

The
FLYING SPY

Lieut. CAMILLO DE CARLO



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THE FLYING SPY

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BY
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OF THE ITALIAN ARMY

WITH A PREFACE BY
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TO THE MEMORY OF MY BROTHER,
TO THE MEMORY OF IGNAZIO AND MANFREDI
LANZA DI TRABIA,
TO THE MEMORY OF ALL OUR DEAD,
THIS TALE OF SUFFERING AND OF WAR IS DEDICATED

PREFACE

I AM asked to write a preface for this little book, but I think that it needs no preface at all. The account of a most extraordinary war adventure condensed in a few pages, the fact that the exceptional will, determination and nerve of the man who accomplished it have been rewarded by the most coveted Italian military decoration, the rarest among all the military decorations in the world, the gold medal for bravery, are good reasons for raising the interest of the reader. But the author adds a new flavor to the thing, seizing often the opportunity to show the ferocity of soldiers who have been to the last the faithful and worthy servants of the House of the Hapsburg; the sufferings of the Italian populations temporarily under the hated Austrian

oppression; the passionate love and devotion of those populations to their great mother country, Italy, arguments too often unknown, overlooked and unappreciated. For these reasons this book is not only an interesting historical document, but also, and especially, a good and patriotic performance.

MAJOR-GENERAL EMILIO GUGLIELMOTTI,

*Hon. Aide-de-Camp to H. M. the King of Italy,
Military Attaché, Royal Italian Embassy,
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NOTE

All documents mentioned in this narrative are in the possession of the Italian military authorities. Every fact can be attested to by numerous witnesses, and has been thoroughly investigated before recording.

THE AUTHOR.

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I

JANUARY 15, 1918.—The command of the Third Army has stationed its headquarters in the village of Mogliano, near Venice. The troops of the Third Army, which for the past two months have been successfully resisting the continual thunderous attempts of the Austrian troops to cross the Piave, have established a front extending from the bridge of the Priula to the sea. Fortunately the region along the coast is flooded. Our other troops hold the old Piave line. Even in the mountain regions, events seem to favor us. After the first moments of confusion had passed,

the new recruits, especially the youths of nineteen, exhibited once more all the boldness, all the pugnacity which had brought them distinction on the Carso. In vain did the Germans hurl their divisions, from the Lake of Garda to the Montello, against the light line recently reinforced by the foot soldiers of our company. The very troops which were unable to resist the forces of the enemy in the trenches of the Carso, although supported by thousands of mouths of every caliber belching forth fire, here on the rocky precipices of the Grappa, with a few wire entanglements and a single line of uninterrupted trenches, formed a barrier insurmountable by the violent enemy.

The German troops, drunk with the wine from our cellars, and fattened with the rich products from our fertile fields, were in a few instances, held back without aid of munitions, as without support of artillery, by mere stones and rocks hurled upon them by our men inexorably determined not to let

the enemy pass. Again I took courage. I had never doubted the fate of our army, but in the rarer and more hazardous moments, had none the less been compelled to question my own convictions, since events scarcely justified my boundless optimism. This optimism depended in some measure upon the fact that I was an officer of the Third Army, the army which, under the command of the Duke of Aosta, had numerous times endeavored to open up a way toward Trieste, and which had occupied, little by little, the land of the Dolina and the rocky regions of the Carso. We of the Third Army had never considered ourselves beaten; we had been compelled to submit to inevitable events; we had been compelled to withdraw, against our wishes, lest we had been surrounded, and to the end that the stream of Germans which had penetrated from Caporetto, might not cut off our road to the Piave. But the heroes of Faiti, the heroes of Hermanda, even on the day when

the retreat was determined upon, repulsed more than thirty attacks of the enemy, and in a final magnificent play, in defiance of the enemy pressing them on all sides, made a desperate assault in which they conquered new trenches and made several prisoners.

Those soldiers wept as they abandoned their huts. On our front the enemy had always been held back, and when it did advance, its journey was slow and costly. We aviators, who had been absolute masters of the air over the Isonzo, who had traversed with unswerving flight the enemy sky where hostile machines had in vain attempted our territory, who a thousand times had brought a greeting to the City of Grief, Trieste, seeming ever to be waiting for us there at the end of the Gulf at the foot of the hills—we aviators of the Third Army had even in our retreat inflicted such great damage on the enemy, that our troops, our ordnance, our supplies were enabled to move slowly on the muddy, congested roads, without

fear of any harm from the wings of the enemy. Although the enemy planes were supported on land by the slow, persistent advance of their troops, they never dared nor risked firing on our slowly retreating column. A feat which but for us would have been easy, and would have shaken seriously the morale of our soldiers.

I shall ever be able to visualize the spectacle of that retreat; I shall ever remember that throng of men with heads bent low, with an air at once so grim, and so surly, that the collective countenance seemed scarcely human. Yet there were not a few encouraging ones among them. I shall always remember a corporal of the Alpini whom I met in the village of Pordenone. He was lying exhausted beside his machine gun which he had carried on his shoulder from summit to summit, from hill to hill, for seven consecutive days, until he had reached the plain. For food he had eaten bits of musty bread chanced upon along the

road. When I stopped he first begged me for a bit of bread, then anxiously inquired on what line our command had decided to halt. He desired to shoulder his gun thither, again to set it up against the enemy where the need of halting their advance was greatest. The soldiers of the new Italy were being re-born!

Without a tear I had left the countryside endeared to me by memories of my childhood, the place where I was born, the place where for several centuries my ancestors had lived. On the last night, when I had a clear vision of the inevitable, after I had learnt from a superior officer that our next stand would be on the Piave, and that all the region in which lay my properties, my houses, my villas, all I possessed, was to be ceded to the enemy, I rushed in an automobile borrowed from headquarters to my father's dwelling that I might persuade him to depart. I was certain that he would not believe me, and it was not without a

prolonged struggle that I succeeded in convincing him. Indeed he would have preferred on that day to hear that we, his two boys, had fallen in battle, rather than learn from one of us that we had been unable to stop the enemy. At last becoming resigned to the cruel reality, giving no thought to the salvation of any of our belongings, since even the dearest personal thing lost all significance when the entire country was in danger he decided to leave.

Even now I can see his tall, straight figure on the threshold of the house, as he turned to cast a final look upon the scene of all our memories; a scene which he would never again observe as he left it that night. The women servants in the house, convulsively weeping, threw themselves at his feet that they might express in a last desperate farewell all the strength of their love. I could not shed a tear. I had given all my tears when I had seen our soldiers retreating from the Carso. I had never feared

death, yet then I prayed God with all my strength and faith, that I might live; that I might not die with that vision of defeat in my mind. A thousand times I had hurled myself where danger seemed the greatest, where death was reaping a rich harvest, not asking God to spare me. But at the Carso I prayed for life. I could not die defeated.

Every foot of land we ceded to the enemy was a new grief to my Italian heart. For every villa, for every square, for every expression of art we had to cede, for every remembrance profaned by the greedy barbarian, the wound became greater and hurt with a vehemence never heretofore experienced. At the death of my mother alone had I felt anything similar. I felt as though the world were crumbling about me. At dawn and at evening, on the rising of the sun and its setting, I would ask myself, how, with such immense grief in the world, nature could act according to her custom

of mathematical regularity, regardless of so much suffering.

With our successful resistance on the Piave the most painful days had passed. A wave of new bold blood, of passion, had permeated our fighters. They had found themselves again, and if anyone among them previously for a moment had felt a streak of cowardice, he now asked to be allowed to sacrifice his life, to place his multiplied energy at the disposal of his country. Often I had asked myself anxiously what would become of our villages; often flying low over the territories which were now held by the enemy but which I knew inch by inch, I had tried to discover what the enemy plans might be. I had tried to steal from the enemy the secret he guarded so jealously.

Once indeed while flying over San Vendemmiano, over the road which passes near my villa, I discovered a long line of cars slowly traveling eastward. Without a mo-

ment's hesitation I ordered the pilot to lower the plane as much as he could. We were a few hundred feet above the enemy when I let loose on them the fury of our machine gun. Gradually I saw a few men turn for cover towards my villa. This assured me that it, too, was occupied by the enemy, and I fired repeatedly at my own house. Small satisfaction though the deed brought me, it yet sufficed to drive away somewhat of the deep dejection which recent events had instilled.

However, my usual program was interrupted one day by a communication from the Intelligence Division of the Third Army, sent by Colonel Smaniotto, ordering me to report at once to the Command for important instructions. I had but just returned from a flight and was editing my report on the movements I had noticed on the coast roads and the modifications I had noticed on an enemy bridge over the new Piave, when the summons came. Swiftly

enough I traversed by automobile the short distance between the aviation camp at Marcon and the headquarters of the division which were in a villa in Mogliano. The colonel immediately received me, with his customary smile and courteous manner. He was seated in front of a large table burdened by maps and books—a high table which dominated other smaller tables at which officers in charge of special departments of the Intelligence Division were seated. Colonel Smaniotto was the leading mind in the Intelligence Division. He possessed the calm, fine, discriminating mentality which analyzed all the varied reports—strange, common, unusual, gathered from all sides, whence he prepared an exact summary of the enemy forces and plans for the use of the General Staff. With his clear, straightforward look he would stare into our eyes to divine our thoughts; his manner was serious and tranquil; his entire personality inspired faith and confidence.

“Are you from Vittorio?” he asked me.

“No, sir. I was born in Venice, but the old house of my family is in Vittorio, and in Vittorio, Congliano, Cimetta, Fontanelle, in fact scattered all over that region we have—or rather we had—extensive properties.”

“Did you know,” the Colonel continued with a smile, “that the command of the German army of Von Buelow had established itself in your house in Vittorio?”

“I did not know.”

“But why? Don’t you read the daily bulletins which are circulated to keep the aviators informed about the enemy forces?”

“No, sir. For the past few days I have been flying a great deal and I have had less time for reading.”

“What would you say,” he asked me point-blank, “if I were to propose to you an excursion to go on the enemy side for the purpose of seeking exact information about the condition of the enemy? Nothing

has been determined as yet—the time, nor the means for effecting this project. Think it over. We need a trustworthy person, a man who is serious, and in whom we can have absolute faith. I am glad to see you have already two medals, one of silver and one of bronze. This might be a chance for you to earn a medal of gold. As I said before, I have as yet no particular plan. It is up to you, knowing well as you do that countryside, and the habits of its peasantry and their dialects, to devise some way for landing and keeping yourself on the other side. Tell me, now, when your family left Vittorio, didn't you leave some custodian or guardian to look after the houses?"

The question annoyed me, and I answered half in jest and half in earnest, "The day of the retreat we were really very little pre-occupied by our own affairs, but I do believe, however, that an old agent and a woman did not succeed in getting behind our lines. I presume they remained in our

house, where they used to stay before. But, Colonel, do you think the Germans will have permitted them to remain in our house? I do not think so. I am inclined to believe, however, that many of our peasant families which live isolated out in the country, have not been molested, and it would perhaps be better, if I should succeed in reaching the other side, to try to join one of these families. I know how deep is their affection for my father, and how greatly they love all that belongs to our family.”

“Very well, think it over, and let me have an answer shortly. Meanwhile I want you to live here in the Intelligence Office, that you may become acquainted with the kind of information we receive concerning the doings on the other side. This will not prevent your flying, since I know that would displease you too much.” A broad smile passed over and illumined his soldierly face. “Here you will get a clearer notion of the

possibilities of my project, and a better angle on the customs of the enemy in invaded territory. Therefore to-morrow you will be transferred to my department, without, however, binding yourself in any way to undertake the trip I have mentioned. I shall expect you to-morrow."

Our hands met in a firm, cordial clasp, and I left him.

All night I could not sleep because of the thousands of plans I kept revolving in my mind. One plan suggested another, and then another, until there were heaps and heaps of them, confused, without beginning or end, just overlapping fragments of ideas. Towards dawn I slumbered a little, but I had to get up early to go to the office. On the fifteenth of January I became a part of that complicated organization which gathers and summarizes all the information the army has about the enemy.

II

SINCE I was well acquainted with the German language, I was assigned the special task of questioning the prisoners and of translating such documents and diaries as were often enough found upon them. The work was interesting and gave me a clear conception of the terrible and disastrous condition of our lands after the invasion of the enemy. While reading or listening to the account of some especially frightful deed, I often asked myself whether, if those of our soldiers who knew not how to lay down their lives for their country to keep the enemy from violating their lands, had known some of the facts I know, they would not have found strength

enough to resist. Ought not the Italian soldiers, who during the terrible days of October were compelled to abandon the villages which they had won, for which they had suffered and fought, know what became of those regions and their people, after their departure? Had not the inhabitants placed implicit faith in the ability of the soldiers to resist; looking upon them as protecting brothers? Yet later, these same soldiers were compelled to abandon to the enemy, one by one, these very towns and villages, whose terrorized inhabitants were then compelled to fly, so relinquishing the uttermost of their possessions to the mercy of the invader.

Among the many documents which passed through my hands were not lacking some of considerable importance. I see before me a letter, found in the pocket of a subaltern officer of the Fourth German Army, which he had not had time to dispatch. In part the letter read:

“Dear Friend:

“After a painful time, the good Lord God gave up wings and, from the icy and snowy caves, has transported us into a magnificent country. We were half-dead, but now we are beginning to resuscitate. This is a splendid country. There is everything one wants; food and drink enough for all to choke on, rice and coffee in abundance and enough red wine to bathe in.”

Another letter found on a German prisoner reads:

“We are living like princes, we have food and drink, and may it always continue thus! If only I could send some to my family in Berlin. But there is not room for much in our packs, and furthermore, one would have to carry it for days along mountainous roads a distance of about thirty-five or forty kilometers.

Right now we have before us a whole cheese, round and large as a cart wheel, and we don't know what to do with it. No one is hungry, yet the cheese is good."

Such acknowledgments filled me with rage. Those who yesterday were hungry are now full and they have filled themselves by stealing from our homes!

The many documents which passed through my hands demonstrated how extensive were the requisitions of the Germans who robbed the poor peasants of the things they needed most.

From the notebook of a Czech officer, a deserter, under date of November 15, 1917, I read:

"Everyone requisitions what he pleases. The plowers are busy all night cooking rice with tomatoes.

"At Villa Santina a supply of food-stuffs sufficient to last ten days for the entire division was found. Every com-

pany formed a requisition patrol; the very privates go to the peasants and requisition cattle, pigs, horses, mules, cheese, wine, wheat, etc. In every patrol there is a soldier who knows Italian. The army, during its advance lives on the country and eats more than is necessary. The troops in the rear are always drunk.

“We found and requisitioned from the civilians bicycles, many motorcycles and automobiles.”

“October 29.—We pass through Colobrida, Prepotto, where we find wine. We stop at Villa Rubini. The men take advantage to find some Chianti, which is insuperable, and many get drunk.”

“October 31.—At Carpeneto I requisition a saddle horse and a mule, and during the stop we refresh ourselves with champagne. At night Captain Vellsang arrives in an automobile requisitioned for the command at Udine, where we took a quantity of things.”

“November 24.—Our attendants were continuously cooking corn-meal and chicken.”

These diaries speak mostly of the greed with which the enemy steals, destroys and consumes every valuable thing in the land. The voracity and greed of the Germans and Austrians are such that after continued debauches of wines and liquors, the provisions are soon exhausted. As an example of the voracity of these men, I shall quote the report of one of their meals from the calendar of an Austrian Lieutenant of the Second Battalion of the 47th Infantry:

“November 11.—We ate splendidly; in the morning—coffee and milk, half a pound of butter, a pound of bread. In the middle of the morning—half a pound of Gorgonzola cheese, half a pound of excellent preserved fruits, a tablet of chocolate. Luncheon—broth, roast veal with fresh peas and rice, a bottle of ex-

cellent wine, and then coffee (without sugar). In the afternoon—a box of sardines, bread and butter with honey. Supper—roast pork with prunes, black coffee. And not on one day only, but continuously; especially after the requisitions. We seldom have less. At nine in the evening, we have a can of condensed milk, three boxes of sardines, a pound of preserved pears, and six candles apiece.”

From questions submitted to an Austrian prisoner, I learnt that the troops stationed between the Tagliamento and the Piave kept up their march with supplies taken from the factories and houses. The prisoners themselves admitted that their lot was hard because they could no longer get drunk, nor gorge themselves on the chicken, sausages and fruit which they had found so plentiful in every house and factory. From a conversation with an officer of the Third Regiment of Kaiserjäger I

learnt, "The foodstuffs found and requisitioned have all been consumed and wasted. Whatever our soldiers cannot devour or preserve on the spot is shipped to Austria and Germany. The 94th Division while at Tolmezzo requisitioned all kinds of woven materials and the officers sent much of it, as their own private property, to Kotshach by means of auto-ambulances.

"Captain Opitz sent home two hundred pounds of coffee, which in Austria is worth about 500 Kronen. Captain Pflanzler collected precious oil paintings during the offensive. He found the most precious near Castellavazzo.

"A bicycle of the 7th company of the Third Battalion of trench diggers was stolen from a civilian by the Captain.

"The officers sent home sacks of rice and coffee. At Timau everything was taken from the civilians. The horses are fed with maize."

From prisoners taken in Val Bella December 24, 1917, I learnt that there was a rumor current among the officers and men that the Italian cities had been thoroughly sacked and that the objects collected had been sent to Germany and Austria through the co-operation of the military forces. It is said that superior officers offered to buy for a few pence, whatever booty the soldiers could lay hands upon.

In another diary taken from a German officer of the 5th Division (which had penetrated to Udine), the following was found under date of November 6, 1917:

“After we had spent several days at Rovereto on the Tagliamento we withdrew to Udine. As the command gave me full police powers I had the authority to enter all the shops which were still furnished with considerable stocks. I spent my time making raids, and during one of these I found materials suitable

for military and civilian clothing. I filled three cases full of them and I had them sent through the military station at Neuhaus. I hope some day I shall find them at home. I have also secured some material for the Captain."

