

## San Pasquale

We were now towards the beginning of June when the wheat started to be taken in. Don Alfonso, like some medieval grandee, was to pay the estates his yearly visit. The whole family, including Caterina, removed to *San Pasquale della Rocca*, a village some thirty miles to the south of Palermo. It was one hell of a time to move into the country. Paolo cursed roundly. He suffered from hay fever and sneezed almost without cease the whole time we were there, turning his nose red and raw. The fine dust rose in clouds and got into his eyes.

*San Pasquale della Rocca* was a sizeable village standing on a low plateau. Gnarled carob trees, lying low against the wind, grew in the clefts in the rocks and among the boulders. Below the rocks, spread miles and miles of rolling land, a yellow carpet of wheat and dark patches of orange groves. In one of the sheltered rolls of land, with the sun gleaming on the brass ball of the church steeple, lay the village of *Santa Crispina della Valle*. It was distanced from the plateau by some three miles and one

of those ancestral hatreds whose roots were lost in the generations. It was an awe-inspiring sight. Not for the first time, I was struck by the beauty of that land.

*San Pasquale* had grown in coils around the church, heavy baroque, with steps cascading like the folds of a gown. The houses were low and solid, built of reddish stone cut in all sizes and plastered and whitewashed to a blinding glare. *Don Alfonso's* family owned the biggest of the half dozen houses of a more distinguished cut which crowded next to the church and formed a horseshoe round the square. The other houses belonged to the *podestà*, the apothecary, the parish priest, and to an old notary who came up on occasion from Palermo to clear any business that piled up during his absence.

On the first evening we were there, Paolo and I took a walk around the place. People had brought chairs outside their doors to catch the evening cool. The men touched their caps and the children stopped their games to stare.

Near the *piazzetta*, we were accosted by a lanky individual who, with an air of shining up to Paolo, asked after *Don Alfonso* and solicited us to give him his deepest *omaggi*. Paolo was very short with the fellow. Even after the man left, I could still see the grim displeasure on his face. That spindle-man had left him with a bad taste in the mouth. I asked him who he was.

Paolo gave me a strange look. It was the first time I'd seen the boy this grave. There wasn't the tiniest speck of fun left in his eyes. For an answer, he motioned with his

hand into the distance. From where we stood, we could see beyond the low houses to the spread of yellow fields below.

‘The land,’ he said, by way of explanation, ‘land is all that matters here. Each man that has it will shed every drop of his blood before he’d give an inch of it away. And any man who doesn’t have land covets it above all else. Above life even. For land passes down to your children, with you remembered as a link in the chain that mustn’t ever be broken, and that makes you immortal.’ A telling pause. ‘And if, for whatever reason, you’re the cause for the chain to cease, your name is cursed forever.’ Didn’t I know what he meant! Back in Mdina, I’d known generation-old feuds over a piece of land not big enough to bury a man in.

‘All that land belongs to a handful of men,’ Paolo continued. ‘How it must gnaw a hole in the heart to get so little return for the sweat you put into fattening another man’s pocket!’

A child of around three sat on the threshold of one of the houses, looking at us with black, round eyes. He had nothing on except an undervest which came down to his navel. He got up, clutched his tiny shooter from under his pot belly, and peed against the wall.

Paolo continued with his story. He told of how that part of the land is studded with villages like *San Pasquale* and *Santa Crispina*, where the people carry a reputation of being bloody-minded to the point of daftness. Trouble

was always flaring up in those parts, only to be quickly smothered like a smouldering fire.

About fifteen years back, there'd been another spate of protests and marches. But that time it was different in that the workers had found a leader, a man from *Santa Crispina*, a cane weaver by trade and a *bracciante* by necessity. This man brought together the aspirations of all the others who shared his plight and gave them a shape. He moved tirelessly from village to village, sowing unrest in his wake: a latter-day Wat Tyler. The villagers even organized their own militia, a handful of grim-faced men, each touting a *lupara*, tasked with protecting the people's champion from the many mortal dangers to which he was exposed.

There was one difficulty, however. Patrizio, as the man was called, was no talker. He stammered and chewed on his words. Like Moses, he needed a voice, and he'd found it in that tall man we'd talked to by the square. He was a good talker, all right, and, what with his talk and the force that came out of Patrizio, the whole thing swelled bigger and bigger until it had to burst.

It's like that over there, where the sun bakes your brain dust-dry in summer, and where you freeze to death in winter. Hate, like an adder, can lie torpid for years, until the blood starts throbbing and the poison has to gush out. Workers were refusing to take in the grain and cows were left un milked. Then a couple of barns shot up in flames and shotguns went off in the dark.

The gentry met behind closed shutters, cursed roundly, and put their heads together. Many credited *Don Alfonso* with coming up with the solution. *Il barone di Traio* had died in senility and neglect in his crumbling palazzo which lay just beyond the village. No one came forward to claim the land. The Baron had indeed been the last of the mad Traios. The remaining land, no more than a few acres, was to be put up for public auction.

Through intermediaries, as these things are properly done, Patrizio and his acolyte were given to understand that should they put in a bid for the land, however modest, it would be most favourably considered. The gentry applauded the idea, after all it wasn't *their* land they were giving away. The *braccianti* shook their heads at the scheme hatched with the cunning of Satan. Land thirst was to be quenched by land. They knew their cause had been lost yet one more time.

Patrizio, upright and steadfast, raged like a bull when he got to know of the obscene offer. But he was a bull tied to the slaughter-post. A few days later, his body, stabbed with a hundred wounds like a Caesar's, was found among the rocks. It was his trusted companion, his Judas, who'd lured him away from his minders and delivered him into the hands of his enemies, and who moved into the Palazzo of the mad baron. He was feared and hated by all: a police informer, a lackey, a maggot that fattened on corpses.

Paolo carried his black cloud around all day.

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*San Pasquale* was right out in the sticks. After the scenic effect started wearing off, I found time hanging heavily on my hands. There was one thing to be said for the arrangement, however. It gave me more time with Margherita. The girl was noticeably more open, warmer even, as if being in the country had taken some load off her spirit. We went for long walks among the boulders, which brought to mind other walks in other places. Maurizio made a reluctant third. How that boy hated walking! Not only did he carry too much weight, but he was also flatfooted. Again, I wondered how he put up with all the marching his troop was put through. Must've been the draw of the uniform.

After I complained how tedious days had become, Paolo agreed to take me to see a spot of work being done. Early one morning, he came into my room and kneaded and pummelled me till I pulled myself out of sleep. I cursed roundly for it was still next to pitch dark.

'I thought you'd like to see Salvatore pick the labourers,' he said.

Salvatore was the overseer: an evil-looking bison, with rotten teeth and a week's growth of beard. We strode to the *piazzetta*. *Don Alfonso* had his regular troop of tenants, but when work piled up, extra help was called in. On such days, Salvatore picked as many *braccianti* as he saw fit. *Braccianti* were workers who hired out for the

day, men who depended on the whims of the land and the bosses.

There were about two dozen of them, standing in knots by the church steps. When they saw us coming, they stopped talking and came together into a rough line. Some wore caps, and a few had a short cloak wrapped round the shoulders against the evil night air. They came in all ages. Their faces were rigidly blank, their eyes looking somewhere beyond Salvatore's shoulder. You don't give a man a chance to look into your soul when you're asking him for a day's work.

