And you started as a peasant!' Dino said with his beaming warmth, 'Just think of that!'

'Yes,(the old rogue said, limping up the stairs like a character in Dickens, 'I'm worth a lot of money!'

Like the produce of most of the wine factories here the Chianti it sends out has nothing Chianti about it. Some of the wine used as a base comes from the Milan area---cheap vinegary stuff of about eight degrees

alcohol. The rest comes from Apulia, a thick, strong wine not pleasant to drink or expensive to buy. The two are mixed, and chemically adjusted so as to retain the right colour and acheive despite its misty origins some sparkling clarity. A small amount of citric acid will bleach a dark wine ~~xxx~~ into a bright Chianti glow, and other acids will secure it against going bad in the heat or suffering from long journeys. Another factory here gets its wine from the Romagna, a thirteen-degree wine of poor quality at the price of a ten-degree Chianti (though there is no natural way of getting a thirteen-degree wine out of the Romangna soil). This is mixed with Milanese slop, and adjusted. It all goes out as Chianti, and wise wine philosophers in foreign cities talk about that reliable Chianti seal on the bottle.

Mixing win sugar with wine to push up the alcohol value is still prohibited, but peasants are adopting it more and more as the weather fails. If the summers fail to provide the stifling, rainless conditions under which clusters of fat grapes thrive, it will be difficult to get more than ten or eleven degrees out of the wine round here. Too much water is ruinous. The wine-doctor in 'town' told me that in France sugaring had been allowed ever since the plentiful supplies of heavy Algerian wine had ceased, because in the old days this had been used to suuplment the low-degree home growths. He said that almost no wine locally could do without sugar, mixed at the fermentation stage.

As we were walking up the narrow mediaeval street at the side of the factory I asked Dino, 'Why dot hose girls stand for it---isn't there a trade union---Whydo they allow a man to poison people like themselves, all over the world? And aren't there inspectors?'

He smiled and took my arm in his erect way: 'There are inspectors, caro mio! There are laws---strict laws and strict inspectors! But the inspectors are badly paid. A little addition to their income each month is welcome, it helsp their children, it brightens their homes! And our old friend there knows how to keep people quiet, he knows the human weakness for money! So what use are strict laws?'

As for the girls, he added, they could talk if they wanted to, but they would lose their jobs. 'Why work for me then?' the old man would say. Besides, to whom would they talk? To an inspector?

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n The sky's daily habits have changed for the better but they are still uncanny. The air is balmy and warm, the best temperature for the grapes. But the clouds gather in the afternoon and a rainstorm breaks in the evening, suddenly. Then, after heavy masses of rain, there is a serene starry sky, with hardly a breeze, and the grilli echo hopefully across the vineyards again.

Even the clouds don't seem quite right when they come. I've never seen this light in Italy before. Italian rain has always been soft and drifting. I don't remember these separate, iron-dense, heaving clouds, day after day, producing a sunlight---when it breaks through---that belongs to the north, thin and sparkling and spacious. The Italian sun, north and south, always had a deeper quality---a stupendous glow close to the earth that pervaded and penetrated everything not with blinding cool shafts but an expanding, throbbing warmth. Even in Rome the sun is watery now, not at all the relentless Roman sun of August, that seemed to crack the stones, that turned the tarmac under your feet into a soft cushion.

At first light today the hunters began climbing into the woods with their dogs. In the immense stillness of dawn their voices sound dry and unenchanted. Sometimes the men here gaze before them like their own oxen.

I'm beginning to like Paolo the shepherd. He has fought hard for his life. He no longer seems to take us for puppets. He beamed at us today and cried out, 'It's been cold, hasn't it? Nearly winter last week!' Then he gazed at us qistfully with his shining red face and sharp nose. Now he's made money he feels he can afford to soften his heart, like <u>signori</u>, like foreigners.

We took Armida to her annual 'fair' above Castel

Vecchio. It looks straight across a wooded valley, itself a rim of clean, rolling fields. We strolled to the top of the high plateau. There was the usual chiasso of an Italian gathering, in the distance--- voices raised, bells, hooting horns, whistles, laughter. Ten years ago the fair was the big annual event for which people walked ten or twenty miles, and some of them came on horseback. Hundreds of horses were for sale, filling an immense field. There were calves, pigs, merry-go-rounds, roasting booths, plenty to drink. There were music and dancing, and the peasants wore their costumes. Men got drunk and sang at the top of their voices.

But all we found were four or five solitary booths selling sweets, toys, oddments like bootlaces and pocket knives. There was an air of self-conscious desolation. We looked for cattle, horses, sheep: nothing. Armida shrugged and laughed---'How things have changed!'