Deserters from the enemy lines confirmed the reports that the Germans took away and sent to Germany all that could be removed—church bells, beds, household linens, entire doors and windows. Their pillaging was so complete that some houses have only the walls and roof left. Furthermore the Austro-Hungarian authorities organized special squads to visit every house and requisition foodstuffs, kitchen utensils, livestock and pack animals. At present the population is compelled to buy at a high price the supplies which were taken from them.

Proof of this organized thieving which was supported by the enemy authorities,

was obtained not merely from writings and conversations with scattered individuals but from reports in enemy newspapers. The *Gazette* of Veneto which was printed at Udine for the Austrian government published the following notice, "The Administration of the Austro-Hungarian Army has ordered the requisitioning of metals in the occupied regions, to meet the army's demands for metals. Church bells, roofs of copper or lead, lightning rods and railings will be requisitioned."

A communication received by our command during the first days of our retreat to the Piave said, "At Graz, and at Vienna, a trade in Italian products has been begun. Besides the small quantities of rice, oil, and lemons carried by soldiers on leave and bargained for at the stations by Jewish speculators, rice is beginning to arrive at Graz in important quantities. The authorities have been asked to pass measures to prevent speculation with this rice, and to re-

serve it for the use of the sick and for children." The children and the sick of the invaded territories were left without these necessary articles of food.

From scattered phrases found in documents, or overheard in conversations with soldiers and officer prisoners, I gathered a general notion of the carefree, corrupt life led by the troops in the invaded regions. A few notes from the diary of the Czech officer who had deserted follow:

"Lieutenant Skebek and an employee got drunk in a villa at Pelos with wine requisitioned at Auronzo and later devastated a villa. At Belluno the gendarmes were supposed to guard the wine cellars; but in a moment there gathered before the house a mob of soldiers with pails, basins, and other vessels.

"The artillery officers have organized nightly orgies in a villa near Feltre; there were more than enough women.

“Almost all the horses have diarrhoea because they have eaten too much.”

The same spectacle of gluttony and drunkenness at the expense of our people, is repeated in the diary of the Austrian lieutenant of the second battalion of the 47th infantry who has already been mentioned.

“December 2.—Visited the Command of the Regiment. Had breakfast with the commander of the battalion. We drank much excellent wine. At three in the afternoon, the officers of the command of the regiment left, hilarious from the wine. The officers of the 16th company and others withdrew singing, and they would have continued their orgy at my house had I not made all the wines and liquors disappear.”

An Italian soldier and an officer, pris-

oners escaped from the hands of the Austrians, reported the following:

“The German officers in command lead a gay, carefree life. They do not mind being seen in public, driving in open carriages with women of bad repute, brought there from their own country. During the first days of the occupation, the enemy troops, exalted with victory, would parade the streets, shouting joyously. They would enter private houses by forcing doors and windows, and make for storerooms full of provisions, and for wine cellars, with bestial avidity.”

In sharp contrast to this life of gluttony and greed was the life led by the Italian prisoners, both those in the invaded regions and those transported back to German prison camps. The following extract is taken from a report of Lieutenant Massa Antonio, a physician who was sent back to Italy after a term in a prison camp:

“By a long and weary journey we were taken to Trento, then to Gardolo and finally to Sigmundsherberg, to a camp of Russian prisoners. The physicians were at once invited to take care of their own soldiers. Captain Luigi Ferrero, the head physician, entrusted me to take care of Group IV. I therefore found myself living side by side with our own soldiers, suffering their physical and mental tortures and hardships.

“There I saw a pitiable spectacle. Our own soldiers were left for whole days without a bit of food. Hungry and sad they would stand against the wire railings begging for food, for a morsel of bread. Daily, fifteen or twenty soldiers who had fallen from sheer exhaustion were brought into the hospital. Gradually the entire camp was cleared of grass by our hungry men who avidly plucked and chewed it in an attempt to allay their hunger.

“During the first days our soldiers were submitted to extremely strict discipline. The punishment posts were always occupied, and the prisons rapidly filling, for the Austrians believed in giving vent to their hatred against us by floggings and beatings.

“The enemy soldiers and petty officers became vile merchants who robbed our poor soldiers of whatever little money they had by selling them pieces of bread at exorbitant rates. Because of the bad quality of the food there were many cases of auto-intoxication. The soldiers welcomed a chance to go and work for they hoped for better treatment.

“Besides acting as journeying physician I was also entrusted with the inspection of the mess and of the discipline of our soldiers.

“I cannot express how painful, how agonizing a task that was. Daily, soldiers would come to me with tales of in-

credible treatment, with their bodies livid from the cruel and fierce blows of the Austrians. Exhausted, worn-out, veritable bundles of human rags, they would tell me of the incredible labors expected of them; how, among the snow of the Carpathians, half-naked, without shirts, while the cold which was far below freezing point, stiffened their bodies, they were compelled to start out at three or four in the morning and walk until eight, after having had only a cup of tea; and how they were then forced to work until night. As payment for their superhuman labors, the poor wretches received a cheap substitute for coffee with one-quarter of a pound of bread.

“During a meal of the officers in Bucovina an Italian violinist was compelled to play the Italian national hymn, and while he was playing he was made the target for all sorts of table rubbish: left-over bits of food and the dregs of bever-

ages. Some of our soldiers were compelled to drag for fifty miles a car in which was the baggage of an Austrian officer. Did one of the tired prisoners attempt to stop a moment for rest, the officer leveled his revolver at him.

“With my very eyes, I saw Grenadier Dantin die some minutes after he had been badly beaten. A special report of his case was made to Captain Ferrero. I made another report against a wealthy Hungarian undertaker who said to our soldiers, ‘You did not die at the front, but you will die here.’

“In the marshes of the Danube our prisoners are placed in the hands of war contractors who treat them like veritable slaves. They try to get the maximum labor from them. Our prisoners were given to all those who asked for them, without any control from the government as to the way in which they were to be treated. They were sent to the squares

of the cities, and there exposed for public choice, just as though they were cattle.

“In the camp of Sigmundherberg the sanitary service is completely in the hands of the Italians who do all they can to alleviate the ills and pains of the soldiers. There are absolutely no medicines, surgical tools and sterilizing apparatus. The sick are fed with corn meal, sour cabbages, and dried codfish.

“There are very many sick, especially of tuberculosis, which assumes every form. Statistics show that this disease was found in thirty cases out of a hundred visited, and that it was continually increasing because of the scarcity of food.”

We learnt of the treatment of Italian prisoners taken during the Austrian invasion from escaped Italian prisoners and from reports from captured Austrians. The Czech officer, mentioned in the forego-

ing, wrote in his diary: "While the Italian prisoners were passing through the city (of Feltre) the women along the streets wept."

The following information I received from two automobilists, by name Ventura and Gandolfo, with whom I was able to speak:

"The life of the Italian prisoners is most terrible. They are treated with scorn, are scantily fed, and are compelled to work at nerve-racking tasks. The harshest kind of a life would be welcomed by them to-day as a liberation."

The two automobilists on December 13 saw the fresh grave of two Italian infantrymen, taken prisoners. They both affirmed that the prisoners had died of hunger. The Italian soldiers had not been thought worthy of burial in sacred ground, despite the protestations made by a worthy priest,

therefore their graves were out upon a common field.

Finally, here is the story of two Italian prisoners who escaped from the enemy—Lieut. Mario Zannini of the Second Battalion, 245th Infantry, and Private Tortoriello Domenico of the Third Battalion, 21st Infantry.

“There are still many of our men wandering round the country. Some of them have not as yet been arrested and others are escaped prisoners. Their condition is most miserable. They have about one two-pound loaf of bread to divide among six. The under-nourishment weakens the organs and they can no longer work. Several have taken sick, and a few have died from exhaustion.

“Those who belong to the invaded regions try to escape to their own homes, where relatives and friends do all they can to protect them, though, often

enough, they fall again into the hands of the tyrants, who then make them pay for their flight with all sorts of torment, ill-treatment, and injury."

What sort of an existence did the people of the invaded lands lead; those people who so long tranquilly waited in the hope that we would forever drive away from them the eternal menace of the enemy ready to pounce upon them?

The diary of the Czech officer says, "The civilians are living in a most critical condition. The passing troops have taken everything from them, edibles, horses, mules, wagons, kitchen utensils. Whatever remained, especially objects of copper, were seized by the gendarmes."

The Germans do their requisitioning in the following manner: they order, at the point of a gun, the peasants to open their doors, and when they have thus frightened them, succeed in getting everything from

them. Enemy deserters who have come to our lines have confirmed the vexations to which the troops subject the people of the invaded lands. According to them, the cruelest and most savage are the Slovenes, the Bosnians and the Croatians, especially the Croatians who have indeed been known to enter a home, and at the point of a gun, take away the few provisions left to a family by the rationing committee. Often the Croatian officers themselves incite the troops to pillage and plunder. Wherever the Croatians pass they leave traces of their brutality not only on property but also on the people, both men and women, whom they treat with violence.

The same report was confirmed by a deserter from the second battalion, 23rd Regiment of chasseurs, who said:

“The people of the occupied lands are continually subjected to injuries. Almost all the food they have has been taken

from them. Wherever anything is left by the official requisitioning committees, the soldiers, especially the Slovenes, steal the rest. Near Sesto al Roghena several Slovenes fired fifteen shots at a civilian who refused to let them remove his goods. He was seriously wounded.

“With my own eyes I saw near the Tower of Mos, two drunken Hungarian soldiers beating an old man who would not let them steal his cow.”

The Croatian troops were ready to steal and plunder wherever they passed. A Hungarian volunteer, taken prisoner, assured us he had seen at Rivarotta (Palazzo) a group of Croatians threatening a priest with a stick unless he immediately procured them some girls. At Portogruaro a woman threatened to wound with a stick a corporal who attempted to do her violence.

The following impressions are taken from the afore-mentioned automobilists.

Ventura and Gandolfi, who as prisoners were placed in the postal service by the Austrians, but who succeeded in escaping:

“We entered for the first time into Udine under the hands of the Austrians, on November 3, at about three in the afternoon. The city’s wounds were all still open and bleeding. There were still smouldering fires along the outskirts. Houses were thrown open, stores shattered; all that which made for a prosperous, wealthy trade, turned out onto the streets—furniture, linen, utensils, crockery, broken bottles, old papers and families keepsakes. Over the smiling, peaceful city, it seemed as if a destructive squall had swept. The automobile stopped at the hospital of the seminary. In one corner of the street three young Italian women were offering such little comfort as lay in their power with their

scanty food and their most welcome presence.

“The city was full of German and Austrian soldiers hunting from house to house and from store to store for booty. The officers took part without a shame in the pillaging.

“Doors to houses were thrown in and the inhabitants compelled, by threats, to help in the plunder of their own belongings. After a short time, there was not a single family which had not been robbed and plundered.

“In the country regions the soldiers rush with impunity from one farmhouse to another leaving everywhere the traces of their rapine. The military authorities encourage the soldiers to send home to their families packages of provisions, knowing well enough that such have not been bought, but have been seized by violence. Furthermore the authorities themselves leave behind them, in ex-

change for horses and provisions requisitioned, receipts either with illegal signatures or irregularly compiled, or with ridiculous phrases, as for instance, 'Fulle Kusse,' or signed, 'Cadorna will pay you.'

"Between San Fior and Monticella, near the inn of Gai, a detachment of German soldiers who wanted to occupy a house inhabited by about forty old persons, women and children, not only entered with violence, but in a spiteful, bestial mood, threw all the furniture from the windows.

"Near the headquarters of the 51st corps, a peasant family had succeeded in saving from theft a cow. One night, a group of soldiers entered by sheer force and took her away."

Two other prisoners who succeeded in escaping after many adventures, Lieut. Zannini and Private Torotoriello, formerly mentioned, added the following details to

the account of the life of those in the invaded districts:

“The enemy troops, drunk, entered the houses and dwellings and broke and burnt the furniture which was thrown out of the windows.

“The young women, terrorized by the looks of the barbarians, barricaded themselves behind piles of furniture. Many deeds of violence were attempted and accomplished.”

Lieutenant Zannini told me how he took by the chest and hurled out of the door, at San Michele di Piave, a German soldier who in the presence of her mother tried to seduce a young girl, after having wounded with a knife an old man who had tried to defend her.

Private Torotoriello told me he saw one day, the body of a girl on the street near Polcenigo. She had thrown herself from

the window in an attempt to escape from two German officers. The same soldier at Stevenà di Caneva, was threatened with a revolver by two other German officers, because he would not forsake a young woman whose mother had entreated him to protect her. He later learnt of the violence done and the wrath of the entire population which openly revolted against the authorities. In the face of such violence, thievery, bestiality and rape, the Italian people reacted.

The population of Fouzaso composed largely of women and children lived apart in silence, maintaining a dignified, proud demeanor in front of the Austrians. There was a look of sadness on the face of every Italian. Every day the church was crowded with worshippers. One could often see, along the street, women, who when they stopped to talk to one another could not keep back the tears. The children sang a ditty with the refrain, "Mount Grappa you are my country." The song is forbidden.

From the belfry the bells have been removed. That was a painful occurrence, for the bells were hurled from the belfry and broke into a thousand pieces right before the eyes of the people. Some of them, weeping, gathered a few of the broken bits of bronze and cherished them as though they were sacred relics. The fragments of the bells were at once loaded on automobiles and sent to Primolano. Meanwhile, the inhabitants of the village were ever discussing an Italian counter-offensive to drive out the Austrians.

Such are the documents I gathered while I remained one month with the Intelligence Division of the Third Army.

Meanwhile my thoughts ran somewhat as follows:

“I have as yet no plan, as yet no definite program, but everything must be tried, everything must be risked against this vile enemy which devastates our

properties, steals all that which we hold most beautiful and sacred, violates our women, and commits every kind of abomination. Of what value is my life when compared with the good which our command might derive from having on the other side a trusted person, capable of sending to it daily detailed reports on the location of troops, on the condition of the enemy troops, on the plans of the enemy? My plans will take shape gradually, but meanwhile I am certain of one thing—I am going to try everything, I am going to dare the incredible, I am going to make real the fantastic. The enemy! He is destroying my houses; the paintings, the tapestries, the relics of our church at Vittorio have been taken from their frames and sent towards the far-off ways of Austria. If they are pillaging my house and destroying with it all which memory holds most sacred, then I want to assume the great risk and the great

honor of attempting to destroy their army.”

And so one morning I presented myself before Colonel Smaniotto and said in a steady voice, “Sir, I have as yet no definite plan, but I am disposed to accept in broad terms your proposition. At first the undertaking seemed inconceivable, but after what I have seen and heard about the way in which the invader is treating our lands and the inhabitants who have remained there, nothing is any longer inconceivable to me, nothing is unattemptable.”

The Colonel grasped my hand, smiled good-naturedly, and said, “That is why I placed you among the prisoners; that is why I gave you access to such important documents. I knew that your sturdy type of citizen and soldier could not remain insensible to the cry of pain which comes to us from every land across the Piave. And now let us get to work. We must plan and organize the undertaking.”

III

BEFORE taking any final decision and attempting to study a means for conveying myself within the enemy lines, I decided to get a working knowledge of the great machine, of the delicate and intricate systems on which our service of information is based.

Many believe that the system of espionage is an extraordinary thing which is conducted entirely in the territory occupied by the enemy. Others imagine that all spy work resembles that done in spy plays, plays wherein a fascinating woman devises vast schemes with the help and collaboration of paid rascals. Both these elements exist in real espionage work, but to a much less degree than is commonly believed.

Our spy system subsidises various agen-

cies abroad whose task is to gather and control all reports and rumors which may have a bearing on the national defense. But the majority of the reports which come from the interior regions of enemy countries are vague and not worthy of much consideration, because the persons who have been hired to send the reports cannot and must not always be believed. Furthermore, as it is not easy to get reports through the strict censorship offices established by every country, it is necessary to resort to ingenious tricks, to invisible inks, to a multitude of devices which tend seriously to delay the arrival of messages. As every report, even the most insignificant, is worth much more if sent with all haste than if delayed, it is usually more convenient not to make use of such informers. They may be valuable at times to give a general impression of internal conditions, of the troops, of the civilian population, and the food supply. Even this information, however, may be

had without the use of such informers, by a careful perusal of the enemy newspapers. For although such papers are carefully censored before being sent abroad, nevertheless a vigilant and intelligent eye may gather from reading between the lines what the conditions obtaining in the country may be.

The most important part of our espionage system is conducted in our own territory, by sharpening our own spirit of observation, by seeking to gather everywhere all the many scattered rumors heard about the enemy. Details which at first may seem insignificant, may become extremely useful when compared with other details, collated with other observations and completed by detailed, careful investigations. The service of espionage is merely the application on a broad scale of a vast study of analysis and synthesis. It is nothing more than a police system which, instead of trying to discover the secrets of a small drama, seeks to investigate great causes, seeks to pene-

trate the essence of that great drama in which the major interests of two great nations, the future happiness of two great peoples are compromised. The two opposing armies even as they try to damage each other by the use of arms, endeavor also to bring ruin on each other by the use of an elaborate system of intrigues and disguises through which each tries to discover the secret of the other and to guard jealously his own.

The sources from which information is obtained differ widely. I shall discuss only the principal ones that I may place clearly before the reader the various means at my disposal were I to attempt to do what the Colonel proposed to me.

An essential element of modern espionage, one of the elements which has revolutionized all that was done and attempted in past wars, is the aeroplane. The small reconnoitring machine which flies over the enemy defenses at great heights, is almost

safe from the fire of enemy anti-aircraft guns, and that the observer may make his observations unmolested and lose no time in defending himself from possible attacking enemy planes, several chasing machines are sent out with him as sort of guardian angels. Nothing should escape the vigilant, educated eye of the observer. His mind, well-acquainted with the enemy situation, his vision, accustomed to the appearance of terrain from on high, examines the roads, searches the railroads, observes both fields and camps, and since at times some detail may escape the notice of the observer, the other eye, the faithful lens of the camera, completes the picture by recording what the observer may have overlooked. These are exact, useful, tangible records of what has been seen; records which can be consulted under any circumstances.