That louse-bitten skunk loved the power he held over those poor bastards. He walked up the line, taking his time and looking each man fully in the face. At intervals, he put out his hand and touched a worker on the shoulder. He passed over a man with the shoulders of a Hercules, only to pick the next in line, a runt past the fifty mark.

The chosen dozen stepped after Salvatore. The rejected, their faces impassive as Indios, turned away and dropped back into knots, waiting for the next offer to turn up.

Salvatore turned to Paolo and, in a voice that boomed across the square, said: 'Here we are, *signore*. All good men worthy of your father's trust. All family men, too wise to get mixed up in things they don't understand.'

I got the story out of Paolo later in the day. During the land troubles, the giant whom Salvatore had rejected had held off a whole army with pitchfork and *lupara*. The

siege had dragged on for four days and three nights. The unmilked cows lowed in pain until people couldn't sleep at night. Then, on the fourth night, when he couldn't take it any longer, the man ran off into the darkness, leaving the barn unguarded. That had been over fifteen years before, but in Sicily that's as good as yesterday.

The feast of *San Pasquale*, the patron saint, came as a welcome break in the days which had otherwise become as indistinguishable as sausages on a string. It was also at this time that the Englishman drove up to the village with a letter of introduction to the *podestà*.

Such individuals were a common sight in Italy. Armed with a Baedeker, they were eyed with good-natured amusement as they came to visit the art treasures and to have a closer look at Fascism which, for some reason, drew the eggheads like jam draws the wasps. No city was free of them. Filled with wonderment, they clambered doggedly over all the monuments, and trudged through the museums in the stifling summer heat.

Small and indefatigable, the man had poked his pointed English nose into every corner of the place in one afternoon. He shot rolls of pictures with an old Brownie and gathered the sweat under his arms in spreading stains.

He spoke a beautiful Oxford Italian. When he learnt that I spoke English, he reverted to his closed vowels with relief. It took the strain off his jaws. He was a housemaster in one of the posh schools back home. He



said he was soaking up atmosphere. It seemed that D.H. Lawrence had lived in Sicily for a time. I moored in my cheeks, hoping I didn't look too dumb. All I knew about Lawrence was that he wrote smutty books about widows and horses.

The Englishman had also been to Rome and had an autographed picture of the *Duce* to show for it. That man was really star-struck by all he'd seen and was thinking of writing a book about it. He'd met his Messiah and wanted to pass on to others what his bouncing, restless body couldn't contain. To all those interested in the circumstances attendant upon the first appearance of great men in the world, he wished to communicate that, at the same hour at which the *Duce* saw the light of day, that's to say at two o'clock in the afternoon, a thunderbolt had struck the two-headed eagle which stood on the gloriette in the park of Schönbrunn in Vienna and broke off one of the heads straight into the lake.

For some reason, the man's eager naivety put Paolo's back up. He set to goad him like a fly on a donkey's rump. At the first few skirmishes, the Englishman went red in the face but kept his peace. Then he decided to ignore Paolo's remarks, painful though he found them.

He was in ecstasy over the disciplined way things were being run. And that's what that housemaster really loved, he and all the others who came to gape. They saw a man and a system strong-armed enough to bring about what they only dreamt about in their philosophy.

This was a revival of the real aristocracy, the reign of the superman over the rabble and their demoralizing bleating for democracy. Democracy was the levelling down to the mediocre.

Paolo retorted that what the man was witnessing was a typical 'Italian solution', the old Wellingtonian gambit of joining those you cannot beat. But all with the utmost *garbo*, of course. The Englishman said that it was deplorable to run down a man who expressed the real aspirations of his countrymen. Paolo gave him his wicked smile and told him the joke that was doing the rounds at the time.

A *gerarca*, a big shot from the Party's hierarchy, was visiting a factory and was told that one third of the workers were Christian Democrats, another third communists and the rest socialists. 'What, no Fascists?' thundered the *gerarca*. The manager hastened to reassure him, 'But *naturalmente*, Your Honour. All Fascists, Your Honour, right down to the last man.'

The Englishman shook his head indulgently. That, he assured us, was an opinion shared by no true Italian, the Italian who is, of all humanity, among the quickest-witted and the most intelligent. Paolo shrugged in despair and turned away. All his interest in the man had suddenly turned tomb-cold.

*L'inglese* was among the guests invited by *Don Alfonso* on Sunday to watch the procession of *San Pasquale* from the balcony overlooking the *piazzetta*. A heavy, red

damask carpet, adorned with paper rosettes along the edges, dropped from the balcony.

Caterina surpassed herself. The guests, seated on straight-backed chairs and touching knees in the narrow balcony, were served biscuits and anisette in liqueur glasses. This was followed by ice-cream crowned with cherries, amid exclamations of surprise and appreciation.

Thus refreshed, the guests turned to the spectacle below. The villagers, with the men in dazzling white shirts, and the women displaying all their gold trinkets, crowded the church parvis and spilled down the steps into the *piazzetta*.

There was a sudden movement and indistinct shouts. *San Pasquale* was at the door. The band struck up and moved into rough ranks behind the two pennants: one blue for the village band club, and one black for the village *fascio*. Across the square, someone lit a string of fireworks which spattered and crackled irresolutely and filled the whole place with heavy smoke and the smell of cordite.

The band was followed by the parish priest, hot and sweaty under his heavy vestments, with two acolytes holding up the hem. Then came *San Pasquale* carried shoulder-high: a man-sized statue carved out of olive wood and painted in hideous colours.

All eyes followed the swaying saint. I was standing behind Margherita. That afternoon, she was wearing a dress of light lilac which brought out the beauty of her

grey eyes. As I leaned forward to look at the crowd below, I cupped my hand over hers as it rested on the stone edge of the balcony. She didn't draw back and I could feel the warmth of her hand under mine. My heart tripped over itself, exploding like a grenade and sending shock waves down my groin. I gave her hand a squeeze. Feeling jumpy, I glanced over my shoulder. Maurizio sat on one of the chairs, languidly licking his ice-cream spoon and watching me with the narrow eyes of a basking tiger.

After that, things moved at a livelier pace between me and Margherita, for I'm not one to keep back once I catch sight of the spoor. Oh, I can see the heads shaking in disapprobation. Seducing the daughter of the house while I was a guest under the same roof strikes me off the roll of chivalry, a dastardly act unbecoming a gentleman, but then I've never claimed to be a gentleman.

Such codes of conduct have always left me stonecold – the rules of the rich and the beautiful to keep lesser hands off what they've got. 'Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife' on pain of damnation and being called a cad. *They* have no qualms at chipping the tablets and adding on addenda when it suits *them*. Evil is what your neighbour does. But when you've been born with your chips down, you learn to grab your chances wherever you find them. If I've come this far it hasn't been by sticking to the Queensberry Rules. You strike first, and when the other fellow's down, you kick twice

as hard. Every man for himself, and the devil takes the hindmost, I always say.

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About three days after the feast, the first rumbles of trouble rolled over the plains. It was the usual demand for a bigger cut of the harvest. That year had been one of Joseph's years of plenty.

The effect was immediate. You wouldn't have caught anyone talking about it, but people went about with their head low over their shoulders like they were waiting for the bang after the fuse is lit.

One morning, we woke up to find the whole place plastered with bills: blood-red with stripes of yellow, as flashy as a *corrida*. They showed a farm labourer, spread-eagled in the mud, about to be crushed by a gigantic black boot. One word was written in letters of blood: *LIBERTÀ*.