A few men sat drinking white wine at a wooden table in a perplexed, vacant way. People were ill-dressed, rubbish lay everywhere. There was one shy-looking woman in impeccable peasant costume, standing alone, not knowing what to do while her husband sat at a table drinking. She was like a figure wandered in from history, looking round and recognising nothing. Youths slouched about, gawping and heavy---they'd come for fun. We looked into the woods---nothing. Why had people come then? To buy a bag of sweets they could get in the shops ? The costumed woman's white cloak gleamed proudly. A shepherd had scrubbed himself and his two children so clean that

they looked polished. They were walking back home, the children clutching flimsy plastic pistols. But nobody minded. We laughed. Nothing is destroyed so fast and with so little regret as in Italy. They're used to it. Empires, regimes, societies have come and gone so often. 'Beter to stay at home ironing!' Armida said.

The Agnarelli family asked me to write a letter of thanks for them---to a lady in Switzerland who had sent them photographs. They naturally assume that I am less foreign to their own language than they are. Even their language isn't their possession. By being educated, I know more of its secrets, have more of a right to it. They look over my shoulder like foreigners as I write. Language is a very fluid matter in Italy. If the foreigner finds it difficult mastering the subjunctive, the average peasant has never tried. Italians who correct your grammar punctiliously always have an attitude of some kind---a mild self-conscious nationlism. They would like you to believe that a fixed and authentic national language exists, but it doesn't. It is coming into being through the newspapers and TV, but it means the end of Italy not a new start, for the simple reason that Italian life is regional or nothing at all. Italiam life is the expression of the practical requirements of the human creature, not of thoughts or ideal systems or power in more than a strictly personal sense. This is why the family has always been its most important, its only social unit.

This morning, Sunday, a convoy of cars, small trucks and scooters come and park themselves round us before first light. It is a military operation--- voices raised, dogs barking, rifles being cocked. They walk under our bedroom window talking as if it was full noon. Their voices in the early morning are dry, barren, dusty, unenchanted by a moment's enlightenment, that is, sense of deliberate individual choice. The enlightenment missed Italy. The Italian character thrived on its absense. That is, life remained grounded on the creature and not on principles. The enlightenment is coming through TV and foreign films, through cities where civility replaces intimacy. And the Italian character stumbles, cannot see the way.

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There has just been the rost flood in Italy since the war. A wave said to be a hundred metres high swept down the Piave from Lake Vaiont through villages, swept them away, uprooted trees. The whole Alpine area is silent and devastated, without a sign of life. Thousands of people were buried or drowned.

The papers say that in the seventy years after 1889 there were four great dam bursts in the world. In the last four years there have been seven.

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Gianni is off again, this time to Rome. We were away in Lucca when he called last. We talk about him together, wondering if he will get 'blunted'.

With the return of the warm weather there are thunderstorms again and sudden flashes of lightning. At Lucca, after a clear evening, a wind started up in the middle of the night---our familiar little 'tornado'---and died as suddenly as it had started.

The swifts were forming up on the wiresthis morning, for their migration. They were side by side along the two parallel wires as far as we could see, stretching far down into the valley, like hundreds of tiny soldiers. Then they flew off south in a dark fluttering mass, as if by a silent signal.

I went down into the vineyard and tasted the grapes. I tried Gianni's suggestion---biting them straight off the vine without touching them with my hands. They taste so fresh that they burn the throat. Every vine tastes different, and every part of each vine tastes different. Comparing the tastes, I found those on the higher ground were the best. An old man once told me that the best wine came from grapes grown in the pergola form. His wine, he said, would keep for four or five years without spoiling, and sometimes ten.

One of our vines, with white grapes, stands alone and has grown as tall as a fruit tree, supporting itself on a pear-tree at its side. The grapse are for eating, swollen and juicy.

Many of the bunches aren't ripe even now. Some of the vines are blighted and their grapes hang in shrivelled clusters, like dried raisins. This is partly due to excessive rain and partly due to Gino's failure to spray at the right time. The raindrops have 'boiled' in the leaves, and started a fatal mildew. Also the vines are 'hungry'. They haven't been given the usual manure---often human sewage from the farmhouse. This is taken out in great barrels on carts, and the whole area stinks for a day. But Gino has a distaste for uncovering our 'black well' as it is called.

It is suddenly normal early-autumn weather, with radiant, warm sunshine and a cool breeze. Everybody rubs their hands. These last few days will push the wine up to ten or eleven degrees at least. Much depends on the last fifteen days. The vineyard lies in its hot, still basin, glorying in it. The flies come back, as in July. I killed our second scorpion.