The aeroplane is used in the field of tactics and in the field of strategy. In the former it is especially useful in compiling

a series of uninterrupted photographs in which not a millimeter of the enemy's territory escapes the sensitive negative. By studying these photographs one gathers a notion of the course of the enemy trenches and the position of their artillery. In the field of strategy the aeroplane penetrates far into the enemy territory to observe points of especial importance. After our retreat, for instance, at a certain time, it was necessary for our command to know whether the enemy had restored the bridges on the Isonzo, on the Tagliamento and on the Livenza. A patrol of five chasing machines started out together each entrusted with the task of observing and photographing a small zone. Several hours later, our command was informed of all it wanted to know. To frustrate these observations the enemy had recourse to several agencies.

"Camouflage," introduced by the enemy to render everything less visible from on high, is now universally known. But besides

this, there are other tricks used in warfare to fool the enemy. When we were on the Carso, during one of our offensives, while the enemy was amassing great forces to oppose our advance up the back of the Faiti, the aviators who for many days had been flying over the large valley of Brestovizza, were able to observe from on high long lines of wagons and great columns of artillery directed from Goyansco towards the Nabresina valley. From information later received from deserters we learnt that the wagons were empty, that the cannons were of wood, and that the enemy had planned all that complicated demonstration show of force as a fiction to deceive us about its real center of reinforcement. The Germans were also in the habit of constructing entire fictitious aviation camps so as to induce Allied aviators to believe that great offensive preparations were being centered at that point whereas in reality the enemy planes were gathering quietly elsewhere.

Similar methods have at times been adopted by us to protect our stations from enemy bombardments. At Udine the various stations were kept completely dark at night and nearby a fictitious station was erected which was always kept light, in the hope that some deceived aviator might waste his bombs upon it.

An important means of observing what happens behind the enemy lines are the Drago balloons. Their task is not only to direct the fire of our artillery and to discover, from the flashes, the position of the enemy guns, but to notice all that which happens within the inner lines of the enemy. Their observations are in certain cases more efficient than those from the aeroplanes, since being ever at a constant altitude, they can follow with greater attention every small particular.

Our balloons, for example, used to give the alarm to our chasers on the field every time an enemy plane arose. They observed

all the movements of trains, so that we were able to compile a schedule of all arrivals and departures of Austrian trains, a feat which greatly aided us in the correct concentration of our fire.

The Drago balloons are also entrusted with the task of recording the aerial activities of the enemy. Every fifteen days, the observers in the balloons must record upon a special chart, the number of enemy planes and balloons which have passed over our lines, and indicate the exact line over which they passed. The study of these charts is extremely interesting. An attack is usually directed against the spot which has been most photographed, and over which the enemy planes have passed most frequently. Therefore, if a record of the enemy flights is kept, it is easy to deduct which points of our defense are most interesting to the enemy.

A practical method of discovering secrets of the enemy is the interception of the radio-

telegrams which the enemy stations exchange among themselves. These telegrams, however, are always in code, and it is very difficult to learn the key to the code. There are certain cryptographers, highly experienced, who spend the entire day trying to decipher the hissing sounds which are intercepted by our receiving stations. At times they succeed in unraveling a few threads, but often, the enemy, who knows the heavy penalties to be paid by not changing codes frequently, has changed the mode of the cipher just when our experts had begun to understand it. It is all a duel of wits, a complicated game of stratagems and deceits, in which the adversaries study each other vigilantly in an attempt to take such advantage of any slight slip as may afford the opportunity for the striking of a fatal blow.

Another element of great importance are the intercepting telephone stations. Special detachments, highly trained and equipped

with special devices, leave our trenches by night to lay telephone lines along the ground as near the enemy trenches as possible. Powerful microphones, capable of enlarging the smallest sound, receive the sound vibrations in their travel along the ground and transmit them to our lines where a person who knows German well, and all the languages and dialects spoken on the other side is delegated to listen day and night to such messages as are intercepted.

But counter-schemes have been found even for this method of espionage.

Telephone lines with double wires are the only ones used now near the front line trenches, and with these it is much simpler to intercept messages. Furthermore, orders were issued that all important communications be transferred in code language. An expert trained ear, and an alert mind, however, can readily unravel the little disguises and stock words used by the troops at the front. For example, it is not very

difficult to interpret the significance of the following message overheard on the fifteenth of January by our station at Grave di Poppadopoli:

“Hello—Hello Adler. Who is on the wire?”

“Weiss. Bad day to-day.”

“The katzelmacher has molested us a great deal this morning. It has made a great noise with its rattle and we had three bananas and a few wounded. I beg you to send us by foreign exchange many caramels because those of the Kaiser Stellung are almost finished.”

This Kaiser Stellung was beginning to annoy us. For some time we had heard her mentioned continually in the messages we intercepted and had not been able to discover from the prisoners or others what the enemy referred to by that name. Purposely to keep us ignorant of its designs, the enemy troops opposite us had given special names to every important locality

and position, names which differed from those assigned to them on the maps and charts. Finally, after numerous researches, we succeeded in guessing the three different points, each of which had the characteristics which we had noticed mentioned about the Kaiser Stellung. At a fixed hour, our artillery opened fire on all three points which we thought to be the Kaiser Stellung. Shortly after, one of our intercepting stations picked up the message, "Time, 1.15 P. M. The enemy has fired three shots of large caliber near the Kaiser Stellung. No wounded." The Kaiser Stellung had been discovered!

There are also special observers in the trenches who compile nightly bulletins of every incident or sound which has been seen or heard in the adversary's trenches. For example the observatory of Case Bressanin communicated on the night of January 13, that an unusual rumbling of carts was heard near the first lines and that all night there

were many voices of persons apparently engaged in transporting material. The same night, the noise of pick-axes in use in the trenches was distinctly heard. The enemy was constructing bridgeheads in his trench lines. Periscopes, cunningly hidden in the trees, can examine the level ground of the zones nearby, but observations from them are not very fruitful because the enemy usually refrains from any movement during the daytime.

The most fruitful and interesting of the methods of getting information is the study of the documents found on prisoners and the questioning of prisoners and deserters. Often the prisoners have no desire to talk, and armed with the pride which every soldier should feel before the enemy, they refuse to give any interesting information about their own troops. But sometimes, that which cannot be obtained by frankness, is obtained through deceit.

In the rooms in the concentration camps

in which the prisoners are placed, microphones which receive everything said in the room, even if in an undertone, have been installed. At the other end of the wire there is a constant attendant who listens and records everything, and often overhears something of importance.

But often one cannot trust to luck. It is at times necessary to force a conversation from an important prisoner supposedly in possession of many valuable secrets. And for this too, there is a method, if one knows how to be prudent. In the concentration camps there are always several persons, usually deserters from the other side, who have passed to our service. Whenever necessary these persons disguise themselves as prisoners and in this way they often succeed in gaining the confidence of the most reserved and those who have enveloped themselves in the most profound silence whenever questioned. When spoken to by these disguised prisoners they have at times

revealed important news, in the belief that they were talking to a comrade.

In this service the Czechs have been especially valuable and have often furnished us with precious information. All these reports when compiled, all these details however insignificant at first sight, when sifted through the intelligence of a man accustomed to collect and co-ordinate, furnish our commanding officers with an exact notion of what is happening in the enemy territory. The news thus gathered is far more valuable than that which could be collected by spies two or three hundred miles inside the enemy lines. For example, let us examine the reports for several days in January:

(From questions asked a Czech prisoner of the 21st Infantry Regiment, on January 16.)

“It seems as if the Austrians are preparing a surprise attack to drive the

Italians from their bridgehead at Capo Sile. The 21st Regiment will soon be relieved by a regiment of Hungarians."

(From the observation post at Taglio of Sile.)

"Night of January 17. Heard the rumblings of wagons, and observed great commotion on the part of the enemy as though there had been the relief of a regiment."

"Time 9.35. Our reconnoitring apparatus in front of the 23rd Corps has observed a column of wagons about half a mile long, near Torre di Mosto."

(Observations from the Drago Balloon of the 23rd section bis. of Porte Grandi.)

"Time 10.50. Noticed great deal of dust along the road 'La Salute Caorle.'

"Time 11. Long trains at the station of San Stino of Livenza. Smoking locomotive at the eastern end of the station. During the entire day it was noticed that two more trains arrived than during the other days, and that there was a great deal of unloading on the field near the above-mentioned station."

(From the interception station at Chiesanuova.)

"Time 1 P. M. (Hungarian language). Hello, Appony. Take good care of the stocks of artillery because I imagine it will be cold to-night. The Captain has ordered that all be at their stations by seven o'clock and that the cadet come back before night."

All these details united and considered, caused the Colonel to believe that the enemy had planned a surprise attack for the night

of January 18. Orders were accordingly given to the troops and the artillery and when, after a brief bombardment, a brigade of Hungarian soldiers attacked our advanced troops at the bridgehead of Capo Sile, and was boldly met by our troops, the enemy suffered heavy losses and was compelled to withdraw after having left several prisoners in our hands.

Such is the value of an acute intelligence service!

IV

THAT which had the greatest effect on me while at the intelligence office was a description by Lieut. Zannini of the life of the inhabitants of the invaded regions. He told me of their sufferings; he assured me that in every moment, every second, they feel Italian and the more the enemy tries to overcome their sentiments with violence, the greater grows within them the feeling of revolt and exasperation. Lieut. Zannini had been taken prisoner during the retreat and by disguising himself as a soldier prisoner had succeeded in living in hiding for several days among the peasants, who did all they could to protect him from the German gendarmes authorized to seize him. He told me that many of the Italian prisoners, especially

those native to the invaded regions, had succeeded in establishing themselves with some family, which welcomed them indeed because a man was of great help in the work on the fields and in protecting the women from the enemy soldiers.

Throughout the invaded regions the enemy used our prisoners freely for work on the roads to construct the new railroad from Sacile to Vittorio. These prisoners, who are held without food and are compelled to sleep in unhealthy places, often attempt to escape. They wander about the country begging bread right and left, only returning to the concentration camp where the whipping post and the prison await them when they have become exhausted by suffering and privation.

Although the enemy's hatred against our soldiers is great, they cannot always prevent the population from coming to our assistance. At times some of the prisoners, feigning sickness, or because they have special

classification papers, are permitted by the Austrian authorities to reside for some time with an Italian family.

Now, why couldn't I become a prisoner? Why, granted that I succeeded in passing to the other side, couldn't I join one of these companies? The idea seemed commendable since I would then be able to approach some Austrian soldier, and who knows but that among them I might find one able to give me important information! Furthermore, the plan was especially suitable, since the largest concentration camp for prisoners was at Vittorio, and because at Vittorio also there was established the command of the sixth Austrian army and in the proximity of so important a command there is ever more likelihood of indiscretions. Vittorio is again a point of great strategical importance. At Vittorio begins the great road which leads to Belluno and the Cadore, beside the other road which crosses the valley of Folina to Vidor.

In the latest encounters it had been observed that the enemy had always attempted to force our front on the side of the Grappa. Therefore it would be interesting to attempt to know what was taking place within the enemy's back area, where undoubtedly he was making huge preparations.

The fact that the German general Von Buelow himself had established his command at Vittorio, indicated the importance of this post. It was indeed one of those strategical points from which branch forth all the ramifications of the enemy's efforts. At Vittorio I know the land inch by inch; at Vittorio too there remained several persons from my house who could help me greatly and find some food for me, for from all reports it appeared that the food supply in the invaded regions was continually getting worse and that it was difficult even to find a handful of flour with which to make bread.

Nor did it seem difficult to enter one of these concentration camps, because it was

reported that the enemy had not as yet made a complete list of all those in the camps, and furthermore there were many with no qualifying mark except their uniform of Italian soldier. Who knows, but that if I were to succeed in passing for a prisoner I might not be detailed, as were certain of our soldiers, to act as automobilists or letter carrier for some Austrian command? That truly would be ideal for I then could have access to many reports which otherwise would escape me. For at bottom I had become convinced that enemy soldiers are little informed of what happens at headquarters. We Italians are ingenuous enough to believe that the humblest specimen from the enemy army knows all the plans of the enemy, whereas, having regard to the fact that the population which forms the Austrian army is as a whole of a lesser grade of intelligence, I believe that they are less informed of the plans than any one of our soldiers. I believed that should a spy

try to get important information from a plain soldier he would learn little that would be interesting.

A further difficulty which however did not at once occur to me was that of establishing immediate communications with my own lines. Were I employed by the Austrian command, I certainly would have a great deal to do. The life of the two automobilists I had met was full of action and they had little peace either by night or by day. At times they even had to do the rounds for some enemy soldier if they wanted to get a bit of bread to appease their hunger. Therefore my time would be limited. How too could I explain my sudden disappearances, how explain to my companions all those complex secret manipulations necessary to establish communications with the other side? No, the plan of feigning to be a prisoner would not do. Some other plan had to be studied.

I really cannot understand why I worried

my brain so hunting for something extraordinary when the simplest solution was to disguise myself as a peasant. No one can know better than I, who have lived in that region for so many years, the dialect, the customs of its peasants. It seemed therefore plausible that I should seek to become one of them, that I should essay to gain access to some isolated house unhaunted by enemy soldiers, there to establish my general headquarters whence I might get into communication with whatever favorable elements I might find in the nearby regions.

One of the methods I considered valuable for obtaining, without suspicion, the location of the enemy troops, was that of collecting such postcards and newspapers as soldiers often enough forget or leave in the houses where they have dwelt. For on the postcard, beside the address and the number of the regiment, there is always written the number of the Feld Post to which a soldier belongs and this number of the Feld

Post corresponds to the number of the division to which the soldier belongs. It follows therefore that if I could communicate to our side many Feld Post numbers, they who had the division numbers corresponding to those of the Feld Post, would easily be able to compile the location of the enemy troops. This method then seemed to me the most feasible in that it did not entail such questions as might evoke suspicion, because the answers to my unspoken questions would be exact, and because before communicating a report it is ever necessary to have a document on which to base it.

The great difficulty of disguising myself as a peasant on account of my youthful aspect did however give me pause. I did not believe that those prisoners who succeeded in establishing themselves in the homes of friends in the invaded region were of my age, but rather men of an older class who furthermore caused the enemy to believe that they were yet older than in truth

they were. Yet one way of conveying the impression that I was older than my years, was by growing a beard. I believed it would be well for me to let my beard grow, especially as many of the peasants of our regions, notably the mountaineers around Vittorio, have the habit of wearing a thick, untrimmed beard. I resolved then that from the morrow the barber should see me no more, in the hope that in a few weeks I should not recognize my own image in the mirror.

Lieut. Zannini, in his return flight to our own lines, made use of a small rowboat procured near Caorle. Through a small canal he reached the sea, and on a foggy night putting out further, succeeded in reaching our lines near Cortellazzo. Why couldn't I do the same only in the opposite direction? It was true of course that Lieut. Zannini was directed towards our lines and that once he had passed the dangerous zone he had been certain of arriving among friends,

whereas for me the difficulties were bound to increase rather than lessen as soon as I had arrived on the other side. Then too it was absolutely impossible to venture so blindly towards the enemy territory without the company of some fisherman from those regions who knew the coastline well and on what spot to make a landing. Quite true, but where were we to find such a fisherman and one willing to lend his services for so hazardous an undertaking?

One morning I consulted Lieut. Ancillotto about it. He is one of our expert pilots of chasing machines, and owns vast estates in the invaded regions, especially along the sea. Nearly all the lands of the lieutenant are interlaced with drainage canals. It appeared to me that perhaps one of his peasants would know the entire intricate system of canals which lead to the sea. It was no easy matter however to find a man sufficiently cold-blooded for an attempt at such an undertaking, and one

possessing the proper physical and moral attributes necessary for its successful completion.

Who would assure me again that once we had arrived in enemy territory such a man would not lose his courage and betray me by some hasty move or a careless word? However, the more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that for such an enterprise I must have a trusted companion; and one not of officer rank lest there should develop two commands, and two opinions which at times might conflict. This companion must be simple, trustworthy, faithful; one whose sole task was tacitly to obey the orders received, and to be an instrument for furthering my plans and my decisions. There would be, too, moments in which I should need rest but I should not be able to sleep save someone be on guard. The greater my labor, the greater my efforts, the more necessary would it be for me to rest, that I might rebuild and restore my weakened

energies for return to further work. In the same manner when my soldier should prove weary, I would stand on guard for him, and thus each would help the other.

I wished to examine the photographic chart of the flooded region in which I had decided to land with my boat, that I might discover whether a landing was possible. No easy thing to discern from a photograph where there is or is not water! I deemed it best to examine the topographical chart compiled from a careful study of the photographs. Only a few roads emerged from the flooded regions. There were many houses completely surrounded by water. Also from the information I received from Lieut. Zannini, I learned that several families were living isolated in their houses surrounded by water, but since they have set aside certain provisions they welcome the peculiar conditions which prevent more frequent visits from the Austrians. Granted that I arrived as far as the shore with my

boat, it was a doubtful matter whether I should find it possible to navigate the flooded district, since there were but the fewest places of reference by which I might take my bearings. What if, instead, after landing, I were to proceed on foot along one of the roads which had not been flooded? Even this idea, which at first seemed feasible I was forced to abandon, because it was more than probable that the Austrians had placed sentinels along the scattered roads, and it is impossible to force a passage on a road even if there is but one armed man guarding it. In case I were discovered where could I try to escape? Certainly not in the water which would be surrounding me on every side.