Without further ado, the *podestà* called in the Blackshirts. These were select, young janissaries culled from the youth sections of the Party, sporting the *fascio* on their black *fezzes*. They drove in on army trucks, chanting party songs and carrying banners with axes and eagles embroidered in silver.

The village walled itself up like a medieval hamlet at the sound of leper bells. Only the men ventured forth in

the morning to go to work. People no longer came out to catch the evening cool, and the shutters were put up in the windows, turning the houses into kilns.

The score or so of Blackshirts lounged about the square, talking noisily and horsing about as would any number of young bloods with nothing to do the whole day long. A couple of boys were billeted on *Don Alfonso*. They were put up in one of the rooms at the back of the house. Caterina was at them the moment they crossed the threshold, clacking disapproval at their boots and hissing at their boorish table manners. Which was unfair on the two young cocks, for they were as clean as a lord's butler. The way the old girl hounded them, the very bread turned into putty in their mouths. No wonder they stuck out of doors the best part of the day.

Then a black car drove up to the village. It was the *ras* come to direct operations. I was struck by the word first time I heard it for we have it in Maltese where it means head. Paolo said that that was exactly what it was supposed to mean: head or chief, a souvenir from the African colonies. The *ras* were old party members, feared and powerful, running whole districts with a free hand often beyond the heavy shadow of Rome.

The driver got out first. He was about my own height without an ounce of fat on him. I'd met his type before; long, stringy muscles and as tough as a cart mule. He sported a pair of protruding, pointed ears which, what

with his long face and fez cap, gave him the look of a football trophy.

I waited expectantly for the *ras*, and out stepped a man about five feet three with a barrel chest and thinning hair. You can meet his type a thousand times over at the gate of any shipyard or at roadside cafés where truckers gather. Short and powerful, with thick fingers and broken nails, he was also the hairiest individual I'd ever come across. The hair on his chest came out of his shirt and stopped where the black line of his ill-shaven beard started. Tufts of curly hair adorned his cheek-bones. This was the *Ras*, the man who was to claim my allegiance for years to come.

Things tightened up at once. The tall Lieutenant, the *Ras's* driver, took the Blackshirts in hand and put an immediate stop to their tomfoolery. He carried the fanciful Renaissance name of Attilio Del Turco. The village held its breath.

Paolo and I walked the empty streets with the Englishman in tow. That was all right with me, for I didn't mind his prattle. Paolo had borrowed a trick from his old man and looked right through him. I often found myself in the odd position of having to walk between the two of them, talking English on one side and Italian on the other.

Two evenings after the *Ras* drove up, Paolo, the Englishman and I walked across the *piazzetta* and started

down the incline, passing the poorer houses on the way. The sun was about to dip below the distant hills, and the sky and the plains below were ablaze with a furnace glow relieved by lagoons of ocean blue. Even the Englishman shut up pronto at the awesome sight.

Then, over the quiet, came the screaming of women's voices and the coarser shouts of men. The cries chilled me right down to the roots of my scrotum. The next moment, I was running with the others down to the houses where the din was coming from.

We rounded the corner and bumped straight into the tall Lieutenant and three of his Blackshirts. It was one of those moments surcharged with animal vibes. They moved in half turns on the balls of their feet, eyes wide and muscles pounding blood. They would've lit into us without a moment's hesitation if we'd made one move they didn't like. But we didn't. We froze.

I stared over the heads of the Blackshirts who closed ranks as if to keep us from seeing what was going on beyond. The house cut off what daylight remained and it was darker on that side. But the door was half open and light streamed over the threshold and into the alley.

A black circle of agitated bodies swirled and moved as fists and boots pounded at something in their midst. A panting growl rose from the group of men. Then the circle parted for a moment, and I caught sight of the body of a man on the ground. He was past defending himself. He wasn't even trying to cover his head. His face was



gashed and bloody like some hideously painted crucifix in a village church. My stomach kicked as I recognized the Hercules I'd seen a few days earlier in the square waiting to be called to work. The man's womenfolk were inside the house, shrieking the high cry of the women of the south. The man had stepped outside to meet his foe.

The pounding stopped and the circle stepped back. For the first time, I became aware of myself. I was panting deeply, heart thumping and fists clenched. Paolo had turned his face away, but the Englishman was staring at the scene, still as a waxwork. His face had gone the colour of bile, and I expected him to puke at any moment. But he didn't. I looked around for the *Ras* but he was nowhere to be seen. Slinking against the wall of a neighbouring house, keeping in the shadows like some alley cat, I saw the spindle-man, the carrion eater.

Then, as if our feet had been weighted with lead, we all turned away from the sprawling figure and moved slowly away – ever so slowly, with the noiseless steps of dreams. The streaming light from the house was cut off. The women had come out to claim what pulp was left of their man. I shivered. The sky had gone slate black and the cold sweat made my shirt cling to my back.

As likely as not, that man had nothing to do with the present trouble. He'd been picked as the desert scapegoat – to keep the others in check.

Early the next morning, the *Ras* left in his car, and the Blackshirts followed shortly afterwards in their trucks.

Paolo and I were the first to come down for breakfast. We didn't exchange half a dozen words all through the meal. I thought it'd be interesting to see how the Englishman had taken to this, his first encounter with the bloody reality of his theories

I didn't have long to wait. When we went outside, we could see him prancing about with his camera among the carob trees. What we'd seen the night before had been too big to pretend it hadn't happened. But the Englishman had recovered all his jauntiness. Later, I was to hear the words repeated so many times that it took away my taste for eggs, but this was the first time I actually heard the sentence: 'You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'. That's the way he put it. He'd set it right in his own mind. Besides, the Englishman concluded, Italy was a violent land. Throughout the ages, its history has been threaded with violence and savage, strong men. Italians were used to violence. Q.E.D.

## The Jackal

I moved into my bedsitter by the railway station and into one of the blackest spots I've known, then or since. It wasn't only that now I had to look after my own needs in the way of meals and laundry – though that was irksome enough. No, it was more than that. It was having to stick for hours in that hole, when what I wanted to do was get away from that grey dungeon, with its damp walls and black stairwell where I didn't dare touch the handrails for fear of what my hands might pick up. The tenement crawled with creatures from the underworld. Going down the stairs, I'd sometimes pass whole families with pale faces and bad teeth. The children stared round-eyed, half naked in dingy underwear, and the women gossiped in washed-out, shapeless dresses.

At night, it grew damnably cold and, every so often, I was jerked awake by the shriek of some passing train, like the tormented screech of a ghoul. What a turnabout from Caterina's spotless housework and the warm comfort of Margherita's soft breasts!

After that first run with the pack, things had settled down into endless tedium. In the evening, I went out and drank myself cross-eyed before crawling back into my dirty hole like a bloated wharf rat. Christ, the black misery of it all! I gave myself another two weeks, after which I intended to take the first boat back to Malta. Come what may.

But the devil looks after his own. Time and again, I've witnessed this proposition proved right. There've been times when I was seriously thinking of throwing in the proverbial towel, when something would turn up to pull me clear by the breadth of a whisker. Now there was to be another reshuffling of the cards, with my name coming up on top.

With the harvest in and the farmers set to face the coming winter, there was to be another census – a general counting of heads and acres. All this was part of the regime's 'battle of wheat'. Whole tracts of marshland had been drained and given over to growing wheat. Every acre of land had to yield its fullest and livestock had to multiply or be removed. The peasants' task was to feed the cities and not hoard away the fat of the land. Periodically, this battle was stepped up.