Gianni returned, looking thin and in some way liberated; also very serious. He drank a glass of wine with us and described the long journeys to Caserta and north to Bergamo, where it was very cold, he said.

'Tiring?' I asked.

'Not, not tiring at all! But---it's too much.'

He wants another kind of job. Far from being blunted, he seems frailer.

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The golden weather ceases, the sky darkens and then unloads such an unbelievable quantity of water that our well is full in a few minutes and a cascading river has formed down our rocky path again. It pours down relentlessly and everyone says, 'Now---now the wine's finished!'

But then the glowing weather takes over again, and holds for five or six splendid days that by being perfectly natural for Italy now seem an uncanny dream: something had on false pretences; a kind of escapism indulged by nature.

The escape is brief. It begins to rain again. An extraordinary darkness comes over the valley, like night in the middle of the afternoon. The gullies outside quickly form rivers once more. The wind howls. The road is a pool of mud. The rain comes gently at first, then more and more powerfully. And now the whole roof is thundering with its force, so powerful that the massive walls, which have stood the weather of five centuries, seem about to collapse at last.

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We help cut the grapes in the few hours when the sun appears. Gino has left the vendemmia as late as possible in the hope of putting on a few more points in the alcoholic content, but now there is a rush to get it all in before they start to rot. The wasps cluster round the heavy bunches---a sign that they are sugary enough to cut. Like everyone els e we bite off a few

grapes while we work. We hurl the bunches into narrow-mouthed wooden bigonci which are easy to haul on to the cart. We mash the bunches down with thick sticks stained a deep red, until most of the grapes have loosened from the stems and begun the work of fermentation. A few of the vines have vivid red leaves---the grapes from these are used to stain the wine a good colour, and have little strength. They spread over the hands like blood. The bigonci stand at the end of the file waiting for Gino to come round with the oxen, then they are loaded and roped round. He digs into the bigonci with hishands, squeezing the jouice out of the grapes. One of the delights is to lick your hands when you havedone this. Up in the courtyard he tips it all into great wooden vats where the 'boiling' will take place. The cutting takes two or three days, with all his family working, and with some help from Paolo's the shepherd's family too. Paolo's old mother talks to herself as she cuts the bunches down with a short kitchen knife. She has an unceasing incomprehensible dirge about the sadness of everlasting work, and the ease of the landlords. But as she pays no rent for the house she lives in, and her son will soon be a prosperous butcher she has less to croon about than most, and the dirge sounds weak, a fact which she seems to know. The peasants can't quite believe yet that their new riches won't be snatched from them. At the same time as agriculture collapses, and industrial conditions improve, there is more land available for cultivation, and there-

fore cheaper rents. As the cities grow, the need for food grows, and the farmer's opportunities grow. The old kind of farming is collapsing, a new one is taking its place not based on the family-unit, and these are the growing pains. The countryside is emptying itself of intimacy, to become a basically industrial concern as it is in most other countries. It is a wrench for the heart in a country which has virtually no society ready outside the family-unit. The almost total destruction of the Church as an active social force by the last war makes the wrnech all the more dramatic, since the Church was the ever-present protector and solace of family life.

The vat in the dark cellar gets fuller and fuller. Little midges hover round the twigs at the surface in thousands. Gino climbs up on an improvised ladder and pushes the stems down with a stick, to stop the wine going vinegary. First the wine will 'boil' or ferment in this vat for two or three weeks, then it will go into barrels minus its debris of stems and grape-skins. A glass tube will be cemented at the top of each barrel so that the wine when it swells periodically in the fermentation will rise into it and release its gas without reaching the air itself. Over the glass tube a cover will be placed, floating in water, so that the escaping gas lifts it gently and sends up a bubble up, with a great satisfying <u>bullop</u>!

Gino uses no sugar. He reckons the wine---swilling the first sweet mixture through his teeth---at about ten degrees. A 'small' wine that will not last the next

summer's heat through without a small admixture of citric and ascorbic acid, about a teaspoonful to a demijohn of fifty litres. In previous years Gino has had eleven and twelve degrees with no trouble. His quantity too is much down this year. Of course a ten-degree wine will fetch less money.

When we first saw the cellar it was during a normal summer. It offered a relief to the throbbing heat outside; the walls shone mellow from the blinding sunlight that emerged from a tiny window with olive branches in it to keep out insects. It was as dry as a bone. Now damp is climbing up the walls, the floor is sodden. A damp cellar is bad for the wine in fermentation.