From Commander Granaffei, who has charge of our army's affairs with the fleet, I learned that during the night one of our silent motor boats often succeeded in getting very near the shore along Caorle. This motor boat, beside its regular motors, is

equipped with an electric motor which is absolutely noiseless. Why not make the attempt in one of these? If a landing at Caorle, which is at a short distance from our lines, was not possible, why not try to penetrate with the motor boat, farther along the coast where the surveillance of the enemy was assuredly less strict?

Upon examining the map I discovered an admirable spot: the pinegrove which is near the mouth of the Tagliamento. I pictured myself arriving there by night, taking cover in the woods, tranquilly awaiting the rising of the sun that I might study my bearings and then calmly start upon my journey. But alas! There was another difficulty. The mouth of the Tagliamento is more than sixty miles distant from Vittorio, which was the place I had selected as the base from which to begin my work of observation. Sixty miles, which are trifling under normal conditions, become an enormous distance when in enemy territory. For it becomes

necessary in traversing so long a tract to enlist the services of too many people; the spy's secret must be revealed at least in part to too many persons, and although I am absolutely convinced of the loyalty of our people, although I have had numerous proofs that they have risked and suffered all to shield our men, yet who shall assure me that in so vast a zone, among so many people there is not one traitor, one who, not so much to harm me personally as to injure some enemy of his with whom I may have chanced to sojourn, will spy on me? Furthermore it became evident to me that not until I had with my own eyes observed the habits of the enemy, scrutinizing them at work in their own camps, would it become possible for me to wander collecting the necessary information in person. Until I had come in actual contact with them, I believed it were better for me to remain hidden and to use others for my purposes. It did not seem as if the best way in which

to make my debut were to travel over sixty miles of enemy territory, through a zone which would undoubtedly be strictly guarded, in that this territory adjoined the area in which were the bridges, railroads, and the roads along which the enemy was transporting all his new material toward the front.

Upon these considerations, I became convinced that to facilitate the enterprise, it would be necessary for me to set foot in enemy territory not far from the place chosen as general headquarters. The only medium then which would permit me to land not far from Vittorio was the aeroplane. The flats however not far from Vittorio, would facilitate greatly the work of my pilot. Obviously the landing could not be effected during the day time; it would therefore have to be essayed at night. But here again were new difficulties, for night-landings are usually made with the aid of searchlights so that, apart from all other

considerations, a landing would be difficult by the uncertain light of the moon on a landing spot never yet adventured by a pilot.

On examining the map there appeared several fields deemed suitable for the attempt. Near our lines is the aerodrome of Case San Felice where the Austrians during the first days of the retreat had established their hangars, because they believed our supplies of artillery of high caliber to be so depleted that we would not molest them. A vain belief! For I have reason to know that they were not a little surprised when one morning they heard arrive overhead many shots from a naval "152." (I had suggested that series for I could not tolerate the fact that the Germans had adopted as their alighting camp an aerodrome which belonged to me.) After that morning, the enemy aviators transported their tents farther back. But the camp remained, and inasmuch as several

days ago Austrian planes had landed on the field it seemed highly probable that there had been no recent works such as would obstruct the landing of a plane. At times, a small hole, a rock, or a bush is enough to so damage an aeroplane that it cannot again lift from the field. In my case, it was absolutely essential that our aeroplane land in such a manner as for it to be able to be up and away again immediately. For what would become of us if for any reason we were compelled to remain on the other side?

The field of San Felice had moreover the advantage of being little more than a mile distant from one of our farm houses. The inhabitants of this farm house were truly devoted to us and the overseer, whose name was Bellotto, had been in his youth my father's coachman, and was greatly attached to him. But since (there are difficulties in every plan) the field was situated near several houses and very near the highway from Conegliano to Cimetta, which had un-

doubtedly become one of the main arteries for enemy traffic, I did not know whether it would be wise to alight in a field so near dwellings and a main highway. On the other hand, I was convinced that the surveillance near the front would be heavier, and who knows but that near Case San Felice there may be some piece of Austrian artillery of large caliber? It really would be too discouraging, if after having organized and planned every detail we should be taken prisoners at once. No, I believed that it was absolutely necessary for the landing place to be near Vittorio, but in a zone less frequented by the enemy. The zone which I believed more suitable to my purpose was the hilly, wooded section of the near Alps which surround Vittorio. For the little city of Vittorio lies at the foot of the Venetian Alps. It consists of two villages, Ceneda and Serravalle and is all surrounded by hills. The village of Ceneda extends over the plains, whereas that of Serravalle lies

where the valley narrows. The river Meschio flows through Vittorio. The outskirts of Serravalle rest on the Venetian Alps and on the great road d'Alemagna which rises at the pass of Fadalto and divides the mass of the Visentin hill from that of Cansiglio.

There are many lakes in this region. The Fadalto Pass is between Lake Morto and the Lake of Santa Croce. From Santa Croce to Vittorio there are not more than ten miles of steep ascent. Another idea occurred to me; why not make use of a hydroplane? . . . and descend on the Lake of Santa Croce? Even this idea which at first seemed plausible had to be discarded for several reasons. Although the hydroplane can at times penetrate into inland regions, it is not a very practical means of locomotion when away from the sea. In our case we would have to travel forty miles to arrive at the determined spot. It did not seem advisable to venture out at night

into a confused, mountainous region, and furthermore, the wings might, by the light of the moon, be clearly mirrored in the water and so be visible to the enemy, and even did we succeed in landing on the water unobserved, how could I reach the shore?

Therefore I considered instead the zone which lies at the foot of Mount Cavallo, north of Pordenone. The heath of Aviano, which is not more than twenty miles from Vittorio, is very extensive and has numerous places suitable for landings. In fact before the retreat, we had at Comina and at Aviano our largest aviation camps for bombing-planes. Almost all the expeditions of Caproni planes which bombed Pola left from those two camps. The ground is both in good condition and extensive and although there are numerous little streams, these do not afford serious obstacles since they are clearly visible. The region is almost entirely uninhabited and there was no reason to believe that the Austrians had

erected any special construction which might annoy us. If we could land in a field between Fontana Fredda and Aviano, we might try to reach the mountain quickly. The fording of the Livenza River would not give us much trouble, for we could trace it almost to its source. On examining the map, the best point for a crossing seemed to be between Polcenigo and Sarone.

Many matters had to be taken into consideration in order that my plans might be successful. I had first to find a suitable place, then a pilot with such attributes as an aviator and soldier as would enable him to face the many surprises of the undertaking. No type of plane with the propeller in front could be considered, because a landing with such a plane at night is far more difficult, since the pilot cannot see the ground in front of him. Both the "Pomilio" and the "Saml" which were at our disposal were not especially suitable for the kind of descent which we would have to

make. Our plane must be capable of carrying three persons, because I had absolutely decided to take with me a soldier from the invaded regions. This soldier would be of great help to me, and if I decided to stop at some farm house, it would be doubly safe to stop with the parents of this soldier, that our hosts might have a double reason for protecting me and for shielding me if, with my life, the life of one of their own is coupled.

The plane which I deemed would be especially suitable for this operation was the "Voisin," an old type of machine no longer in much use because it is too slow and has not much power of "climb." But in my case neither great speed nor great height was needed. What I did need was a sturdy plane equipped with a truly powerful undercarriage. The "Voisin" rests on four wheels which support the "cabane" and four powerful springs of steel fasten the wheels to the fuselage. I have seen several acci-

dents with a "Voisin," but in many cases the sturdiness of the undercarriage has saved the aviators who, with another plane, would have met with certain death. The "Voisin" is constructed wholly of steel, and I myself had the opportunity of testing its resistance in one of my early flights when, through an error in judgment as to our height on the part of the pilot we struck the top branches of a tree. The steel skeleton of the wings resisted the blow and we had the supreme joy of landing on the ground with our wings covered with the many leaves which we had loosened with our speed.

In regard to the pilot, I had a certain one in mind, Umberto Gelmetti, a Captain in the Bersaglieri, who was in my squadron during those glorious twenty-five days when we battled and conquered in the sky over the Carso. He was now with one of the chasing machines, but still an efficient pilot of the "Voisin." He might prove a suitable

pilot. He was an expert and there was no feat too daring for him to attempt.

On February 27th I went to Captain Gelmetti and I laid my proposal point-blank before him. He accepted the general outline of the plan but wished to confer as to details. My first idea was, starting from our territory, to soar to a great altitude over the established field, then, with engine cut out, to volplane to earth. Captain Gelmetti remarked that although this method had the advantage of not making any noise, it had other difficulties. With our motor "ticking over" we could, if at the last moment we were to spy an obstacle, at once take flight again. For instance, were we when about to land within observation of Austrians encamped, we should have a chance of escaping were our motor in motion, whereas, with motor stopped we should be compelled to accept our fate. Furthermore who would swing the propeller to start our motor again? At times it will take several minutes

to set a propeller going and we in enemy territory would certainly have no time to lose. We might use a small magneto as a self-starter, but such systems are but uncertain resources with aeroplanes in their present state of development, and furthermore, after making a descent with a propeller not in motion our motor would have "gone cold," and we would still be compelled to run the engine for some time upon the ground "to warm her up." This unusual noise would attract the attention of the Austrians. The only means for overcoming all difficulties was to apply such a powerful silencer to the plane as would deaden the noise of the motor, so that while descending, with the engine making but few revolutions, the firing of the engine would scarcely be heard and there would only remain the rustle of the propeller. All these considerations were discussed with Colonel Smaniotto who, promising to take a great interest in the enterprise, gave orders for the transport

to us of an old "Voisin" lying in a park at the front with all equipment we thought necessary.

Meanwhile, my beard was beginning to grow, and since I did not wish to explain to any one the reasons for this adornment on my chin, and since I knew there were many Venetian soldiers from the invaded regions in the eighth Regiment of Bersaglieri, I asked Colonel Smaniotto to send me for a short time to the trenches so that, being in personal contact with those boys, I might the better get to know and choose the type suitable for me as a companion. The choice of a partner in such an undertaking is difficult, because beside the physical and moral attributes and the courage necessary, he must be of a cool temperament, at once calm and calculating, able to weigh well the importance of the mission to which he is called, the dangers he is likely to face, not a man guided merely by his sentiment of patriotism and his ardent de-

sire to get news of or possibly see again his beloved parents who have remained on the other side.

Colonel Pirzio Biroli, who knew of our plan, gave me a long list of willing Venetian soldiers. The choice was really difficult because there were many of them, and I did not wish to compromise myself nor let them know my plans. I kept the real reason for my presence in the trenches a secret even from the officers of the regiment, telling them that I had been delegated by the command to study the aerial activities of our adversaries. I spent whole days conversing with the soldiers, studying their character and seeking the man who seemed to possess the complicated qualities I required. I discarded many at once who would be of great value in an assault, but who did not show the necessary seriousness. I told all of them that I sought the names of the soldiers from the invaded region because the command was desirous of devising a system whereby

they would be able to communicate with their families who had remained therein. In this way, I got them to talk to me, to ask me anxiously about the fate of their villages, the condition of their homes, and being an aviator, they believed I knew all secrets and could tell them of the most intimate details which are hidden within the houses. By a process of elimination I arrived at a small group of the most willing of those whose homes were in the vicinity of Vittorio. Among them there was one who seemed especially suitable, Giovanni Bottecchia, born at San Martino di Colle but whose aunts live in a little village which rests on the mountains near Vittorio. The little village is A'Fregona and the wooded, uneven condition of the land, which is far from any roads, was suited for my plans. He was a sturdy youth, a trifle stubborn, as are all mountain folk of our regions, but he was instilled with great love of his country and a deep sense of responsibility. Whenever

I spoke to him of what was taking place on the other side, he became profoundly indignant. He hated the invader not only because the invader had separated him from his family, because he was stealing and pillaging everything, but above all because the hated invader had violated our territory. So elevated a sentiment was noteworthy in the simple heart of a soldier, and he was one of the few who reacted so powerfully and so sincerely to my arguments. To test his ability of keeping a secret, I told him a small part of our project, and asked him not to tell anyone, not even the officers of the regiment if they should ask him. I then requested Colonel Pirzio Biroli to send for him and question him, to see if he would disclose anything. Bottecchia did not reveal a single word; on the contrary he evaded the questions of the Colonel with a certain diplomatic ability. This seriousness, this ability of keeping a secret, this enthusiasm, were truly exceptional qualities. The fact

that the house of his parents was in a convenient spot was a further asset. Another point in his favor was the fact that he had been a driver and therefore knew every road and path along the mountains. As I questioned him about well-known places, on common trips, he answered with such exactness in every detail that I was really astonished and gradually I persuaded myself that if I was to have a companion I could not find a better one than he.

Gradually I disclosed to him my plan in every detail. His courage instead of diminishing in the face of so many difficulties, increased. He became enthusiastic. He asked me anxiously the day, the hour, when we should begin our adventure, thus showing he was eager to hurl himself at once into the greatest danger. To him I owed some important bits of information, some suggestions and modifications in our plan. At first I had decided to leave the camp disguised as a peasant, but Bottecchia

rightly remarked it would be better to remain in uniform and carry our disguise under our arms, so that in case the Austrians were to surprise us while alighting, we would not have to explain to them our plan, but could say we were aviators who, after a nocturnal flight to ascertain the conditions at the railroad station at Casarsa, had been compelled to land because of a fault in the motor. The enemy would not have time to notice our civilian clothes on the plane, for at the first alarm we would have made them disappear by means of a special infernal machine with which our planes are equipped in case they have to land in enemy territory.

V

I LED a laborious, tranquil life with the command of the eighth Bersaglieri which held the line from Fagare to Molino della Sega. Every now and then there were slight surprise attacks at night and small bombardments. During the day there was a little isolated shooting upon the roads most frequented by our wagons, but otherwise there was nothing abnormal, almost no indication that we were at war. So for many weeks on many fronts this calm subsisted yet beneath its stillness what great griefs, what sufferings, what trepidations lay hid!

The willow-trees put forth their first buds; spring came on apace. A hawthorn bush about which the wire entanglements were twined, foamed, snow-tinted, under the

pale sky. A warm breeze, the lightest of March, breathed from the South, and at the first cascades of song from larks, singing as it seemed just beneath the low clouds, we felt faintly calling in our hearts the echoes of the distant springtimes, now—save in the moments of this brief episode of war—vanished from the memory of a child grown man. In the afternoon we heard the first rumblings of thunder, followed by large warm drops of rain which filled the air with the smell of fresh earth newly trenched and with the fragrance of primroses and violets sprouting among the first green leaves. Far off in the background where the irate mountain seemed to support a curved garland of clouds, I beheld, illumined by a slanting ray of light, the cypresses which surround the castle of Conegliano, near which my house stands. Everything proclaimed the unhinderable beauty of nature, the joy of youth, were it yet possible even to sense this beauty and this youth in the great

cataclysm which surrounded us. That view and those cypresses renewed within me the ardent desire to reach the other side. I pointed out to Bottecchia the steeple of his village church, which veiled itself far away among the distant vapor of clouds. And by this sign we became two bosom companions joined by a firm bond of love and friendship. We became two comrades, dedicated to the same cause, two comrades whom nothing can stay in the fulfillment of their chosen duty.

Very slowly, so it seemed to me, the days passed by, perhaps because I slept little at night. For then it was that many small details took shape, many new angles of sight were discovered, many definite ideas were formulated. In the morning my soldier and I met and communicated to each other the experiences and thoughts of the previous night.

One morning I received a letter from Colonel Smaniotto saying that His Excel-

lency, assistant-Chief of Staff of the Army, Lieut. General Badoglio was greatly interested in our undertaking and had given orders that the "Voisin" be dispatched as soon as possible to the front, and that it be equipped with a silencer reported marvelous. The Colonel further entrusted me with the task of choosing from among the officers of the eighth regiment of Bersaglieri some one who, were my venture a success, would be disposed to attempt the same thing in the region around Pordenone. After numerous considerations I turned my attention to Lieutenant De Carli (strangest of coincidences in names!) who seemed to me to possess the necessary qualities and who had left his mother in the invaded territory at Tiezzo di Pordenone.

We Italians are truly a great people! He did not hesitate a second before accepting my project. Without asking for any details he placed himself at my disposal and merely requested that he be permitted to

take with him his brother, a corporal serving in his company. After seeing such ardor and such frenzy not to leave a thing undone which might help drive the enemy from our lands, I became more and more convinced that it was merely a matter of time before we should achieve that victory for which we had been summoned.

With the two De Carli brothers and my soldier I returned to headquarters because there were still many points to be settled, especially what means of communication we should adopt when we had reached the other side. From numerous reports it seemed that the time set for the great Austrian offensive was not far distant, the offensive destined definitely to crush our army and enable the enemy to turn all his strength against France. We must be ready before that offensive.

As I did not wish to tell anyone of our plans, and since a large staff usually ends by knowing all, we decided to establish our-

selves in the prisoners' concentration camp at Capella where there were a few officers who were used to silence and discretion. We were living in a small isolated house, outside the village, and this house had become the forge where weapons fatal to the enemy were being shaped. Methods of communication must now be studied. Signaling by night with lights had to be eliminated because the zone in which I decided to act was in a small hollow surrounded by hills and so dominated by them that any lights would be readily visible from them. More appropriate seemed the method of communicating by means of sheets placed on the ground according to schedule. Bottecchia told me that near the house in which his aunts live there was a small brook and in this brook the wash-women usually did their laundering. The wash was probably laid on the grass near the brook to dry. I did not see why the Austrians should suspect an innocuous sheet of conveying information to our command.