On the first Sunday of the two I'd given myself before I hit the seas back to Malta, I got on a truck amidst a crowd of Blackshirts and other zealots and headed into the country to count horns and bales of hay. Everybody

was in high picnic spirit, set on routing out the wily peasants and their caches of goodies. The *Ras* came along as well, riding in his black car at the head of the convoy of trucks. Del Turco was at the wheel.

We drove into *Prandella*, a sizeable country town, where the *podestà* was waiting for us with full band and raised dais. After all, this was an official commission, and the *Ras* was to first try the gentle art of persuasion.

That short man took his place at the centre of the platform. Like Amadeo, he was a slow starter but, unlike my uncle, he got stuck in his sentences. He was too roughly hewn to even try and head for the finer points of oratory. He banged out what he had to tell them, just as he would've loved to shake them by the throat and rub their faces into the facts that *he* found so obvious to understand.

There was no doubt about the man. He was as straight as a die. The usual phrases, washed colourless like an everyday shirt, he found true and wholesome. He churned them out without irony or nausea. It wasn't the first time I'd come across a man, otherwise as shrewd as a market Jew, yet as blind as a newborn pup in that one spot where his heart aches.

He spoke of the blinding glory of the *Duce's* vision, and of the enemies that lurked around the Motherland like wolves ready to pounce at the first sign of weakness. Every true son must do his bit; the soldier on the battlefield, the

peasant in the field. Only by making the land yield its fullest could Italy stand alone and feed all her children without depending on the charity of the Judas.

I looked at the people gathered below the dais. Even if you knocked off those who'd come in on the trucks and those rounded up by the local *fascio*, that still left a sizeable crowd who'd drifted in from the surrounding countryside to hear what this man had to say about their land.

All farmers, whether in the pocket-sized fields below Mdina, or on the rolling acres around *Prandella*, wear the same face when outsiders talk about their land. A walled-up, trapped gaze comes to their eyes every time they're cornered into the presence of city folk, with their loud manners and wads of papers. Above all, the peasant distrusts the written word for, once put down, it may one day be called up again like some departed ghost.

After the meeting in the square, we split up into gangs, each heading for a different sector. Not entirely by chance, I got myself included in the *Ras's* party.

The place allotted us was called *La Quercia*. It was an enormous farm run by four brothers, each with his own tribe of sons, daughters and retainers. The main building was fully sixty yards long, three storeys high, with a roof of red tiles and resting on a ground floor of arches where the stables were housed. There were various other outhouses and cowsheds. The whole layout must've fed at least eighty souls.

The four patriarchs came forward, with the rest of their people keeping a respectful but attentive distance behind. I looked at the ring of sullen faces. The hostility was closer to the surface and less well-veiled than usual. Can't say I blame them. Wouldn't like it much either if someone came poking his finger up my behind.

The counting started. The *Ras* and Del Turco moved off in the direction of a cowshed accompanied by the eldest of the brothers. He must've been well into his sixties, with apple cheeks and a drooping, white moustache. I followed behind with a couple of farmhands.

We stepped into the cowshed, and into the reek of cowpats and animal bodies. We walked down the aisle, counting the swinging tails. Midway down the shed, the light streamed in through an open door. The *Ras* and the old man went outside. I stopped on the threshold, looking out. Bales of hay were stacked into a mountain under a spread of burlap. Between the stacked hay and the wall was a smaller hill of cow dung covered with buzzing flies, vigorous in the warm afternoon sun.

The air was heavy with sleep. A mangy, brown dog half opened one eye when the men walked past him, and then stretched out to sleep again.

When it rang out, the gunshot sounded louder because of the quiet. Everybody jumped. The shot was followed by shouts and screams coming from the direction of the big house. I never did find out what started it. Maybe somebody's nerves snapped, or maybe light fingers

grabbed some girl by the tits. Who can tell? What I do know is that the next moment all hell broke loose.

Del Turco and the farmhands bolted out of the barn as if the devil was after them. The *Ras* and the old man stared at each other with wide eyes and shoulders hunched. The old peasant was the first to recover. He grabbed the first thing within arm's reach, a three-legged milking stool. He wielded the stool above his head and came forward. The *Ras* stepped back in haste, right into the dung heap. He slithered, kicked to keep his feet, and ended up sitting in the muck with his arms sunk in up to the wrists.

You know how it is at such moments. Either you freeze, or you bound quicker than thought. I made a grab at a two-pronged pitchfork. We must've made a fantastic picture: the old man with his stool, I with the fork, and the *Ras* in the shit.

I had nothing against that old man. I fainted with the end of the pole, thrust out with the prongs, and pinned his arm against the wall of the barn. Only one thing for him to do if he wanted to get clear. He dropped the stool and slid his arm out. Then he, too, scuttled off in the direction of the big house.

I turned to look at the *Ras*. He kept trying to rise but, what with his bulk and the wet dung, he kept slithering back. He let out an obscenity to rival Jove's own thunder bolts. I passed him the end of the stick and pulled him clear.



We went back to the central yard. Del Turco and the rest of the men were bunched back-to-back into a tight knot. At a glance, I'd have said they had half a dozen pistols among them. The whole of *La Quercia* was out in force – men, women and children, with pitchforks, staffs and hatchets. The men were in front, shotguns at their waists. All eyes followed the *Ras* as he strode towards his men. Whatever happened now rested with him alone.

They say Napoleon lost the battle of Waterloo because he had a cold in the head, but I figure that's nothing next to feeling your pants heavy with stinking cow shit. The *Ras* lost that one before it even started. He growled an order and the Blackshirts packed into the trucks. I got into the waiting car.

Del Turco drove fast, right through *Prandella*. The smell was getting overbearingly strong, though we drove with the windows down. The *Ras* had gone through one hell of a day. He was looking for someone into whom to shoot his poison. Del Turco knew it was coming. I could see it in the way he sat humped over the wheel without ever taking his eyes off the road.

The thunder rolled a few miles outside Palermo. The *Ras* accused his aide of desertion in the face of the enemy. He followed that with a charge of incompetence in the handling of troops, and with mucking up the whole operation (I liked that). Del Turco flinched at each sling of outrageous fortune, but kept his eyes glued on the road.

They dropped me by the railway station, and I climbed up to my room. I kept a tight rein over my hopes. It was true that I'd helped the old boy out of a tight hole, but he could, for that very reason, hate the very thought of my existence, like when Ham was cursed for witnessing his father's nakedness.

I was summoned two days later. Headquarters were housed in a new block, all glass and concrete. Here, unlike that time at the old palazzo, the *fascio* and axe over the door were built right into the building. To tear them out you'd have had to knock down the whole ruddy front.

A Blackshirt took my name, checked it against a register he held open in front of him, and showed me up to the *Ras*'s room. The door was opened by Del Turco. As I've said, he was about my own height, so that now I found him looking right into my eyes. I held my ground, trying not to flinch before that look of naked hate.

Del Turco went out and closed the door behind him. I looked across the room to the *Ras* sitting behind the table. He motioned me to a chair. This was another of those situations I had to play by ear, not too cold as to appear disinterested but not too eager either, like some weak-brained Saint Bernard. One look into those black, button-hard eyes and I dropped all scheming cobwebs right smart. His thick, hairy fingers played along the hard spine of a thin dossier with a salmon-pink cover; my own, no doubt. I gave straight answers to all his questions.

That's how I became one of the *Ras's* guard dogs. My position was to be purely probationary, and there was to be no uniform. Only Italians who'd gone through the successive youth organizations made it to the select Blackshirts. I was to carry on with my classes at the university, but I was to move into one of the dormitories at the back of the building.