Dino is moving house. He showed us their bedroom just before removing its furniture. There was one large bed for himself and Armida, and a smaller one at its side for their son Silvano, who is over thirty. Families sleep together partly for safety. There is still fear of the dark, of loneliness. If Armida and Dino stay talking with us in our kitchen after dark Sivano calls to them from down the lane: '<u>Mamma</u>! <u>Babbo</u>! <u>Vieni</u>!' Dino smiles and says, 'He's afraid', but it is accepted, not felt as an unmasculine quality, simply recognition of the dark facts of life.

If Dino's move was simply to another farmhouse he would use a cart and a couple of oxen, in the old way. But this is a move into a new world. It requires a truck. Something is arranged with a friend. The

truck arrives and the loading begins: beds, wardrobes--- peasants do with few stick s of furniture. No carpets, no lamps, no settees. They will sell their dresser, and a table. They leave the house dark and silent, given over to the mice. Waiting for them in the new kitchen is a refridgerator in a great polythene envelope, a red plastic table surrounded by plastic-seated chairss, also with their polythene protectors, and a kitchen dreseer to match. And these will soon be followed by the TV set.

The little plot of land that served Dino for a vegetable patch will be used by Bepe, the oldest man at Pescille, who still has the blue, wondering eyes of a child and a bright bronzed face. He has no children and seems to listen for their arrival on the breeze, leaning against his spade.

Foschero and Piera, the young couple with two children, are preparing to go too. We heard it this morning. Foschero has found a job as a labourer working by the day, on the other side of 'town'. They too have found a flat, grander than Dino's, with marble everywhere.

Up the hill, of the three houses in the woods, only one will be occupied, that of Gianni's family. Paolo the shepherd is leaving in the winter. We passed his new gleaming butcher's shop, just inside the Etruscan gate. He was standing inside by the cash desk looking shy. His house will be abandoned, on its cool plateau. The owner, who lives far away, thinks it too isolated

to attract a new tenant. It stands at the edge of the woods like a miniature mediaeval castello, its old bricks glowing. Rocks appear in the fields round it. The air is pure and chill. In the hunting season it involuntarily becomes a lodge for the hunters. They sit in the courtyard, ask for water. Their shots echo deep into the woods. There the sun goes down later. In the old days, when three large families occupied it, the house must have looked like a thriving townlet, its walls glittering in the sun. Its position, once a refuge from the terrific baking heat of the valley, is now a disadvantage. The wine no longer achieves more than eight or nine degrees of alcohol. The frosts are sevrere. The wind is chill even in the dog days. The woods are dark and dank, with the iron clouds drawn to them, whereas in the old days they were the source of pleasant cool piney breezes that drfited across the courtyard, bringing health that was impossible below in the sweltering basin of Pescille. Paolo said, 'We shall miss the air up there, but nothing else!'

As for the white house just up the hill, that too will be empty soon. The grown-up daughter is to marry. She will no longer watch Gianni taking a short cut across her courtyard with its polished boulders, no longer say something gently moral to him, with the faint suggestion that if he changed his life he might get her in marriage instead of the bronzed six-footer with no mind whom she had her eye on.

We have our eye on her house for next year. It is as clean as a bone, and dry, and the rooms have been kept neat. The landlord is willing. So one day we shall get Dino's oxen out and load our sticks on his cart and trudge behind them up the rocky path with its numberless bleached fossils. The house was a monastery once, they say---at least five hundred years ago. The local Augustinians used it for the summer months, and called it 'the hermitage'. The quiet is abolsute up there. The Volterra road is hidden to it by trees. On the other side of its courtyard lie the woods, twenty kilometres deep.

Then we shall look down on all the abandoned houses below. Psecille will have two old couples who mean to move to town when they can. The Agnarelli will be gone by the winter. Guido will move to the house which until now has been ours, but the peasant rooms will be his---where the water cascades down the chimney. He will stick it out for a year, he says, while his son is in the army, then he too will move to 'town'. A pension is due to him, for some service in the army long ago.

Dino's house is already closed up, with mice scuttling about inside. Its garden is a seas of mud. Next year there will be no children's voices echoing across the valley.

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We put Gianni on to someone who found him a job in

Germany. He had to sign a form that he was competent as a carpenter. He told us he had once worked at a hardboard factory; but he would have signed it anyway. The Italian is naturally competent for almost anything you like to put him to.