By taking as a point of reference a field which could be easily identified, why would it not be possible to lay the sheets on it in such a manner as to convey a special meaning to our command? Several aeroplanes were then sent to photograph the regions selected by us, and in the enlarged photographs the brook was plainly visible. One could see the house of my soldier's aunts, the little bridge which passes over the Friga, and a small group of houses near a mill, marked on a map of one to twenty-five thousandth scale. Near this group of houses there was a large patch of ground which was very distinct in the photograph and which was but a slight distance from the river. I believed it would be suitable to indicate on it by means of sheets what we wished to convey to our command. There were but a few things which would have to be communicated. A sheet on the southwestern corner of the field would indicate, "offensive imminent from the side of Montello"; a

white sheet on the southeastern corner would signify "calm"; a sheet on the northwestern angle of the field would indicate, "enemy troops are moving towards the plain"; a sheet on the northeastern corner would mean, "enemy troops are moving towards the mountains"; a sheet placed in the center of the field would mean, "German reinforcements are arriving." Our aeroplanes would come by day and photograph our signals. The only difficulty lay in the possible discovery of our plan by the enemy, and its use by the enemy to cheat our command. We must provide against such a possibility. We therefore decided that the signals be disposed at different hours every day. If the signals were not placed in the established hours, then they were to be disregarded. So, even if the enemy were to discover our system of signals, he could never wrest from us a confession of the hours in which the signals were to have been placed. But, although this means of com-

munication might be very useful during a battle, it is at bottom little more than a very crude, elementary method for transmitting information.

For communicating more detailed, interesting information, we decided to rely on carrier pigeons. It would not be easy for us, besides our clothing and money, to carry pigeons with us, and furthermore, it would be absolutely impossible to travel for twenty miles in enemy territory with birds which in case of capture would at once reveal to the enemy our intentions. We must find some system for delivering the birds on the territory established as our headquarters. After numerous experiments we adopted the following method: the birds were to be closed in little cages in which had been placed paper, pencil and small bags with their food; these birds were to be dropped at night, by means of parachutes, from our aeroplanes, but in order not to arouse the suspicion of the enemy that these birds had

been thrown down for special informers, there was to be placed in every cage a photograph demonstrating the method of holding the pigeon and of attaching the message to its leg, together with a printed bulletin addressed to the people of Veneto. This bulletin was to ask the good peasants for help in effecting their liberation, and for answers to the following questions—"What troops are quartered in your vicinity? Have you seen any cannon pass? When will the offensive begin?"—and many other similar questions; at the end, the bulletin was to announce that after the war, prizes were to be awarded to those who could prove that they sent messages by means of the pigeons.

That the enemy might not discover our abode, the pigeons were to be thrown down not only on our field, but casually throughout the invaded region. Since the enemy might make use of this means too, of deceiving us, and of communicating false reports as to its intentions, we therefore,

studied a code with which to express numbers, and a system of interpolating insignificant words after a given number of words, so that before a pigeon-message could be declared authentic, it must pass certain tests. Thus even if the enemy were to succeed in discovering part of our secret, he could never send messages so correct in every detail that they would not be recognized as frauds by our command. I further decided to number progressively all my pigeon-messages and to sign them with the coined word, "Genga," or the phrase, "An Italian."

On May 1st, while we were conferring together at Campo de Capella, we had a pleasant surprise. Suddenly, when we least expected it, we heard the noise of an aeroplane passing low over us. The noise of the motor sounded familiar, like the round, tranquil thump of the "Isotta," and as I raised my head I saw a "Voisin" spiraling about a hundred yards above us, and an

arm stretched from the pilot's seat waving gaily at us. At last, we realized that Gelmetti after so many hunts and searches had succeeded in finding a plane and had brought it from Camp Poggio Renatico to the front. This was a great step forward, because we would be able to begin many necessary trials with the apparatus. We must make the first trial for weight, and then several trials for landing at night without the use of searchlights, and with the use of the silencer. I therefore thought it would be better for us to transport our tents to the aviation camp at Marcon which is not far from the army and is suited for such experiments.

We were already furnished with our civilian clothes. Mine consisted of a coarse shirt of wool, a pair of wide trousers of striped velvet like those used by our mountaineers, a jacket and vest cut in peasant fashion, and a soft felt hat. I put my disguise on trial by crossing a field where there

were many soldiers who knew me in my regular outfit and without a beard. I noticed that many of them stared at me in surprise without recognizing this peasant who walked slowly, dragging his legs along heavily, as though he were worn out. Between my teeth I held a small earthen pipe, I am happy that I passed unrecognized. Even Gelmetti who was resting in the Hangar near his "Spad" was surprised and astonished to see suddenly standing before him this mountaineer whom he did not at once recognize.

I did not believe our departure was far distant. All the reports we had been able to gather recently told of gigantic preparations by the enemy for an early offensive against us. The Austrians for several months had been gradually increasing the number of their guns, and new arrivals from the eastern Roumanian front were continually reported.

The political reasons for this offensive

were the great discontent manifest in all the provinces of Austria because of the scarcity of food supplies, and the belief, which gradually undermined the morale of our enemies, that a decisive victory against the Allies was impossible. The most hostile forces then within the enemy lines were the factions which have furnished the best troops. The Hungarians had a deep hatred against Germany, whom they accuse of being the originator of all their troubles. A newspaper from Budapest mentioned that the drive must be finished before the great weight of America could make itself felt in the balance. Therefore, the supreme command of our adversaries was about to exert itself to the full in speeding the decisive drive on our front, in the hope that this drive would bring to it not only a victory of arms, but the conciliation of the hostile, troublesome factions which were ever becoming more formidable and threatening. Were the Austrians to succeed in crushing the Italian

army, they would throw all their strength against the southern end of the line in France, and then the Allied forces, enclosed in the iron circle of Germans on the north and Austrians on the south, would have to succumb. The officers of the Austrian staff were confident that they would find our army in the low spirits in which they found it at the battle of Caporetto. They knew not that after our magnificent resistance in November and December a new spirit of moral and material regeneration swept over our soldiers. Furthermore, our great military machine had effected a thorough reorganization. The treatment of the troops, the tactical method, the equipment, the distribution of supplies—all these branches had been reorganized by wise adaptations of such a kind as to inspire confidence among the soldiers in their officers and ensure the ultimate victory of our arms. But we were not to delude ourselves, nor lightly underrate the imminent danger which threatened us;

we had to realize that the formation of our front would not permit us to withdraw one inch. We were holding onto the last position in which our stand could be efficacious. If the Austrians were to succeed in driving us from this position a great retreat would be necessary, and even if this retreat were to succeed in saving the army from complete disaster, the new lines would have to be established far inland on the Mincio or the Po, and our failure to hold the first position would mean the sacrifice of Italy's most beautiful and richest regions, and among them Venice would have to be ceded to the enemy.

Venice! At the mention of this name my Italian heart cannot but be set beating! It was absolutely inconceivable, it was absolutely inadmissible that the barbarian be permitted to trample with feet of iron the pavements of our squares and our churches. Better were it for us all to perish rather than permit the German Emperor to issue

from the Doge's Palace a proclamation of challenge and victory! But the configuration of our front was terribly against us. Our curved front which formed a strong salient from the Astico to the sea gave the Austrians the strategic advantage of being able to launch two attacks simultaneously in two converging directions, from the mountain and from the Piave across the plains. If the attack were successful in one of the two directions, that fact sufficed to cause the downfall of the other sector. The victorious enemy troops having accomplished a "break-through" one side of the salient would at once execute a flanking movement in such a manner that the rest of the front would be compelled to surrender. The maneuver of Caporetto might be repeated to our disadvantage, and this time the defeat would be decisive because the Allies, barely capable of holding back the Germans in France, would not be able to send a single man to our assistance.

Therefore, our surveillance was becoming all the more anxious, our chiefs more strict in their reports to the generalissimo of the doings in the various sectors, and I—I should have the honor of taking part in so great a drama, I should have the honor of trying to frustrate the enemy designs.

The incidence of numerical strength was greatly to our disadvantage, for the Austrian army mustered about twenty divisions more than we had. We would therefore have to dispose of our troops with the greatest care. Our reserves would have to be concentrated in a central camp whence they could be readily sent to the section of the front where the enemy seemed most threatening. There would have to be no doubts, no hesitations on the part of our leaders; not a single man ought to be moved to no purpose. It was absolutely necessary for us to know the enemy's plan of attack, that we might concentrate every soldier we could on whatever sector the supreme blow was to be

expected. To discover this plan and report it was my task; a task of danger, a task of honor, the supreme privilege of a man consecrated to his country, of a soldier sworn to the faith of the soldier.

VI

I DO not believe any man could ever have hoped for a finer task than mine. I, who have often considered life not worth living, congratulated myself on this undertaking in which I should have the opportunity of creating my masterpiece. But before attempting the marvelous game from which I was certain I was never to return, I wished to visit Venice once again, I wished to draw again from the memorial and eternal glories of these monuments the deep joy of such a life instilled in stone as but rarely it is possible to instil in men. How often while contemplating the architecture of St. Mark's have I said to myself that we have the right to make men die because we also know how to make them live, but no right to destroy memories be-

cause we cannot build them again. How could one reconstruct the glories of fourteen centuries of domination?

With Bottecchia and the De Carli brothers I went to visit Venice for the last time. A light naval motorboat carried us swiftly along the short stretch of water separating the mainland from the city on the sea. It was a clear day; the bluish surface of the basin of St. Mark glittered under the first light zephyrs of May, and, stirred from time to time by smarter puffs, the little waves broke crisply against the sides and over the bow of our skiff. The symmetrical form of a swift torpedo-boat, whose slender sides were moulded for speed like the tendons of a grayhound, was outlined against the curved horizon flecked with frail diaphanous clouds. Amethyst and cobalt, purple and gold mingled in the rapid, ever-changing water swirls about us, intersecting now and anon shattered into fragments that in turn recreate new gleams of loveliness of color

and new plays of light. The cold, viscid seaweed stood erect in midstream eagerly awaiting the caress of a passing keel, or hid its dark mass among the shadows of the Cyclopean walls from which the swift foam of the eddies is hurled back. The spirals of a slender column resembling a wistaria vine descended as far as the odorous musk along the bank, while two gentle peacocks, reclining upon marble, wound their sinuous necks about a byzantine image before which wavered the flame of a votive lamp. Our gondola glided silently along the tortuous canal of the dead city. Now and again we passed a heavy stone railing before which dancing statues seemed to suspend the invisible garlands of a distant minuet, or such a heavy iron gate as pricks the pale sky with its pointed blades, or a cypress and a rose bush closely bound together in a single embrace for centuries, with their long, green foliage resting on the water. The Lombardesque eagles curved

under the cornice of Casa Vendramin uphold the festoons of stone and on the porous, stained marble one can always read the phrase of the Latin psalm "non nobis, non nobis." Yet, even for us it is springtime; even for us it is sweet to think it is springtime and that we shall be able to die in springtime.

The gondola drifts slowly between the palaces resting on the water. The Ca D'Oro outlines against the sky its designs of Romanesque acanthus. The Pesaro Palace opens its gigantic stalactic gates into the shadow of its deep courtyard. From under the curved arch of the Rialto a tear still falls. The erect, angular obelisks of the Palace of Pappadopoli pierce the sky as though in defiance of the enemy, and from the high belvederes two somber cannon raise their sinister mouths in air.

On the deserted "fondamenta" there appears the slim figure of a woman enveloped in a shawl and she advances tranquilly gaz-

ing towards the East. How calm, how sacred her demeanor! Nothing of earth is there about her body; all her sinews seem set for the same struggle, all her nerves seem tautened by the same love. Her gesture is not new. It has been beheld before on earth. The Virgins of the Carpaccio know it; it has been known for the past fifteen centuries by the women of Venice accustomed to await the advent from the sea of their greatest griefs and their supreme joys. For those women, for the children who have been tortured on the other side of the Piave, I am determined that this pure image of Venice, this pure image of our race shall not suffer contamination.

The clouds of springtime fled rapidly overhead; piling one upon the other into white heaps, swollen to huge proportions. Occasionally a strip of azure disclosed itself and then an oblique ray of light shot through, coloring for a second the vivid façades of the palaces. A boat filled with

cabbages, of the large white-headed variety from Verona, passed near us and scattered the fragrance of the country. Ca' Foscari stood out, with its broad face and large windows rimmed with gold, and farther on glittered the statues of the Contarini Delle Figure palace. A solitary aeroplane which had arisen from Sant. Andrea described slow curves overhead, accelerating and retarding the run of its motor. My faithful friends, my trusted companions were in the boat with me. We had come to Venice in a moment of expectation, during a respite in the struggle, to derive from these memories the strength to accomplish our undertaking, now almost wholly matured in my mind and become the favored child of my imagination. Every day I outlined it and reshaped it with great love; daily I examined its weak spots with affectionate care; daily my assurance revived; every moment I tormented and tortured myself with new doubts so as to be certain that I might not be cheating

myself, that I would not fail. At night, before sleep overtook me, I felt the beautiful armored creature alive in my flesh; I felt in my rapid pulse the whirlwind of its strength ready to hurl itself like an arrow which cannot fail; I was conscious of the calculating cunning, the vivid joy of doing evil, the perfervid pride in being able to do harm. The terrible anxiety of expectation burned into my forehead like a sledgehammer shaping a red-hot point. Every remembrance, every grief, every bit of beauty, became fused, became amalgamated in a mould which I alone should be able to direct, and if at times within my weary breast there glistened tears of my great love, them too I seized, them too I hurled against all doubts, against all envy, against death. I did not feel that sleep which enervates and softens, that sleep into which I have often abandoned myself with voluptuousness, but instead my being grew tense, ready for the supreme effort. I felt that I loved even my

body because it was my faithful instrument. I reflected upon the play of my muscles, the expansion of my chest and the elastic tenacity of my fingers, and I stretched and turned, ran and leapt like a mastiff who, indomitable, struggles with every part of his body—with paws, tense shoulders, arched back, curved loins, and ravening teeth.

We alighted in the little square in front of the statue of Marco and Toderò. The broad, heavy architecture of the ducal palace had been covered by sand bags, and at the end towards the Porta della Carta the very church itself was hidden beneath the weight of the beams and the scaffolding. I would not be able then to see her again as I had often seen her resplendent in her mosaics under the beams of the distantly setting sun! I would not be able to snatch away with me a last image of her to treasure for the days in which I was to tempt fate. Along the stairway of the Giganti, along

the gallery flanked by statues, we passed into the Sala del Maggior Consiglio. All was changed; everything had been moved and I no longer recognized the splendid symmetry which used to animate the wall behind the throne; no longer did I see the great world maps which amused me so as a child; no longer did there hang from the wide ceilings in magnificent perspective Michelangesque limbs and torsos of the valiant men who assured to Venice the glory of the seas. The gold of the frames which at other times held the jewels of the spouse of the Doge and the purple mantles of the counsellors of the Republic seemed to have lost its brilliancy. A wrinkled old guardian in whom I seemed to recognize the face of one of those oarsmen from the galleys of Saint Mark guided us through the spacious rooms. His step was measured, his heavy voice was a melody which let its notes fall on my memories. I did not heed his words but something of them entered into my

mind and vivified my memories. Up a steep and winding stairway we climbed in the Piombi and visited the cell where for many months Silvio Pellico suffered indescribable tortures at the hands of the Austrians. The emotion of such a remembrance renewed the strength of the hatred against the century-old enemy.

A curved flock of wings greeted us as we left the palace. The pigeons flew in groups towards the Procuratie. The square was almost deserted but among the few passersby I recognized the slight figure of Luisa. Luisa was a schoolmate of mine; with her I read my first wonderful books, with her I shared the great and pure joys of art.

“How pleased I am to see you here again.”

“The soldiers’ duty is not to leave the trenches, but the duty of the citizens is not to abandon their city and I see you have been faithful to your trust.”

We took once more the lonely way which passes across the parks whence the merry chirping of myriads of birds reached us. Near the Academy the children were playing on the ground near a well; I am not certain whether it is imagined or real, but their game seemed hasty and nervous, their movements hurried as if in fright. Perhaps they had not slept because last night the enemy bombarded Venice. I asked Luisa why she was not afraid to leave her child in the city and she answered me that all the poor women of Venice had not been able to send their children to places of safety and there was therefore no reason why the rich should claim this privilege; furthermore, she scarcely knew how to leave Venice nor to entrust her child to anyone else; in any case they would be struck together and would together perish.

We had almost reached the Chiesa della Salute near the old abbey of St. Gregory where we often used to go after school. The

round glazed doors were closed. We could not enter, but peering through the many-colored glass we could imagine the forest of agile little columns which support the wonderful pointed arches.

“You have been my friend and confidant since my earliest years and I know you can preserve a secret. Within a few days I shall send you a postcard on which will be written, ‘arrivederci’ (may we meet again). I entreat you to think a great deal of me in those days because I shall be in danger, because I must succeed, because I want all these wonders to live beyond our memory, because I want Venice to live forever after us.” She smiled back slowly for she had understood. Then with the fall of dusk we returned towards Saint Mark’s which no longer glittered in the evening lights, but whose purple marble and stained glass faded away and mingled with the distant red of the sunset.

VII

THE days which brought us nearer to our venture ran on. On May 15th, there was a full sitting at Camp Marcon with Colonel Smaniotto present, to the end that we might disclose to him all we had determined. Lieut. De Carli also took part in the meeting and he explained his plan for arriving at Tiezzo di Pordenone.

I collected in a manuscript everything which concerned my departure and the methods of communication and signaling. What yet remained to be determined was the means to be adopted for returning to our own territory, if such a return were possible. I proposed that we make use of two mediums, the aeroplane and motorboat. . . . About a month after our departure an Italian reconnoitring plane was to let fall

a volley of three shots from the sky over Vittorio. Two days after we had observed this signal we were to be found in such a field as shall have been determined upon and upon which we shall have already alighted at two in the morning. The "Voisin" would fly very low over the field and if Captain Gelmetti observed certain lights gleaming in the small trenches which were near the field, he would make a landing and we would depart with him. If the weather were unfavorable, the attempt was to be repeated the subsequent night. But we could not rely on one method only for the return. It was better to have some alternate way available.

I proposed that the silent naval motor-boat, aforementioned, cruise during the nights from June 20 to June 30 in front of the port of Caorle, about two miles east of it. It was to keep about two hundred yards from the coast, in order that, should it hear the song of a cuckoo (such was to

be our signal) it might send a rowboat to fetch us. All this was to take place at two in the morning. It seemed to me that I had thought of everything; it seemed to me that I had studied all the details.