I put my few belongings together and moved out of that pus-festered leper's cell with light steps and music in my heart. They gave me a room ten feet by eight with an iron bedstead and regulation commode. Toilets and showers were at the end of the corridor. A bit short on the five-star luxuries but as clean as a newly scrubbed bathtub.

I was thrown into close proximity with the *Ras*. There were days when I doubled for Del Turco as the old man's chauffeur. Otherwise, I stuck around the office, filing endless bundles of papers. I've never found it hard to get on with those around me, and I'd soon dropped into the slot allotted to me. Only Del Turco refused to thaw out. His nostrils still twitched dangerously whenever I was in the vicinity, like I was some bad smell.

I'd been wrong in thinking that the *Ras* would feel resentful because I'd kept the old man from bashing in his brains. Never have I come across a man who swung so much power yet held himself in such light regard. That small man was driven by the one thought of spreading Fascism. All else must bend before that force, like bamboo before the wind.

He was one of the original handful; a purist, holding all newcomers in loud contempt. He and Mussolini had been buddies in Switzerland when both were penniless immigrants looking for work and drowning the rumblings of empty bellies under the shouting of slogans. Ever since those far-off days, he'd cast himself into the role of the *Duce's* guardian angel. He was continuously writing him letters criticizing some move or other.

He poured scorn on all those who surrounded the *Duce* in his fine Roman palaces. He feared the insidious corruption of all luxuries and fine manners with the suspicion of the poor-born. At regular intervals, we got photos and write-ups from the Ministry of Propaganda. The *Ras* pored over each photo showing the *Duce* in the company of some king or prime minister with a mixture of jealousy and pride.

In some ways, I found his jealousy touching. I recall how the news that Mussolini was taking lessons in deportment from his diplomatic staff drove him into paroxysms of rage. At such moments, he'd rant and tear into the man whom he saw as selling out on what they had built. He regretted not being at hand to keep an eye on things and ward off the bloodsuckers. He opened each reply to his letters to the *Duce* with trembling hands. Each word of praise lit his universe for days; each word of criticism or impatience darkened it for weeks.

He was always growling that, one fine morning, we'd wake to find him gone back to Rome. But that was

all eyewash. His work in Sicily took up all his time and energy. He drove himself hard, and demanded as good from those around him. He might grumble at each directive from Rome, but every order was followed through with a thoroughness as would've turned a colonel's face green with envy.

He hated sticking around in the office and shied away from paperwork like it was the plague. What he liked best of all was to drive over to some project or other and inspect what was going on. Nothing escaped his notice, whether it was testing the concrete mix for new foundations or the wire fencing for some schoolyard. He had some of Grandfather's ways about him, like when he'd slip off his jacket and work a pick to help tear down a wall.

His power was absolute. The revolt at *La Quercia* could never go unpunished. When the bolts of vengeance struck, they shrivelled the whole place down to its foundations like some uprooted oak.

One morning at dawn, four truckloads of Fascist militia swept down on the farm. All unregistered stock was requisitioned and all men of service age were pressed into the army on the spot. Even before the sun's warmth had broken over the morning's mists, the raid was over and *La Quercia* lay stripped of all flesh like it'd been hit by a flight of vultures. That was my first lesson in absolute power.

I got my second soon after.

We received a thin dossier from Rome marked 'Urgent and Confidential'. It told of a certain Lucchese Roberto, a graduate of the University of Pisa and a journalist by trade. The man was suspected of communist sympathies and was known to fraternize with the French *fuorusciti*. These latter were Italians who'd fled the country when Mussolini took over. There was a whole colony of them in Paris.

The dossier also told of the man's friends, of his suspected activities, and ended with the exhortation that he should be put under 'intense and active surveillance'. This last meant that the poor bugger was to be grilled over a slow fire.

The gadflies set about their task that same day. The man was picked up and brought to headquarters, kept in isolation for a couple of hours, and then released without explanation. This routine was repeated several times. The next step was to comb his office for seditious material.

When the OVRA men got to his flat in the afternoon, all hell broke loose. Very likely the man's nerves snapped, or maybe he did have something he didn't want falling into the wrong hands. Shots were exchanged and one of the OVRA men was hit in the shoulder. Nothing serious, just a flesh wound, but enough to make the blood run freely and fill the whole place with groans. Lucchese got away over the roofs.

Thanks to the dossier, we knew where he was likely to hole up. All we had to do was watch his pals. We could've picked him up any time we wanted. But then, to everyone's surprise, the *Ras* called the hounds off. He said he wanted to wait until he had something really heavy with which to nail down the man.

It was at this stage that events took a strange turn. Del Turco had always been a great one for the whoring. He guarded his rank as number one stud in the herd with quick jealousy, even if it meant fucking himself to his knees. Lately, he'd taken up with a nice, little brunette who kept a couple of rooms over a bakery. One could have one's bit of fun amidst the heart-breaking whiffs of newly-baked bread. Then, as in one of those Greek tragedies, Del Turco fell in love.

I don't know why it is, but a man who falls in love with a whore crowns himself jester of the realm. For days Del Turco went about in a rare temper. Not only did the meaningful grins stick in his throat, but going by what was whispered in the corridors, the girl was refusing to grant him exclusive rights to her delights.

On the night of the shoot-out, the Lieutenant was visiting his little friend. We never got to know what actually happened. Perhaps he tripped, or maybe the girl or her pimp pushed him. Fact is, he tumbled head over heels down the twenty or so steps and cracked his skull on the threshold of the bakery. He never regained

consciousness and died in the early hours of the morning. The girl beat it out of town that same day.

The *Ras* took me and a couple of Blackshirts to see the body at the morgue. It touched a strange mixture of nerve-ends when the attendant drew back the white sheet to uncover the corpse. You would never have taken us for brothers while Del Turco was alive but, all the same, that poor sod had sure chosen one hell of a way to kick the bucket. To my shame, I must also confess to some ripples of satisfaction at seeing an enemy into the ground. In death, his long face seemed to have grown longer. There was no sign on that stringy, muscular body of the blow that'd finished him off.

It could be that it was because Del Turco had died on the same day as the shoot-out that the two events came together in the chief's head. The *Ras* stared fixedly and at length at the yellow corpse with the blue shadows around the eyes. Before we'd set out for the morgue, the *Ras* had breakfasted on thick slices of brown bread and goat cheese. He'd never struck me as one who lost any sleep over metaphysical thoughts of the beyond. I exchanged glances with the two Blackshirts.

Then he turned slowly towards me and said, as if he were asking me to get him the car, 'Have Flavio take a couple of pictures of the corpse.' Flavio was from headquarters. He was the one who fed the pressmen.

I must've looked dumb, for he explained: 'That turd of a journalist shot at one of our men last night. The



whole bloody quarter heard him.' He pointed to Del Turco spread over the marble. 'And there you have the body – enough to hang the bastard.'

My jaw dropped. The other two men shifted uneasily. One of them cleared his windpipe and tried his voice. 'But the ... the ... er.' His hand twitched towards the corpse, 'The body has no bullet marks.' The *Ras* snapped impatiently. 'Then you'll have your bullet marks.'

He reached across and flipped open the man's holster. He pulled out the service M34, pointed it close to the corpse and fired once with a stiff arm. A neat, black hole, laced with cordite powder, appeared in the white flesh on the chest, but no blood trickled out. The corpse jumped under the kick of the shot, and an arm dangled over the side of the narrow marble table and swung to and fro before coming to rest.