Gianni settled down in Germany at once. He found the work easy. What the German called a hard day's work he found less than a light day on the farm. 'Work' in the bad sense means getting dirty, slopping about in wet cow-dung, fetching pig swill. Clean ordered work can be done more or less indefinitely. The Italian is always in crisis, personally---always at the frontier, with the problem of survival before him. He keeps a graps on the basic necessäties. However rich he becomes he almost never loses his gift for primitive improvisation. It is a knowledge of basic survival passed on from generation to generation, through one invasion after another. The skills die out but the practical flair reamins. This would keep a semblance of Italy going though the heart had died.

Gianni stayed in Ger,any three or four years, coming back for a Christmas or a summer holiday. He looked paler, with less hair on his head each time. He began to complain about the food up there---too much pork. He began not to feel well.

Like most of the other two million Italian workers in Germany and Switzerland he was saving most of his

earnings. This is the sacrificio nearly every Italian makes at some time in his life.

And then, after four years, he came back and swore he had finished. In a few months he had bought a farm with three hectares ofland, together with a small car. They were now established. No more of the rocky path up the hill, freewheeling down it on the scooter to save petrol. He was now a 'prince', the peasants said. Their head-shaking about him was forgotten. It had turned out that a little imagination wasn't such a diaadvantage after all. He was a clever one---yes, they had to admit that! Always had been clever, painted little madonnass as a child! And now he had returned home like a prince, and set his family up--- the poorest family in the district. Not that they talked about him much. They just acknowledge the new facts and forgot. After all, he had worked for himself, hadn't he, not for them? Well, egotism was expected of every man. You don't talk admiringly for long about a man with sufficient common egotism to line his pockets. He had simply become authentic. And they paid him the respect due to that.

When he bought the farmhouse he took me aside and said in a whisper, 'There are two and a half hectares of land, but if anybody asks you how much I've got tell them three or four. And if they ask the price tell them five million' (he paid half).

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A Sicilian family---refugees from Sicily's devastating earthquakes and floods---took over Gianni's house. They let their pigs roam down through the woods, to the other farms, a most un-Tuscan procedding. They say that the farm has gone right down, that the vines are worth nothing now.

Paolo the sheperd became a butcher for a year, and got fat and pale from standing about the shop. Sometimes he took a hand at the cash desk, but it wasn't his life. Suddenly he bought a small holding close to the 'town' for a few million lire and let the shop to someone else. Within a few months his eyes were sparkling again, his face was urddy and sharp as before. He worked the land for wine and oil and grain, but never touched sheep again. About the name<u>pastore</u> or sheperd, there hangs the lowest social implications. It means dirt, illiteracy, holl-w-eyed staring into space for days and weeks while the sheep munch. The idea is that you quickly make your money out of your flock---and much can be made on the <u>peccorino</u> cheese alone---and then sell out. The association of the shepherd's life with innocence is a bad one in a world where innocence means stupidity.

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The summer after Gianni left there was an earth

tremor---quite usual in this district. People ran out of their homes at Pescille. We slept through it, while they dozed the night through in the fields, thinking we were away. Next afternoon it happended again. The house shook, the doors rattled violently as if somebody was pulling at the handles, a thunder grew under the floors, the walls seemed to separate a fraction of an inch from the rafters overhead, and then it died away, leaving us staring at each other in a quite animal terror which until then we hadn't known was in us.

This was during the three-weeks heat. 'Three-weeks heat' had become normal now, from about the middle of June to the first wekk of July. Apart from that the pattern was as before---with more or less stretches of the 'old' weather. People began to talk of the 'old' spring---the nimble air that made you feel good through and through and which the children of today may never know.

The Corpus Domini procession at the beginning of June is nearly always under a big watery sky now, with chill breezes coming down the narrow, stone-walled streets. Delight has left the Italian sky.

In the autumn one year a wind started up, trees bent over as usual, a firce torrential rain was released from the sky, windows were shattered, the little Elsa river swelled up, it swept away the stout brick bridge over it, tore the masonry down like matchwood, and the road lay collapsed in its swirling currents. One river

flooded another until the Arno burst its banks and all Florence lay under water. Her flood became famous all over the world. At Grossetto it was as bad, and took more lives. It was the high peak of a process that had been going on year after year, in miniature tornadoes and frosts and floods and fierce magnetic storms that hovered in the sky and proliferated for hours on end. The sea raged.

Dino and Armida and Silvano felt snug in their new flat. The sky could do its worst, they weren't in the country any more. The make-believe of cities had scooped them in, served with television. The rain thundered on the roof two floors above. The wood-stove in the kitchen was lit. There was no work while the water flooded down. Every evening they sat and watched a new world unfold on the little box. The barns and cattlesheds of Pescille were empty. The thundering rain, the sudden blinding lightning even in winter, the unexpected rivers down rocky paths, made 'town' a good place to be.