Our front had been divided into many sectors each of which had a special number, and the established phrase, "the wolf will not return towards such and such a number" signified that the enemy intended to attack that sector of the front. Colonel Smaniotto was well pleased with my plan and with my personal appearance which was really most encouraging. My beard had really assumed tremendous proportions and it bothered me considerably. That night the light of the moon was bright enough to permit us to experiment on landing without lights. Captain Gelmetti had placed himself at our disposal for the necessary trials. For experiments with the silencer the officer who invented the apparatus had come purposely from headquarters, together with

some expert mechanics for whom we had sent in a request.

At about ten o'clock at night we ascended from the field at Marcon and after several landings with the help of searchlights the pilot attempted a landing without the use of any lights and his management was so skillful that we were not conscious of the moment in which we touched ground. I was truly astonished at the familiarity with which Bottecchia viewed aeroplanes. During the flight I watched him closely to see if he showed any signs of fear, or if he held onto the sides of the seat as most beginners do. He really conducted himself valiantly and no sudden move or action belied the faith I had placed in him. The officers who were present at the experiments told me that when the motor was turning slowly and the silencer was working the plane made only a slight noise which was scarcely audible even to those standing directly beneath.

I told another person about my plans,

Lieut. Manfredi Lanza di Trabia, brother of Ignatius, one of my dearest friends who disappeared mysteriously during the retreat from Caporetto and from whom I have had no more news. However, considering all the circumstances, we still believed him to be alive, perhaps because we loved him too well to permit ourselves to believe that he has disappeared forever. To Manfredi also I promised to send a postcard with the conventional word, "arrivederci," which would be the sign of my departure.

Several changes were made in the silencer because it became over-heated too rapidly. We hoped that it would now function properly. But the weather which had been clear up to date, changed and seemed determined to thwart our plans.

On May 26 there was a full moon. The nights favorable for attempting our project were to last only until the first of June. After that we should be compelled to relinquish our plan or to devise some

other way. Days of cruel alternation passed, and we were continually standing with our faces turned upward to the sky in the hope of espying some bit of azure among the thick clouds which crowded overhead. This inclement weather made us nervous, uncertain, whereas we needed a great deal of calm to be in the proper mood for our attempt.

Colonel Smaniotto gave me 2000 Austrian crowns that I be not encumbered by too much coin. In case I needed more money I was to send a notice to them by means of a carrier pigeon. This idea of carrying Austrian crowns with me was not very agreeable because it would be a compromising fact and grave accusation against us were we to be captured. However, I decided to keep the suspicious roll always in my hand and at the first alarm to throw it away so as not to be surprised with it. I also had to sign a statement for the supreme command in which I declared that I was

undertaking the feat absolutely of my own volition and that I was not compelled or coerced by any external pressure. I am truly proud of this document. My soldier also signed a similar document very willingly.

It really seemed as if all the clouds of the Veneto had made an appointment with one another to meet over our field. In vain we sought a sign which would let us hope for a happy solution. It was now the thirtieth of May, so there were but two more nights at our disposal. After that we should have to bid "adieu" to our plan fostered for so long. It was torture to think that our presence on the other side would be of extraordinary value just then, because from the answers to questions asked of Czech prisoners we knew that the Austrian offensive could not be delayed much longer. Therefore, our enforced pause was all the more dangerous, because beside necessitating a new scheme of preparations, it

might also result in our arriving across the Piave too late.

Gelmetti's mood was insupportable. Instead of trying to comfort one another we were continually irritating and provoking our companions. We were annoyed, spiteful one with the other, as though each one of us were the cause of our painful delay.

The barometer on the morning of May 31, had risen slightly, but still I did not see any sign of clearing; the rain continued to beat madly against the windows of our hangar. I contemplated with love and wrath the great metal skeleton of our apparatus, resting heavily on its wheels. The huge canvas of the hangar struggled violently with the bonds which fastened it to the ground. Suddenly a tiny ray of sunlight illumined the canvas hanging limp and damp. I leapt out onto the field. The direction of the wind had changed. The rain had miraculously stopped, and the storm clouds were fleeing towards the sea.

In the background the bluish mountains with their snow-capped tops were outlined against the distant horizon.

It seemed as if there were fair weather on the other side of the Piave. We would soon know from the reports of such chasing planes as had left this morning. Meanwhile, there was not a moment to be lost. It was three in the afternoon and there was much to be done ere we left. Quickly I telephoned to headquarters and the voice of Colonel Smaniotto answered me. He was delighted at the unexpected turn of events.

“Sir, if you offer no opposition we have decided to leave to-night.”

“What opposition should I have? On the other hand, I am elated at this brief respite which has come so suddenly. One of our proverbs says there is no Saturday without a bit of sun, but to-day is Friday. I’ll see you shortly.”

Everything was going well. The only thing that annoyed me was that the day was

Friday. We Italians are a bit superstitious and it did not seem expedient to start a project of this nature on a Friday. I confessed my doubts to Gelmetti and he braced me by scolding me. "How foolish you are! Don't you really want to take advantage of this respite which may be the only one? For I am convinced that the weather is still unsettled and remains determined to be crazy. If we do not leave to-night, we can forsake our project forever." I let myself be convinced, but a little unwillingly.

Gelmetti was radiant, and was dressing himself in his toilette for great occasions, for we aviators are habitually dirty and oil-stained while at camp, but the moment we have to leave for a flight or some special action, we become fastidious and dandified; we don our best outfits, for we must be clean and elegant when we face the enemy, when we face death.

I too, had to consider my toilette, because I did not think my coat with the yellow

collar would be the most suitable for such an undertaking. I donned a soldier's coat with the distinguishing mark of the observer on the sleeve, and I prepared my observer's tally for I decided to take it with me, as is customary with all aviators.

Through the window I observed that the "Voisin" was out on the field and that they were filling her up with the supplies of gasoline and oil. One of the mechanics had jumped up onto a wing and with a large can was filling the feed above the wing. His demeanor was that of a tranquil trainer who knows his beast; he was singing snatches of a song popular among our soldiers:

"Oh rare, delightful sweetheart
Beloved and sought by all,
You are that dear strange creature,
For whom by chance we fall."

Another mechanic was testing the motor with his fingers on the gas control to see the response of the six powerful cylinders. To me, whose ear is well trained after many

flights over the enemy, the motor appeared to function well, and this gave me great confidence. A lieutenant from the general staff who is a specialist in the use of the silencer, was explaining to Gelmetti how to set the silencer in action. After a brief discussion they decided that we were not to use this attachment on leaving our territory, but to ascend with open exhaust and use the silencer only when we had arrived in enemy territory where it would be necessary to make no noise. These precautions were necessary so as not to strain the motor.

How rapidly my life seemed to flee during those hours, those minutes which still separated me from the moment when I should find myself face to face with the reality against which I have prepared and which I have long desired.

I entreated Colonel Smaniotto to communicate to my family that I was well every time he received a pigeon with a message from me. He promised to do it, and I was

contented because I did not like my people to remain for long without news of me. However, I had to notify my father that I should be far away for a long time. I had had a photograph of myself with my beard taken, and above it I wrote the date, May 23, to recall the other 23rd of May, the day on which Italy entered the war. Had I no other joy in the world, it would suffice me to know that Italy was not beneath the other great powers and that she too had taken sides with righteousness and liberty. In sending to my father a last message before my departure I wrote the following lines with great emotion, "May 31, 1918. Dear father,—I beg of you not to worry if you do not receive a message from me for a long time. I am leaving on a special mission, and I do not believe I shall be able to communicate with you directly, but you will receive news of my condition from headquarters. I ask this new sacrifice of you in the name of the suffering lands which are

waiting for us. May we meet again. A kiss to you. . . . (P.S. I shall bring a greeting to mother from you.)” My mother is buried at Vittorio and from the closing words he would understand the destination of my mission. This was the only hint I gave my father of where I intended going.

Bottecchia and the De Carli brothers were eating. My soldier, who has a sturdy exterior, was storing as much food as he could in his inside, for he feared, with reason, that it would be difficult to find food on the other side. I, on the contrary, when I am about to undertake something important can swallow only a very small quantity and a sober repast is sufficient to appease my appetite. Night fell slowly over the field, and I lighted a lamp so I might see to write two postcards to my distant friends. On each one I wrote “arrivederci” and my name. They will understand. Every promise is an obligation, and Luisa

and Manfredi were awaiting this signal from me to know that I had left.

The telephone bell rang unexpectedly. They wanted me at once at headquarters because his Highness the Duke of Aosta wished to see me before I left. In an open car we sped along the endless line of budding poplar trees whose silent shadows were traced on the white road. The trunks in front of us stood bold and upright against the red of the sunset. From the pools and ditches a light fog arose and escaped in a mist towards the sky where the first stars began to twinkle.

The villa of the Duke of Aosta stood in the center of Mogliano, and there were no marks which distinguished it from the surrounding villas, save that the flowers were more carefully cultivated. The Duke's dogs playfully greeted the visitors. His Highness was expecting us in the broad ante-chamber. He clasped my hand, and we had a long affable talk together. His tall figure,

which became slightly bent after Caporetto, has all the majesty of his race; expressing at the same time a certain paternal goodness. His face furrowed by nights of anxiety and watching, expresses the ability and habit of command; his clear, penetrating eyes are accustomed to look fate well in the face. The Duke wished to know in detail all we planned to do. He knew the broad outlines and Colonel Smaniotto and I explained a few details he did not know. He noticed that I had changed the collar of my uniform and I told him the reason which induced me to make the change and the displeasure I felt at not being able to bear upon the other side the colors of my regiment to which I am still devoted. Before we left, he again clasped my hand firmly and with a steady voice in which there was barely a shadow of emotion, said, "I thank you for what you are about to attempt. I am convinced of the usefulness of your enterprise, and I am certain you will help us greatly in those

days when the enemy hurls against us all his desperate strength. I thank you as a Prince and as an Italian, and you know I am a good Italian."

I know that his Royal Highness is a good Italian and I felt that in difficult moments, in moments when I should have to dare and risk all, the memory of that dear, austere face, would be a great help and comfort in the fulfillment of my duty.

I left the house of the Duke of Aosta, moved not by what I was about to undertake but by what he said to me. There was not much time to lose, yet I dearly wished to give a farewell greeting to Lieutenant Lanza di Camastra who is the uncle of my intimate friend Ignatius Lanza di Trabia. He is very intimate with his Royal Highness, knew of our plans, but since he wished to be present at my departure he begged me to send for him. In the little courtyard of the villa in which he lived I found several officers who offered me a small glass of

cognac. I relished it, sipping it to the last delicious drop, certain that on the other side I should find nothing of the kind. I was very pleased to spend a few moments with Lieutenant di Camastra because I wished to speak to him of Ignatius who we hoped was still alive and interned in some distant German camp. The thought of this dear friend had often given me strength to overcome the innumerable difficulties which presented themselves before arriving at this point. With gratitude I listened to the words of di Camastra who assured me that Ignatius would be proud could he see me depart.

Before leaving my mother-country, since I was certain I should not be able to return, I wished to be at peace with my conscience, and accompanied by my dear friend we went towards the vicarage of Mogliano where there was a priest who could take my confession. After knocking repeatedly at the gate, an old priest, who wondered why unknown visitors should come to disturb him

at so late an hour, thrust his head from behind the door. At last he opened the door and led me into a small, low room where there was a prayerstool. . . . For a moment I reviewed swiftly the events of my life, and alas, there were only a few actions for which I needed not to be repentant. God is good, I thought, and will heed my sincere prayer. So when the priest absolved me, I felt that to all the strength I had before there had been added the new strength which comes to those who feel they are pure.

VIII

TIME, 1:30 A.M. On the field there are a lot of people going to and fro. Many friends have come to bid me goodby. Even though I have spoken to very few about the adventure, still many know of it. With Colonel Smaniotto there are on the field several officers of the staff, Colonel Novellis of the Aviation, the Honorable Miari of the kite-balloon division, and many other of my aviator friends who wish to be present at my departure. I have taken with me a map as a precaution, for the weather which seemed most favorable at first has gradually become foggy, and since even the upper atmosphere does not seem very clear, it may be difficult to get our bearings. However, I am certain that once I have arrived in enemy territory, or rather

in my own home town, I shall not need any map. Our fur-lined leather coats and our helmets are ready and lie folded on the wing. The mechanics are busy about the motor, one gives a last look at the spark-plugs, another at the magneto, another at the gasoline feed, so that once departed we shall have no unpleasant surprises. Gelmetti is already at his place and is trying the levers. A groundman has turned the propeller and in the calm of the night nothing can be heard but the chirping of the crickets and the croaking of the frogs which are telling of their loves from the ditches. There arises the deep and powerful roar of the motor and from the curved arches of the hangars the echo answers so that it seems as if several machines were in motion in the distance. The moon is rising, and as I see her again after so many days of rain, she seems smaller, and I wonder how my pilot will be able to make a landing on unknown ground with so little light.

De Carli who probably will soon attempt a similar feat stands near me. There is in the eyes of all such great anxiety, emotion so deep that I ask myself why I too, should not feel moved. Lieutenant Simoni asks me if I feel as calm as at other times when I am about to leave for a war flight, and I answer him that I am certain I should not feel so calm if I were seeing another leaving in my place. Many of the pilots of chasing machines of the 77th squadron are present and among them Lieutenant Marazani, one of our aces who has brought with him his little fox terrier.

“Before starting on a flight,” he tells me, “I always touch the nose of Bobby, and, as you see, I have always returned. You do the same, and you’ll see it will bring you good luck.”

He does not have to beg me twice, and I pass my hand over the damp nose of Bobby who looks at me with his intelligent eyes as though to ask me what unusual thing

is happening, for he is not accustomed to seeing planes leave at night. Everything is ready. I have the money in a small roll. Bottecchia has in his pocket a bar of chocolate, and I have brought with me my talisman which has been with me in every undertaking, an old crucifix of silver, a family heirloom which has been in many wars and many battles with my ancestors. We are in the plane and in place of the small observer's seat they have fastened a small wooden board on which two of us must manage to sit. But the place is very narrow, and both Bottecchia and myself are not very comfortable. The inside of our "cabane" is lighted by blue lamps upon the dashboard and I hold in my hand a small lamp fastened to a long wire with which to watch the manometer which marks the oil pressure and the gasoline feed tube. The motor is hitting in all cylinders. Gelmetti advances and retards the accelerator and the machine pulses and vibrates, held back by

the wedges under the wheels and the mechanics who are holding it by the shaking wings. The "Voisin" seems to have found again its youth and seems eager to start the flight. The indicator marks 1300 revolutions. Everything seems to be proceeding regularly.

"Are we ready?" I ask Gelmetti. We button up our overcoats and buckle our helmets under our chins. Many hands are extended towards us. Some of the men clamber up on the large springs of the wheels to embrace me, and although the wool of my helmet covers nearly all my face, still I feel something moist on my skin. They surely are not my tears! . . . Bobby, jubilant at the sound of the motor going at full speed, begins to bark, and his master throws a stone down the field for Bobby to chase so that he will not disturb us, and so that I may exchange in quiet a few more words with Colonel Smaniotto.

"Above all I urge you to specify the sec-

tor and the day of the offensive, and secondly the location of troops."

Gelmetti slackens the motor, the mechanics remove the wedges from under the wheels and the plane is free and ready for the flight. We rise to our feet to give a final salute, and an indescribable emotion comes into the faces of all. The plane begins to move and our cry of "Viva L'Italia," is drowned by the roar of the motor whose pulsations grow ever quicker and faster. The grass flits rapidly under the wheels. A slight jerk, a slight start, and we are in the air. What were living persons near us, what were houses, have become specks, have become infinitesimal statuettes against the dark background of the earth.

I see certain small red lamps on the tops of trees, I see the red lamp which marks the chimney of the furnace near the field. The great scaffolding from which the searchlights usually hurl upward the streams of their light, is lost in the night's

darkness. The little canal which passes near the hangars glitters distinctly and along the plain traversed by roads and streams of water, many tranquil lamps are glowing. Along the road which leads from the field to the highway of Mogliano the searchlights of the automobiles leaving the field follow us. We turn slowly, and—as is always the case when in a plane—we feel as if we were still. We are now traveling towards Mestre and beyond we see the mirror of the glittering lagoon which the moon silvers with a thousand tiny flames, and in the background where sky and sea mingle in a dark gray mist, we can imagine Venice arising from the water.

The conditions of visibility are not good, and the fog instead of diminishing as we ascend becomes gradually more opaque. A swift, boisterous wind shakes the wings of the plane which slopes to the right and to the left according to the movements of the pilot. At times the entire machine vibrates

and we feel ourselves so closely bound in its flight that often we believe its wings are attached to our very shoulders. As I look back at the oil guides I see the sparks from the exhaust tube escaping rapidly like a swarm of fireflies swept by the wind. The tube of the silencer which is fastened onto the motor, although the exhaust remains at present completely open, is red and incandescent. I ask myself anxiously what will happen, when, having crossed the enemy's lines, we shall have to make use of the silencer. I look at the altimeter; we have already arisen to a height of three thousand feet, and beneath us are outlined the walls and towers of Treviso. The tracks of the Treviso-Venice railroad sparkle in the light of the moon, and on the fields in the small pools of stagnant water, the light is reflected. Several searchlights placed about the city turn like sentinels of the air, but their rays do not strike us for they are not searching in our direction. The white

clouds slide above our heads hiding at intervals the moon which appears again and again between the wings of the aeroplane. The fog becomes ever denser. The wind increases, changing at times into sudden gusts, rapid vortices, and brief eddies. I hold my head low so as to offer as little resistance as possible to the blowing currents, and Bottecchia does likewise, pressing close to me. The calm hands of the pilot tightly gripped on the "joy-stick" move from right to left with automatic gestures. The motor does not seem to be operating well, and I whose sense of smell has become extremely sensitive to the odor of burning rubber—since the day when following an encounter my plane took fire near the ground—sniff about attentively to discover if there is anything burning. The indicator still marks 1400 revolutions. This is a reassuring sign. We are at 6900 feet. I do not believe we have to climb any higher, and tapping Gel-

metti on the shoulder, I point out to him the direction of the front.