I looked at the two men who were with us. Their faces had blanched to match those of the dead. The *Ras* sneered, and thrust the gun back into the holster. I drove him back to headquarters. My hands on the wheel weren't what you'd call rock-steady. My stomach felt right squeamish, like I'd been made to swallow a tumbler of castor oil.

A stirring of ancestral horror. That's what I'd seen on the faces of the Blackshirts back at the morgue. It was more than just disbelief in the face of brutal callousness. It was the way he'd desecrated the dead, and a comrade to boot. An act as horrendous as incest; a crime calling

for the descent of divine wrath on the whole tribe, and enough to drive its perpetrator into madness. But the *Ras* scoffed at holy fears, and no lightning smote him dead.

I was struck by another consideration, though it came only later, when the goose-pimples had smoothed down. What the *Ras* had done amounted to judicial murder, and he'd done it openly in front of three witnesses. In short, he didn't see me as a threat. He didn't even have to tell me to keep my trap shut. It was a sobering thought. I was a man who saw without seeing, who could listen without hearing. A eunuch in a seraglio.

With Del Turco out of the way, my position as chief zombie became uncontested. The *Ras* was completely without friends. He didn't even have any family to speak of. He got his pleasure as crudely as any trooper. About once a month, he had a girl sent up from the whorehouse. Then, with the edge taken off his randiness, he'd set into his work with his usual demonic frenzy.

Sometimes, the mood would take him to reminisce. Then he'd ruminate by the hour about the grand old Duke. I got to know things you don't find in any of your history books. Like with a handful of old sepia photos, I got glimpses of the first days of the *fascio*, of the pitched battles in the streets of Milan, and of the car that the *Duce* kept at the ready to shoot off to Switzerland while he sent his men to march on Rome. That's how I came to know the *Duce*, long before I ever set eyes on him; by proxy and very likely not completely on the mark at that.

There was one thing to be said of recent developments. I stopped going to classes at the university, and that dropped the curtain on my short and undistinguished academic career.

### III

## The Front

A couple of days later, we got assigned to our positions, and we set out for the front. We had to foot it, for the land grew more rugged and the earth-roads more impossible the closer we got to the sierra that marked out the front. The supplies came up behind on mules and donkeys. The Aragonese drove their mules in tandems, as many as six at a time. For some reason known only to themselves, the peasants treated their mules well but burnt out their ill temper on the wretched donkeys. Whenever the whim took them, they hit them with sticks across their legs or kicked them in the testicles.

The fields had been arrested at the previous year's harvest. Vines, untrained and with hanging, mildewed bunches of grapes, spread over the rubble walls. Patches of drooping maize, with flint-hard cobs, served as windbreakers to squares of enormous turnips that'd split and turned grey with age. Everything choked in jungles of weeds. How the peasants must've cursed us and the war we'd brought with us!

The sierra on which the positions were perched was a queer collection of hills with flat tops. On the high slopes nothing grew except shrubs and heath, with bones of limestone sticking out of the grey sides like bleached skeletons of oxen.

We'd been climbing all the time. At one point, we entered a thin veil of mist. I shivered. But that was nothing to what I came to know later, to my chagrin. The positions were a good 1,500 feet up, exposed to the driving rain and often wrapped in thick, swirling mist. The few lorries that braved the roads and jolted their way up were often lost in the mist for hours. Some mornings, the valleys below were hidden under a sea of cloud.

However, this time the mist lifted before we reached the top. We stopped for a breather. At this point, the sierra bent eastward, making way for the valley that led up to the town of Huesca – in royalist hands. Below, the town of Robres looked tiny and white in the cold sunlight. Beyond Huesca, more hills, like the fins on the back of a stegosaurus, led the eye to the distant Pyrenees where the snow never melts. Those mighty rocks seemed to float on nothing at all.

At last we reached the top and the enclosure. This last was in the shape of a drawn bow, maybe fifty yards across, with a chest-high parapet of sandbags and limestone rocks. They brought to mind the rubble walls that framed the pocket fields around Mdina.

The sickening stench hit the nostrils like a flow of sewer mud. I looked around trying to locate the smell. The ground was pitted with holes – close to three dozen dugouts I found out later – which ran into the ground like rat holes. I shrank from the dank openings, so like festering sores, and looked down the cleft behind the position from where the main stink rose. The refuse of months had been tipped down that slope: a deep, fetid bed of decaying food, muck, and rusty tins. I spat into the pile. How's that for a twenty-one gun welcome?

What's the first thing you'd do when you get to the front? Look for the enemy, of course. Well, so did I. The Cabo put the question to a soldier who motioned casually over the parapet. I almost ducked. Then I followed the pointing finger.

Across the valley, more naked hills and grey cliffs rose towards the sky. At first glance, no life seemed to be stirring, not even a lonely bird. Then at a distance of over half a mile, I made out several black dots, like frantic ants, dodging behind a raised parapet identical to the one I was sheltering behind. *That* was the enemy.

The front zigzagged crazily along the sierra, a chain of fortified positions perched on top of the hills, showing flags and smoke from dugout fires. The flags were the only way of telling friend from foe. Yellow and red for monarchist and red and black for anarchist.

I turned for a more local look. Behind the parapet, a system of narrow trenches had been hewn in the rock.

A dozen sentries lounged about the trenches and behind the parapets, staring at the newcomers with curious eyes. Beyond the parapets stretched rows of barbed wire, before the hillsides slid into bottomless ravines. Dozens of tin cans were tied to the barbed wire; an advance warning system against anyone tinkering with the wire.

We were told to dump our kit in the dugouts. The *Ras* made for the one right at the front. I glanced at the little man. He looked as happy as a boy scout at summer camp. I balked at the prospect of descending into that tomb-hole. The swirling smell stopped my nostrils and made it hard for me to draw in breath. Besides, I can't stand the idea of being enclosed. The very notion bruises my nerves raw. But there was nothing for it. I cursed roundly and followed the *Ras*.

Inside the dugout, it was pitch dark. My eyes took some time adjusting to the gloom. The tunnels were driven straight into the hills and went on for prodigious distances. They were so low, a man could barely kneel in comfort, let alone stand. After about the first twenty paces, my back ached fit to snap. Given his midget size, the *Ras* raced ahead like a mole on wheels. I couldn't take much more of that. I pitched my kit into a corner and fled back up the tunnel towards the fresh air.

And that's where I was to be holed up all through the winter and a good part of spring. Those of us who'd come out dreaming of bloody fray and blinding glory had another think coming. They told us that, during the

previous October, there'd been fierce fighting all along the sierra, as both sides grabbed as many of the positions as they could. That accounted for the crazy way the front zigzagged. But now the positions were set and all that was left of the roaring fire were the embers. We dug in like the Greeks at Troy. Achilles yawned, scratched himself under the armpits, and put on extra inches round the waist.

Some battlefront! The days sunk into yawning wells of tedium. Nothing but endless loafing about in the trenches or in the dugouts, with lolling heads and clogged thoughts. Then sentry-duty and endless digging. Digging, digging, like brainless badgers. The futility of it all! The only diversion came from the patrols.