Beneath us towards the Piave, which glimmers indistinctly in the east, the fireworks of our troops on guard in the trenches shower forth. Occasionally a ray with a parachute falls more slowly and vividly illuminates a small tract beneath us. A few flashes and unexpected streaks tell us that our artillery is firing prohibited shots. The sky about us is thick with the flashes of many shrapnel which shoot up in the air like fireworks. An anti-aircraft battery is firing at us. The rain of fire approaches and recedes according to the moment, and occasionally the explosion of a well-aimed shot is heard as it hisses past the plane. The pilot changes his course so as not to be hit. I am curious to know who is firing. I bend forward in my seat and beneath us in our territory, I see the parting flashes of several anti-aircraft shots which have begun a barrage fire. Immediately after, in the direc-

tion of Treviso I see huge flashes on the ground as if large projectiles had fallen on the city. Now I understand! Our batteries are not firing against us, for they have certainly been informed by the observation posts that an Italian plane is flying over them, but their fire is directed against the enemy planes which are bombarding Treviso. We must be on the alert, for evidently there are many enemy planes about, and I should not care to run into a plane with the cross designed on it.

We are passing over Montello, all bent and shriveled, which reminds me of the configuration of the Carso. At the foot of the mountain I recognize Giavera and almost on the banks of the Piave, Narvesa shimmers. We are about to enter enemy territory. The broad flow of the Piave, which separates into various currents among the whitish masses of the islands, clearly outlines to us the flow of its impetuous waters. The supports torn from the bridge of the

Priola arise towards us like the stumps of a mutilated arm and farther down, the river widens its course towards the Grave di Papadopoli and the sector of the front where the Bersaglieri of the 8th Regiment are stationed. Even Bottecchia recognizes the places in which he fought recently and points out to me Isola Maggiore, separated from Isola Caserta by a short, narrow current. All these strips of land which formerly were nought but unformed heaps of stones, now have a history, and on every one of them both the belligerent nations have tried to establish defenses, to construct outposts and small stations for machine guns.

"Oh rare, delightful sweetheart" . . . the familiar melody is recalled by the buzzing of the motor and repeats itself continually in my ears. At times while listening to the powerful voice of the "Isotta" I feel as if there were many instruments playing in the night and the alternating melodies

and varying modulations in the orchestration recall the classic symphonies in which the greatest artists of sound have expressed with majestic power the rhythmic significance of their thought and the fury of their passions.

The Castle of Saint Salvador appears on top of the hills and although our guns must have fired at it frequently it still preserves its original structure and the heavy tower, which has something German about it, still rests on the high sloping roof. This castle belongs to an Austrian and, perhaps because his countrymen have spared it, undeviating justice has loosed against it the fury of our guns. The reverse of the hills which point towards Conegliano slopes slowly towards the hills of Pieve di Soligo, while the broad road of Susegana and Conegliano glimmers distinctly beneath us.

Gelmetti has inserted the handle of the silencer, and as though by magic the concert of the marvelous instruments which had

echoed many distant songs in my mind ceases. We now feel as if we were sliding through air, the same impression one feels while coasting in an automobile whose engine has been shut off.

The enemy territory is less illuminated than ours. The lights in the villages are scarce, and there are few searchlights turned towards us. As though by magic the enemy anti-aircraft batteries become silent. The reason for their silence is obvious; the Austrians have many of their own bombing planes in the sky and they certainly have not noticed the slight humming of our motor. Along the road of Susegana to Conegliano Pordenone, great green lights are lit from which many colored rays shoot forth at intervals. It is the first time I have observed those lights in enemy territory but I have heard about them from Lieutenant Ancilotto who often goes on nocturnal flights to try to down some enemy bombing plane which finds in the obscurity of the

night the courage to attempt what it dares not in the daytime. These signals are placed at convenient intervals so that if some enemy plane loses its way in the fog and cannot find its bearings, all it need do is to fly low over the lights which often indicate a safe place for a landing.

There is Conegliano. . . . The large tower and cypresses of the castle look small and flat and do not convey to me that feeling of reality which I felt as I looked at them from the bank of the Piave. Near the great stone quarry, from which even before our retreat powerful dredges had taken abundant construction material, there lies a large mansion with its lights aglow and surrounded by a vast garden. It is my own house! I recognize the tennis-court, the paths and barns, and I know who those are who are permitting themselves the luxury of so costly an illumination at this late hour. They are the surviving Austrian aviators of the 7th chasing squadron who miracul-

ously escaped the fire of our guns. They who cannot allow themselves the joy of combat and do not dare face us by day in the sky are trying perhaps other struggles against the weaker, against the women who succumb. What a pity that I have not a bomb. I am certain I would not miss my aim! The long path which leads from Vittorio to the inn at Gai is outlined clearly against the green fields and the Villa of Querini Stampalia on the top of the hill unfolds in the night its huge arches. The Austrians have built a new connection on the railroad line, Sacile-Conegliano, which will enable their trains to arrive directly at the station of Ceneda without passing through Conegliano.

The altimeter marks 7500 feet. I think we can begin to descend because there is not more than about ten miles between us and the field on which we have decided to land. The fog which at first was dense has thinned out gradually and we can now recognize

every detail on the ground beneath us as though it were daytime. The moon which is now high in the heavens follows its course, tipped up on one side. The vegetation beneath us changes gradually and in place of the cultivated fields, vineyards and rows of mulberry trees there is a flat, grassy region divided by many small streams of water lined with willow trees. The Meschio, a tributary of the Livenza, has already disappeared beneath the wing, and beyond glitter the tumultuous falls of the Livenza near Sacile. The river forms a huge "S" around the towers of this city whose sharp gables rise towards us. The streets are deserted and it seems as if no important movement had ever stained their whiteness. The still wing continues to descend. 4500 feet. . . . I stand up to inspect the ground because we must lean slightly towards the left in order to leave the road which leads from Sacile to Pordenone and take the road from Fontana Fredda to Aviano. The

field on which we have decided to descend is called "Praterie Forcate" and is about a mile from the enemy flying field at Aviano. I strain my eyes to try to recognize the little trenches to the left of our field, trenches which I have seen in photographs of this region made by Gelmetti from his "Spad." There they are, right in front of us! I examine the field beneath us and there does not seem to be anything abnormal about it. The sections where the grass has been cut and those where it is still high form little splotches which resemble camouflaged military works. We are about 3000 feet above ground and Gelmetti begins spiraling so that I lose my equilibrium for a moment, but when the plane resumes its horizontal position I suddenly see flashing on the ground beneath us one of those green lights which I had previously noticed from on high and which are accustomed to indicate directions to enemy planes. Three colored stars rise up towards us and tremb-

lingly fall slowly back on the plain. There is no time to lose. We must at once modify all our plans because if in the field where we had decided to land there is a green light it means that nearby there are Austrians and if we do not wish to be captured at once we must attempt a landing in some other place. We describe a wide curve and resume our original route with our nose towards the camp of Aviano. Two searchlights suddenly blaze out on the ground and by their light we clearly see a "T" which is the sign used by the Austrians to indicate to their pilots the spot where they should place their wheels marked on the field. For a second we believe all is lost, we fear we must renounce our enterprise forever. If the rays of the searchlight succeed in enveloping us in their light we shall be discovered, fired at, and shall have to turn homeward. But instead of turning their lights towards us they concentrate the power of their rays on the ground, so that

the field beneath us seems to tremble with a myriad sparks which dance in their broad embrace. The searchlights cross and intersect over the "T" of the landing spot. Through the air there passes a swift vision; a few yards from us an enemy plane which I have recognized from the flashes of the exhaust, cuts across us but swiftly withdraws and its light disappears towards the higher strata of air. Therefore, the enemy planes must be departing, their motors must be going and they must be making an infernal noise.

Suddenly a wild plan occurs to me. What if, instead of landing on the field near the one which we had picked out, we should land right on the outskirts of the enemy's flying field? In the first place we should be certain of the favorable character of the land, and secondly we could not be discovered by the Austrians because they have the light of the searchlights in their eyes; they would not hear the indistinct noise of

our motor because it is so slight that it would be drowned by the noise of their departing planes. Furthermore, the audacity of the project fascinates me; the risk tempts me; it would be too beautiful to be able to land right on their own field without having them notice it. In a second I unfold my plan to Gelmetti. He does not answer, but as a response he lessens still further the flow of gas. The earth rapidly approaches us. It seems as if it were coming towards us; with the rapidity of lightning everything retakes its just proportions. We are a few feet above a road; I am bent double so as not to hamper in the least the movements of the pilot. He concentrates all his efforts so as to make a safe landing, but perhaps because he is deceived by the distant light which, instead of helping, hinders us, he touches land too soon with his back wheels and the plane jerks forward suddenly; in a second he straightens it with great dexterity and we touch the ground

gently and glide swiftly towards the end of the field.

“Good, excellent!” I had time to say to Gelmetti and he answered, “Up to the very last moment you want to make fun of me.”

I jumped to the ground with my bundle of civilian clothes under my arm, and without waiting a moment I bent to kiss the ground for which I had suffered so much. My comrade also descended without uttering a word. We looked anxiously about but the searchlights continued to glow in their regular fashion as though no alarm had been given. Above us we heard the deep grinding noise of a “Gotha.” Not a moment to be lost. I went towards the tail and Bottecchia stood by the wing. The propeller revolved slowly and with a light, cadenced rustling moved the high grass and bent with its breeze the branches of the trees and the stalks of the flowers near it. I pushed all my weight against the triangular trellis of the tail of the “Voisin” and by

making the front wheels of the plane rise, I caused it to circle on its hind wheels while Bottecchia helped me by pushing on the side of the wing. Quickly we removed our fur coats and helmets and I jumped on the plane to throw them in the bottom of the car. Gelmetti was moved and I could not say a word. I whispered in his ear, "Remember what you have promised; remember to come back for me after a month." He nodded affirmatively and kissed me. I barely had time to place my feet back on the ground before he had fed the motor with gas and in the twinkling of an eye had disappeared. The dear old "Voisin" had again taken flight and we could only distinguish it by the rumbling of the silencer which was red-hot and resembled a red lamp wandering in the sky. For a few seconds we could still follow its glitter and then it disappeared. . . .

* * * * *

We were alone! The moment which I

had thought about so often, which I had so often dreaded, was come! The aeroplane, the last advanced sentinel of our country, the last safe refuge, had left us, but I did not tremble. There was within me all that calm which comes to us in most trying moments, all the faith I had ever felt in the success of my mission. Above us the tranquil stars twinkled and the vast plain beneath trembled as though an invisible hand were moving the flowers and stars which surrounded us. In the background the still profiles of the mountains lent to the picture a meek aspect of peace and we, who had passed from sudden motion to calm, from a great struggle to the silence of nature, found again in the wilderness of that broad plain the significance of deep things, the intimate feeling of life. Never as in that moment had I ever experienced the sensation that something within me had been cut short, that a new life was commencing for me; I felt like a sailor who, wrested from

the current, has with difficulty reached the bank of a turbulent stream and looks anxiously towards the other bank to which he no longer has the strength or the courage to return. So I felt that the past was worth nothing and that I lived only for the strength of the present, that I lived only for the strength of the future.

We began to walk rapidly. I had taken Bottecchia by the arm and had clasped his hand with great emotion that he might feel we were now one, that a single, firm, indissoluble bond now bound us for the future. He too answered me with a prolonged, affectionate clasp, without uttering a word. Almost as if there had opened before us a mysterious way, unseen before, we hurried and ran towards the mountain guided by a sure instinct of direction. In moments of such great concentration it almost seems as if nature, through an egotistical strength of conservation gives to the organism an unimaginable calm. My impression was not

of walking through a deserted field, but of following the track of a known path, and when we reached a small country road on whose rocky bed an enemy tractor had left the marks of its broad tracks, I had the impression of having already seen those marks, I felt as if I was reliving in a new life an old adventure. . . . We were happy! With us sang the voices of the insects. All the loves which breathe in the country about us seemed to raise a hosannah of glory in one single glorious melody. In my ears rang the chords of a Beethoven sonata which sings of the joys of the awakening. Without stopping we ran across a long expanse of field until we reached a file of poplars which rose in front of us. There we paused a moment for breath; to turn around and take stock of the real things about us. . . . The small roll of enemy money weighed in my hand, but I did not put it away because I wished to have it at hand to throw away at the first provocation. Beyond the file of

trees there extended before us another field, as vast as the first. But the ground was less level, there were little grassy mounds, heaps of rocks, and occasional holes. With great satisfaction I reflected on the good fortune which guided us to land where the ground was level whereas we might have selected the ground we were now passing over, in which case a disaster would have been inevitable. At intervals we listened with our ears close to the ground to discern if there were any suspicious noises about. The only indications of the enemy and of the war were the beams of the searchlights which were still lit and the uninterrupted buzzing of the numerous enemy planes furrowing the paths of the sky. A small truck passed along the road which we had crossed and we heard its rumbling lose itself in the distance. We had now arrived in a cultivated region and large fields of wheat were swaying their stalks in the night breeze. We did not cross the field, but preferred to

circle around it, because the stalks as they divide always leave a trace of the passing and if anyone were to have followed us, or had noticed our presence he could easily reach us by following our track through the wheat field. I did not expect the land to be so extensively cultivated. Even in the smallest patches of ground the little plants of wheat lifted up their heads and everywhere were the signs of the indefatigable hand of man. We followed a labyrinth of cultivated vines and every time we were about to step out into an opening, we looked anxiously about us to make sure there was no living creature near us. We threw ourselves prostrate on the ground at the slightest suspicious noise. We had traversed a great deal of road, but the distance between us and the mountain was still great and would be more difficult to cover because the dawn was not distant and because we were approaching a region where there were dwellings. The far-off

voice of a dog barking at the moon reached us as we stepped out onto a road and this was the first indication that the presence of man was near. We passed a region cultivated with fruit trees and from behind a hedge which separated the field from the road there rose the outline of a small farmhouse.

We had to be on our guard so as not to fall in the jaws of the wolf when least expected. We were bound to travel more slowly and try to stay as far as possible from dwellings. Had we been dressed in civilian clothes we should have been less conspicuous, but if anyone were to see us in Italian uniforms, with our healthy appearance and clothes not badly worn, he might suspect us at once and spread the news. Furthermore we had to be very careful not to meet Austrian soldiers. We had to avoid the roads where the gendarmes usually walk.

The languid melody of night had been

superseded by the brisker melody of the morning. It seemed as if all the voices of the country were of one accord to tell us the tale of the light which was about to rise, to celebrate the praises of the great light-giver which, having traversed the starry deserts, returns to us with the joys of the awakening. The air had become colder, there was in it something sharper, something which invigorates one for the struggle of the day. Towards the east, towards the distant aviation fields where the searchlight faded in the first greenish lights of dawn, a thin, pale, wan light penetrated and followed the grave majesty of night, the grave, deep azure vault in which Venus had lit her torch.

The houses became more frequent and from them there sounded occasional confused noise of voices. Something common and familiar was awakened in our consciences. The wonder of sleep was interrupted by the little necessities of every hour,

and these needs were revealed to us by the noise of wooden shoes running downstairs, by a virile voice, or by the bellowing or mooing of an animal as it awakened. The roosters raised their silvery voices towards the sun and their joyous chants multiplied and increased along the plain with the light. Life was being reborn again in a multitude of ways and we had not reached a safe spot as yet, we had not reached the mountain where we should be able to change our clothes. We were compelled to quicken our steps, lest we be discovered unexpectedly, and since in the many noises we had heard nothing abnormal, nothing which indicated the presence of the enemy, we hastened all the more to reach the hills embossed in the thick foliage of the chestnut trees.

A small village extended at a short distance to our right and the tranquil houses with their sloping roofs of wood clustered about the church like little devout women who wished to enter. Our progress was now

more difficult because at times our path was crossed by wire railings, by low walls which must be jumped, and every now and then there was no alternative but to travel along stretches of road where we were likely to have unpleasant encounters. A bluish smoke rose from the chimneys and through a thick curtain of leaves I got a glimpse of a peasant who having collected his heifers, urged them on with the tip of his staff. There was only a short distance left for us to cross and having followed for a few moments a wall along the road, and having crossed a small ditch, we again found ourselves in open country and fronting hills sloping toward the plain. We began to ascend and nature at once became wilder, the cultivation less cared for, and thick entanglements of shrubs and thorns encircled the sturdy, knotted trunks of the chestnut trees. These gently sloping hills followed one another in rapid succession, so that no sooner had the climber reached the top of one of them than

up shot another elevation which required further ascent. But we had to descend again towards the bottom of the valley from which there rose a sudden cloud of smoke. Between the backs of two mountains which outlined their sharp shapes against the sky there appeared the square imposing mass of the Castle of Polcenigo. We quickened our pace while descending and passed near a small clearing in which a few trenches had been dug and above which projected several targets of cardboard. This must have been a practice field for the enemy, and therefore we could not delay long in its vicinity; for directly the sun rose, there would probably arrive enemy soldiers. Rapidly we traversed the distance which still separated us from the river and without removing our shoes or turning up our trousers we plunged into the water, which reached to our knees, and which separated us from another hill where the wood was so thick and compact

that it would serve as a safe refuge in which to change our clothing.

A small rocky path rose towards the summit of the hill and the water of a brook eddied and leaped down through the rocks. The vegetation about us was composed largely of shrubs, and the climbing vines about the massive trunks of the chestnut trees formed intricate labyrinths which it was not easy to enter. At intervals a small clearing opened before us and we chose one of these, not too distant from the top of the hill, as a suitable place in which to make the necessary changes.