I'd have thought that the upped chances of death would've spiced the edge of my days. But even that wore off gradually, especially when I found that the threat coming from that direction had been much overstated. No bomb ever fell closer than a hundred yards from where I stood, and I never came within bayonet reach of any enemy. The only real danger lay in getting in the way of a stray bullet. Bullets cracked overhead, sometimes whizzing past dangerously close. First time that happened, I ducked behind the parapet. Beside me, the *Ras* grinned broadly. I've never said that the little man wasn't plucky. But given my height, in places I cleared the parapet by a good foot. Gave me the uncomfortable feeling of going about naked.

As it was, the casualties were mostly self-inflicted. Those bloody conscripts were as green as spinach, though



again, it wasn't all their fault. Their scrap irons were so bad they sometimes burst of their own accord or went off when least expected. Those boys sure were nervous. Stories of an imminent rush on our position were incessantly being put about. Once it got dark, they shot at anything that moved, including each other.

Spaniards treat firearms with such disrespect that it verges on the homicidal. They whirl their rifles about and point them at each other for emphasis. Once, Cabo Martinez threatened to shoot our cook if he dared show up again with his filthy pigswill. The fat man paled and told him to point his gun somewhere else. Martinez laughed. Why, the thing wasn't even loaded. And to prove it he pressed the trigger. There was a loud bang and soup sprouted out of the hole that now adorned the enormous cauldron at the cook's elbow. How the others roared! Some of them nearly died of asphyxia.

The more belligerent chafed at the enforced idleness. Unconcerned about causing offence, the *Ras* called the Spaniards bullocks. On bad days, we went around with hanging heads and growling: 'Why don't we attack? Why don't we attack?', but no answer came over the hills and across the valleys.

It didn't take an Alexander the Great to realize that what we were asking for could never happen. Every position was as safe as a medieval castle. It could only be taken by enormous numbers, and then only from one side. A handful of men could hold off a whole battalion. It

grew so that we never bothered about the enemy during the daylight. The only danger lay at night, when some positions were actually overrun by surprise attacks.

Oh, for a couple of artillery guns! That's about the only thing that would've worked. It'd have been like knocking off coconuts at a fair. We did get the occasional gun coming up from Zaragoza, but they never could get a job done properly. There were always so few shells that they never even found the range, let alone hit any of the ruddy positions. The shells plunged harmlessly into the ravines.

We sat perched on top of our hills like disdainful eagles, dirtying the nest in which we slept. Our enemy wasn't men but the cold. We stood more chance of being cut down through pneumonia than by a bullet or a shell. We were well into winter now, at a height of close to two thousand feet. At times it was so cold it felt like I was breathing in solid air. The lungs refused to open up. It even snowed sometimes, in large, dry flakes. That was the first time I'd ever seen snow. The wind cut keener than a surgeon's knife. I huddled in my trench, and the wind came shrieking over the sandbags and slapped me in the face and snatched at my cap like it wanted to tear the very hair out by the roots. Well, maybe it did pull out some which never grew back again, for my hair started to thin out fast at around this time.

Worst of all was the mist. Banks of mist often clung to the top of the hills, leaving the valleys below clear.

I'd sometimes climb down through the mist like Elias alighting from his cloud. But not when I was on sentry-go, of course. Then the mist would pour into the trenches like cold soup. I know of nothing that shrouds my soul in thicker mournfulness than does mist.

The rain vied with the mist in turning the whole place into a slithering mud pit. The wet limestone oozed a greasy, soapy paste, and keeping one's footing on the jagged rocks became a major feat. At night, the going became doubly hard and there were occasions when I slipped a dozen times in as many minutes – especially if we were called out in a rush. Each fall was greeted by whoops of mirth, more so if one landed cursing on some turd, for the men could never be broken out of the habit of defecating in the trenches. Rifles jammed and became impossible to work with cold-numbered fingers. For whole days, clothes, boots and blankets were sodden through and caked with mud and filth. We slogged laboriously along to the accompaniment of belching mud.

Our preoccupation, twenty-four hours through the day, was trying to keep warm. I piled on so many layers of clothes that I had to tug vigorously to pull my arm up to shoulder-high. And I put on so many socks that I found it hard to lace my boots. From a distance I looked like I had swollen ankles.

But that was better than most. The greater part of the conscripts were miserably underclad. They went about with blankets wrapped over their shoulders. On the

position to our left, there was a detachment of Moors. It was said that they caught pneumonia in batches and spat blood. How the poor bastards must've suffered!

The only way of beating the cold and the dampness was to light a wood fire. We dreamt of fire even more often than we dreamt of women. But in the wilderness, firewood was as hard to come by as blood-roses in the snow. Two or three times while I was there, the supplies from Zaragoza came up in enormous, wooden crates. We fell upon the wood like a host of locusts. Those crates kept us in wood for two days. I crept as close as I dared to the blaze, stopping just short of getting singed, with clouds of steam rising out of my clothes.

But such godsendings were rare. We scoured the hills and valleys for anything that'd burn. What little vegetation there was had been picked bare for months on end. Every spare minute we had, we spent bent double, picking twigs like pigeons in some backyard. We eyed with craving the brush that grew in those open spaces of no-man's land which were within unobstructed firing sight and which, as a consequence, were left practically untouched. What a waste.

There was one good reed which, when dry, burnt long and hot. But, for some strange reason, it only grew on hilltops like the tuft on a Mohican's scalp. Even when one succeeded in slithering on one's belly up to a clump of reeds, all the fluttering about usually gave the game away. Because of my bulk, I, in particular, wasn't very

adept at it. Wrath descended in the form of a burst of machine-gun fire as one got a whole drum all to oneself. The bullets whizzed overhead or chipped the limestone sending fragments into one's face. It was a risky business but next to the cold nothing mattered. Cabo Martinez was the outstanding champion at the sport and only got shot at on a couple of occasions, while my butt got the full gun treatment every time I ventured forth.

And this for many months to come. It wasn't until well into April that the nights grew noticeably warmer. Given the conditions, we became indescribably filthy. We'd have done that anyway. Any number of men left to themselves would, but we precipitated the process, so to say.

Gone was all pretence at military smartness. We looked a motley crew. We wore anything we could lay hands on. When out on sentry duty, some even wrapped sugar sacks over their shoulders. Our boots had taken a bad battering and were practically falling apart. And no chance of replacing them, either. Boots fell under 'luxury commodities' at the front. Which could be said of most other things, for that matter. Tobacco, soap, candles, and matches became very hard to come by. Even water. Water came up from Zaragoza in enormous barrels over mules' backs. We were rationed to a quart a day each man. The water looked opaque, like weak milk, and tasted of bicarbonate.

At the start, when I was still foppish, I used to put a little water aside every day for an occasional shave. Or I'd pinch the odd water bottle until I had enough in which to soak a cloth and dab myself with soap and water. But there was never as much as would've washed a baby's bottom and I soon gave that up.

It's surprising how rapidly one gets used to not using a handkerchief for wiping one's snot, or to not washing or shaving. The first few days I slept in my clothes and boots in case of raids. I was uncomfortable not because of the clothes, but because I was skipping a habit imbibed since childhood. Hadn't felt like that since the first day I skipped my prayers.

Old hands told us that as yet we'd been spared the major scourge of trench fighting. It was far too cold for the lice. Not knowing any better, I failed to appreciate the magnitude of that reprieve. Besides, I was too taken up with the rats.

The brutes had the run of the place. Bloated and obscene, they'd grown so bold that nothing could scare them away. Even if one hurled a stone at them, they'd stand on their haunches and wrinkle their impudent noses. At night, I could hear them scrambling over the cans in the rubbish dump, or scurrying by my camp-bed in the dugout. How I loathed those bastards! The idea of having them crawl over my body and breathing into my face as I lay asleep was enough to spoil my nights.

I set out on a personal crusade to exterminate the sewer turds. At first, I thought of using the rifle, but that would've been too good for them. There was no need anyway. One good length of thick planking was all I needed – if I could keep it from the fire gangs, that's to say. All I had to do was lie still and wait and they were bound to come within swing range. Then whack. I missed more often than I hit, for my rage spoiled my cool. But when I did hit, the blighters stood no chance. One quick, high squeak of terror and the rest scurried away only to return a moment later. I must've massacred hundreds – well, scores anyway. Which is the only life I can safely swear to have taken while I was in Aragon.

The rats weren't the only nuisance. I don't know if I've mentioned it before, but the *Ras* was a prodigious smoker. Puffed worse than Mount Etna. When cigarettes started getting in short supply, he grew panicky. I don't smoke. Never could take to the idea of filling my lungs with fumes, so I passed him my share. But even then, he had to space out his smokes. The men took to pouncing on fag-ends which they kept in small tins buried deep within the folds of their clothes.

Even worse was the candle shortage. Each dugout was issued with its supply every day. In those holes, candles were the only source of light, except when some muttonhead lit a wood fire and filled the whole place with smoke and watering eyes. During a night alarm, a candle at hand could mean the difference between life

and death. In the dark, everybody trod on everybody else's face to the accompaniment of round curses. Candles were hoarded and guarded closer than a sister's honour. Everyone kept a tinder lighter at hand and yards of yellow wick which we made out of candle drippings.

Wick-making was a craft I was familiar with from my childhood days. I'd been taught it at the cathedral in Mdina where the verger, wizened and arthritic, used to go around, bent and groaning, with a length of wick at the end of a long stick, lighting the candles in front of the holy pictures, with the smoke rising in sooty spirals.

Now you're free to go right ahead and laugh yourself into a hernia, but, in spite of all the discomforts, that was one time when I felt perfectly happy. All food tasted good, even the eternal haricot beans, and that's always a positive sign. I took to my food like a hog. And never did wine taste any better, though it was raw and sour.

For a time, I'd managed to get away from myself. That's what it was. Among those bald hills, wading in dung and with the smell of excrement in my nostrils, I'd forgotten myself entirely; completely. I went about crusted with filth, face bearded and wind-burnt, and with thinning hair and inches on my midriff, but I was happy. An unreasonable and motiveless happiness possessed me. I lived by the day, for the moment, without thinking of the morrow, which was strange, for I had plenty of time in which to ponder.

I spent hours on sentry duty. It wasn't too bad during the daytime, for you always got some of the men strolling



over for a chat, but the nights were drawn out and lonely. And when the mist descended into the trenches, my desolation became complete. I was a lost soul suspended over a vaporous pit, cut off from time and men. That's my notion of hell.

But then, as if to make up for the beastly times, there were stretches of peace and beauty. Some nights, the air was so clean, so clear, it almost hurt to look into the distance. On such nights, I could follow the lamps of the supply lorries winding out of Zaragoza and those of the enemy from Alcubierre. Zaragoza itself looked like a thin scattering of stars. Then, gradually, the faintest wash of light would start chasing the darkness away but, ever so subtly, I was never sure whether it was real or whether I wasn't just wishing it, until the first pink over the eastern hills set that to right.

This idyllic peace was all too often shattered by night alerts. Even when we weren't on sentry duty, we were frequently called out from sleep on false alarms. Sometimes the rumours of an imminent attack built up so strongly, that we never even went into the dugouts.

All the time I was there, there was only one night assault on our position, in late January. But this constant cry of wolf took its toll when kept up for days on end. We often suffered from lack of sleep – I, who've always loved my snooze, even now that I'm an old man. I grew stupid, climbing became harder, even loading my rifle became a

feat in itself, fingers slow and as thick as blood sausages, almost as if they were outside of my body.

When the anarchists did attack, we greeted them like long-lost brothers. The fact is we knew they were coming up the hill almost from the word go. It was a dark, starless night. It'd rained without cease for days, and the ground was as slippery as pigswill. We could hear the suck of the mud on their boots. We lined the trenches with machine guns and waited for them to creep up. We waited without breathing, in case even that should scare them off.

I listened until I developed an ache in the jaw. Then, through the darkness, came the fine clicking of wire being cut and the faint tinkle of cans. They were working carefully and agonizingly slowly. Let them come up close, oh Lord, let them come right up. Hours seemed to have passed since the first murmured alarm had spread from trench to trench and through the dugouts like the ruffle of the breeze in a field of grain.

Then some conscript's nerves snapped. A rifle spat somewhere on the right. Above the boom of the gun, the enraged voice of the position commander, a tall, thin man with a noble, aquiline profile, damned the hapless devil for a son of a leper-whore.

The next moment all hell broke loose. The machine guns, in their nests on the edge of the parapet, swept the darkness in front. The enemy answered with a line of rifle shots. In the dark, you can't make out the man

who's firing, so every jab of rifle fire seems to be pointing at you. Then the grenades started bursting. They fell hopelessly short of our sector of the trenches, but, not to be outdone, we picked up our own, pulled the pins, and pitched them into the darkness.

From the right, drawn-out, piercing screams rent the night. The enemy must've come up close enough on that side to land some grenades into the trenches.

The line of rifle fire started receding and, after a while, was below the drop of the hill and had disappeared. We set up a croaking cheer. In the ensuing silence, the groaning of the wounded hit us like a cold wind.

I straightened up slowly. How long had the whole action lasted? I don't know. It'd seemed like a long time, but it couldn't have been more than eight, ten minutes since the first shot had sent us firing bravely into the darkness.

It was interesting to see how I'd taken to my first encounter with action. Now that it was over, my legs were sending waves of weakness down my thighs. But while the fireworks were popping, I certainly hadn't been frightened. The thought of getting hit was always there, of course, a constant backdrop, a tension of the whole body. The question hadn't been so much whether I'd be hit as *where* it'd hit me.

I felt I'd given a creditable account of myself. Definitely better than some of the men who'd actually wet their trousers during the firing – shit scared. Most of

them weren't even aware of it happening, not until they came to climb out of the trenches.

We turned to the dead and wounded. Two men had been killed outright, and lay huddled in the trenches like grotesque rag dolls. Another three had been wounded, one badly. He'd stopped a whole fistful of shrapnel in the guts. It was a vile job getting the wounded men out of the trenches in the dark. We put them on stretchers together with the dead, and they were carried down the hill to the waiting ambulances. I wouldn't have given the man who'd been hit in the belly a dog's chance. Those who got hit in the arms and legs considered themselves lucky. To be hit anywhere else meant certain death. If you didn't fold up on the spot, then the ambulances, bouncing about like mad broncos on the earth roads, saw to it that the job was done before they reached the field hospital in San Alvaro.

With the first light of day, we peered curiously over the parapet at the stretching slope in front. Two corpses lay face down in the churned mud. They'd gone stiff in the cold of the night and it took four men to hoist them over the parapet. We leaned on our rifles and stared into their vacant eyes in silence. Both of them had rubbed soot over their faces for the night attack, and one had a red and black scarf wound round his throat. He also had one clean hole the size of a penny at the back of the skull. He must've been with his back to us when he got hit. Who knows, maybe one of mine. I glanced at Martinez. His jaw muscles were working convulsively.

If we'd hit more of them, their comrades must've carried them off, leaving just those two behind. The dead followed the wounded down the hill.