This was really a streak of luck because we were thoroughly wet, and it would do us no harm to change into dry clothes. The only thing we wanted to change was our shoes but on certain occasions one cannot afford to be too particular. We undressed and put on the coarse underwear and our heavy peasant suits. I glanced at the front of my uniform on which the three blue medal ribbons,

which I did not wish to leave behind me even when I left my country, were pinned. Bottecchia made a bundle of our cast-off clothing and threw it under a tree which could be recognized at once for its height. Those suits might prove useful. If at a future date we should be found and made prisoners we could show our tallies and call ourselves Italian aviation officers who had been compelled to land in a camp near Aviano, because of a sudden damage to the motor. We could say we had ordered the pilot to destroy the plane and that we had obtained civilian clothes from some peasants in which we attempted to reach our own lines. The pilot instead of destroying the plane perhaps had succeeded in adjusting the magneto and had departed leaving us in enemy territory. To prove the truth of our tale we could show them our uniforms which we had left under the tree where they were at present. This version seemed plausible

and I hoped that in case of necessity I should be able to convince the Austrians.

We stood up. The resplendent sun was already high in the heavens and all the plain was flooded with its light. The fields which we had traversed extended across the background of the picture and we recognized the rows of poplar trees towards which we had sped when we first alighted. Then we saw again all the cultivated district, the scattered houses we had encountered at the beginning and finally the compact mass of houses of Budoia which we miraculously passed without unpleasant rencontres. Everything about us seemed marvelous. The plants, the flowers, the bushes, the grass seemed to have a new fascination for us. The very rising of the sun astonished us, as though the sun should arise otherwise than in our own territory. Finally we began to consider the insurmountable barrier which separated us from our people, and looking towards the west we sought for a sign of

something from the other side. Everywhere we were surrounded by enemy territory. Delay in this spot however was dangerous. We should try to get our bearings more definitely in mind; waiting then in some secluded nook until night fell once more.

It would be interesting to be able to watch from an elevated point the movement on the Sarone-Polcenigo road and we therefore continued our walk towards the other side of the hill; that side which dominated the road. I threw a last glance towards the tree beneath which our uniforms rested, hoping I should never need to see them again. The wood was so thick and tangled that it was difficult to open a passageway among the dense foliage. At length we emerged on a large clearing. In the center the heavy walls of a large house arose. The chimney was tranquilly exhaling a bluish smoke which faded away in the clear atmosphere of the morning. We barely had time to hide before we saw a young woman carrying

a large pail of milk come out from the half-open door. How we should have liked to step out and talk with her; how we should have liked to drink a glass of milk! But dared we do it when in that house there might be billeted some enemy soldiers? We turned away and resumed our weary march through the contorted coils of the climbing vines. Occasionally a lizard glided swiftly through the low juniper-bushes which were in bud and we turned, fearful that some suspicious person was following us. The wood became gradually thinner and the hill descended rapidly towards the road. We stopped in a sort of cave surrounded by shrubs from which we could see everything without being seen. In front of us rose the stony wall of the Cansiglio which is almost without vegetation; the sections nearer the lowland however, seemed more cultivated than in previous years. On one side the Livenza, which from its very source forms wide turns over a vast sloping tract of

ground, divided our hill from the mountain in front of us. The Church of the Santissima could be distinguished on the further side of the valley and a few houses were scattered here and there over the slopes. We tried to get our bearings so as to study what road to follow as soon as night should fall. That village which we saw about two miles away in the gap between the hills and the Cansiglio was Sarone. Yes, certainly, because lower down, before the long zig-zagging of the ascending road, I recognized the great furnaces which are marked on the map. We had to decide whether it would be more convenient to pass to the right or to the left of the village, and both of us decided to pass by way of the mountain where the dwellings are less frequent. For, by that way it would be easier for us to pass unobserved. I thought it would be better to follow a little mule-path which seemed to pass over several small precipices where, one could guess, there was a quarry, and thence,

by keeping always towards the center, we should arrive at Belvedere.

The hours followed each other slowly; the sun was high and the noise of the cicadas made itself heard about us. The fields in front of us were peopled with workers and the furrows in which the wheat was planted glistened distinctly. Several women, easily identifiable from the black kerchiefs tied about their heads and the traditional full skirt, were hoeing near us. So far there had been no sign of the enemy, yet from what I heard at Sarone, there should be the command of a brigade of Honwed nearby and therefore also the command of the gendarmes. Several hours had passed and still not a single wagon nor a single soldier had been seen. Suddenly we heard the buzzing of a motor overhead. We raised our eyes and over us an enemy plane flew low, clearly distinguishable by the crosses on its wings. We now had to resign ourselves to the sight of seeing those colors, which we

often fought on our front, pass over our heads. Here the machines which would fly at great height and would be followed by bursts of shrapnel would be the planes with the tricolor of our friends and comrades.

Noon had now passed. We inferred this from the position of the sun for we had no watch with us. Subdued whisperings were heard from among the rustling leaves as though persons were passing through the wood which we had crossed. They were the sweet sounds of children's voices. We left the small clearings at once so as not to be espied and from the wood there came two little boys searching for strawberries. They took the road which led to the house on the top of the hill; after a few seconds every sound ceased. How we should have liked to stop them; how we wished to kiss them, to express to them all our love and how many questions we wished to ask them. But we did not deem it advisable to confide in little children who might talk and so focus

on us the attention of soldiers who could not be far distant.

A slight noise of firing reached us from the other side of the valley. It must be, we thought, the Austrians practicing in the firing camp which we crossed. The time did not seem to pass, and although each of us had rested for a few hours while the other stood on guard, it seemed as if the great solar disk were always in the same spot in the heavens and had decided never to disappear behind the summits of the hills. A military cart drawn by four horses passed near us with heavy tread. The cart was full of knapsacks and munitions and this was the first sign, this was the first enemy we had encountered. Immediately afterward we heard a bugle, and a truck passed by noisily, the reverberation of its motor growing and then fading away among the mountain echoes. The sun at last was about to set and the women who were working in the fields took their children in their arms, and

with the farming implements on their shoulders, wended their way towards home. Then followed the groups of peasants ascending slowly the road which leads to Sarone. A great calm seemed to rest over all; peace in a smile seemed to descend from heaven, and in the failing light it seemed as if all worries, all cares, became drowsy. The sunset hour passed quickly and the purple sky became tinged with violet in the higher regions.

*Era già l'ora che volge il desio
Ai naviganti e intenerisce il core
La, di, che han deteo ai dolci amici addio.*

—Dante Purgatorio

The melancholy or night enveloped my soul and albeit no chimes from a bell wept for the dying day, yet a throng of memories crowded my mind during the first silences and shadows of the night.

IX

WE had now to resume our journey; we had now to find water to drink, for during the entire day our lips had not touched a single drop and that with throats dried by the eating of chocolate which in truth is not the best sort of food when one has nothing to drink. We rapidly descended the hill and traveled for a short distance along the road until we came to a cross-road where the suffering arms of Our Saviour were extended upon a wide cross. At the base of the crucifix the signs of the passion were simply represented, and I recognized the hammer, the pincers, the sponge and the crown of thorns. We passed through the cultivated fields which we had seen from on high; we jumped across little ditches which separated us from the road

and circling the branch of the Livenza where it disappears in a tunnel, whence it is absorbed by the electric factories, we arrived near the furnace. Immediately afterward we had to begin to climb again. I realized that we had not been foresighted in many things, and my shoes were surely not the kind suitable for a long cross-country tramp in mountainous regions. However, how could I have explained to the Austrians, had they captured us while landing, an aviator wearing shoes bound with iron? My soldier wore heavy, rough shoes, and I had great difficulty in following him in the steep climb; he changed his for mine, and I continued the road with less difficulty. We ascended rapidly; all the plain opened beneath our eyes. Below in the village of Sarone many lights glittered. A cart ascended heavily along the road leading to the little town and we distinctly heard the tinkling of the bells and the frequent lashes of the whip. Everything was silent. . . .

Occasionally a distant voice reached us carrying sounds which were Italian. We had found again the mule-path over which we had decided to pass, and after following it for a long time we ascended still farther along the ragged, rocky edge. Suddenly, at a cave, the road lost itself and we had to find our way alone. If only we could have found a little spring to quench our thirst, but the unmerciful chain of mountains did not seem at present to offer us any watery vein. Perhaps if we could carry ourselves a little farther up we might find one of those holes which gather rain water, so we climbed higher, we climbed forever.

Every sign of vegetation had ceased. The ground was rocky and so irregular that we had to guard well our steps lest we fall in the deep valleys which opened at our feet. We were beginning also to feel tired, for it was many hours since we had last tasted food and our thirst was becoming greater. A searchlight had been lit in the distance

and its light fell full on us. We hoped they had not seen us. On the field the green lights which annoyed us so the previous night renewed their fires. Probably the Austrian planes were preparing to depart as soon as the moon arose. We descended a steep valley at the bottom of which there ought to be water and the deep voice of the wind which blew between the rocks gave us the impression of hearing the murmur of a stream at the bottom. The descent was long and difficult and at the last when we had reached the point where the two broad bases of the mountain meet, we found nought but two enormous rocks which marked the impetuous course of a torrent, but had not a single drop of water between them. It seemed well then to follow the bottom of the valley, for there was no longer any reason why we should struggle through the high mountain, and perhaps we should be able to find some isolated house where we should have to de-

cide to knock and trust to luck that we should encounter no gendarmes. We were continually descending. The rocky bottom of the torrent changed into a paved street. Beneath us glittered several lights which marked the site of some dwelling. We hastened our walk and, having reached a little hill overlooking the village, I stopped and suggested to Bottecchia that he descend cautiously to the first house to see if he could discover any indication that might suggest the presence of enemy soldiers. If he found nothing suspicious we were to take courage in both hands and dare knock at some isolated hamlet.

Bottecchia descended and I saw him disappear in the night. The moon had risen and everything was stained with its pale, yellowish light. I hid in a shadowy spot and awaited the return of my soldier. The few minutes he stayed away seemed interminable. Finally with great joy I saw him and when he got back to me he reported

that he had found nothing to hinder us from carrying out our project. We continued along the rocky road and approached the village. Two small houses in front of us clearly indicated the poverty of the inhabitants. We chose the poorer one and knocked at the low, narrow door. No answer. We knocked again, and then knocked at a shutter and a closed window. Finally some noise! Someone had been awakened and sleepy voices reached us in the silence of the night. Immediately after the frightened voice of a woman asked us in the Venetian dialect, "Who are you and what do you want?"

"We are Italians and we ask you mercifully for a drop of water."

Someone arose and shortly after we heard the slow heavy footsteps of an old man coming down the wooden stairs.

"Who are you Christians traveling at so late an hour?"

"We are prisoners who have escaped

from a camp near Gemona. For pity's sake give us a draught of water to drink. Tell us, too, what village is this? Are there any soldiers? Are there gendarmes?"

"This village is Sarone, but you can feel safe because all the soldiers left for the front several days ago and even the gendarmes who were here guarding the village have followed the brigade."

At last we breathed.

"Thank heavens they have gone," continued the old man in a tired voice, "for if things had kept on this way, we would not have had a single blade of grass left. They have taken everything away from us. Imagine, they have begun to dig up even the new potatoes which are no bigger than a pigeon's egg. Everything, every vegetable which comes within their reach is devoured at once. Imagine, they even cook the tendrils of the vines in their soup. . . . But you do not look as if you had suffered much, you especially," he said turning to-

wards me, "you must have been a cook in some concentration camp."

I did not answer but greedily drank the water from the cup he had offered me, and no liquor, no beverage has ever tasted better to me than that draught of water did.

"Tell me, my good man, why have the soldiers left for the front?"

"Why, don't you know? You seem to be little informed of what is happening here. For the past two months we have seen nothing but cannon and soldiers passing and it seems that shortly the offensive will begin. If only they would put an end to this terrible war!"

This was the first military information I succeeded in obtaining in enemy territory. . . . Then the offensive was imminent! We must hasten on toward Vittorio to gather more exact information. I did not ask anything further of the old man for I did not wish to make him suspicious, and after asking about what roads we should follow, we

left him on the threshold of his house. We believed we had traversed a large tract of land, we believed we had walked in the right direction but instead, after many hours of anxiety and errors, we had found ourselves back in the same village. Thank heaven there were no gendarmes in the village and that the old man told us of a short cut which led to where we had planned to arrive before dawn. We crossed the deserted village and reached a fountain which filled a square tank by the flow from its two jets. Oh, how pleasant is the noise of falling water to one who is thirsty! We drank our fill of the delicious liquid. When we had passed the last houses we turned to the left and ascended a hill along a safe path. The route we had to follow was in exactly the opposite direction to the one we had decided was correct and had intended to follow; we were somewhat reassured, our step was more elastic and we felt less weary than before. We passed near several demolished

houses about which there were deep holes. Perhaps these were places where our soldiers had resisted. The path broadened and almost became a mule-path. We had emerged on a courtyard, and a dog tied to a long rope which ran along a suspended wire came toward us barking furiously. As soon as he saw we were dressed in civilian clothes he began to wag his tail and make a fuss over us. A good sign, thought we! Even the dogs here recognize friends. The house was large and indicative of a certain amount of comfort. A notice had been posted over a door. I approached to read it and recognized a manifest of the troops of occupation, with the enemy eagle at its head. "This warehouse has been set apart as a deposit for ammunition of the Imperial Royal Austro-Hungarian army. The inhabitants of this house are guarantors of the safe preservation of the same. Whoever, even indirectly, becomes guilty of damaging war materials will have to answer

with his person and will have to face a firing squad." One cannot accuse the enemy of not having expressed clearly his intentions.

We continued along the path, ascended the hill and saw beneath us the glittering lights of a large town; from the railroad station the clank and hiss of a steam locomotive in motion reached us. The city on the plain beneath was certainly Canova, where the Austrians had constructed an important railroad station. Dawn was not distant and soon we should have to hide and rest for a while. It would be better therefore to ascend the mountain awhile to get away from the frequented region. Hill followed hill, at times separated by a deep valley through which a brook flowed, and it was a great relief to us to think that we should not now lack water. Above, the heavy droning of the motors of the enemy planes following one another with mechanical regularity, continued. We arrived in a place where the rugged rocks

left an opening barely large enough for a tiny road to wind up towards the mountain. On one side the ground sloped more gently and there were occasional bushes which protected us from indiscreet glances. It seemed best for us to lie behind one of these when we decided to rest for a few hours. A heavy sleep overcame us as soon as we stretched out on the ground and even my soldier permitted weariness to get the better of him.

I do not know how many hours passed; I do not know how long we forgot ourselves and everything about us; I only remember awakening at the sound of the rhythmic, cadenced tread of many soldiers' feet on the march. I tried to understand what was happening and looking through the branches a few yards ahead of us I saw a Hungarian battalion ascending the rocky road beneath. By good luck no one discovered us. Shortly afterward we heard the noise of shots, indicating that the battalion was at target practice. Soon we

should have to renew our journey, keeping far from the plain so as to meet no living soul. Beneath us, surrounded by a vast garden, we recognized the Castle of Moncenigo with its broad, heavy walls.

Hunger now began to make itself felt insistently. The little chocolate we had with us would certainly not suffice to appease us. We knocked at a small house and the old man who opened the door surveyed us suspiciously. We asked him for a bit of bread, and added that we were willing to pay well for it, but he looked at us with a wondering air as if bread were an unheard-of thing.

“I have nothing for you,” he said, “and I believe you had better make off at once because this morning the gendarme who usually comes to get the milk for the command hasn’t shown up yet and I shouldn’t like to have him find you here.”

The word “gendarme” was so significant that we did not make him repeat it and hastening our steps we endeavored to place

the greatest possible distance between us and that inhospitable house. We reached a vineyard where a man with a long, unkempt beard and a sort of apron all stained with green, was sprinkling sulphur about the vines. A youngster of about ten was helping him. My soldier recognizing him, saluted.

“Good morning, Andrea. I bet you don’t know who I am. I am one of the Bottecchia from Minelle, and as you see, after numerous vain attempts I have succeeded in escaping from the concentration camp at Gemona with my comrade here.”

“Oh, you are the driver who used to bring me the casks before the war. Now we don’t talk any more of casks or of wine; they have drunk it all up and in December when they wanted to build bridges across the Piave they took away even the vessels in which we used to keep it. This year, even if we had any grapes, we should not know where to put them, but the good Lord has taken

care of this and so have the Germans who hitch their horses by the vines. As you see they are nearly all ruined, and then without any sulphur what kind of a crop can you expect? Were I to tell you of all the subterfuges we had to resort to, to keep this bit of sulphur I am spreading about the vines, it would take me till to-morrow morning. Would that sulphur were the only thing we did not have!" A painful expression spread over his face. "We don't even have any bread. So these poor blameless people are dying of hunger!"

This sad news so impressed my soldier that he asked anxiously after his family. "Do you think my people are still alive?"

"Yes, I should believe they were, but one never knows for certain these times," he answered carelessly and indifferently.

"Do you think it would be possible for me to get as far as home?"

"I would not advise you to try. Even I stay at home as little as possible, and

furthermore, at Minelle there are always many gendarmes about. If you want to stop at some place it would be better for you to look up someone on the side of the mountain: for instance, your relatives who live near Fregona. That region is less frequented and you might find a way to settle down there and be able to see some of your people occasionally.”

The house mentioned by the mountaineer was the very place towards which we had been directed. We took leave of him; I caressed for a moment his child who stared at me with his large, frightened eyes. We continued our journey. The scenery which extended beneath us was truly beautiful. Frequent villages were scattered about it. We followed a small path among the high trunks of a wood of chestnut trees; this road seemed safe to us because it was improbable that anyone who did not know the ground inch by inch would venture here. We needed to be especially cautious when

compelled to cross the road. Then we had to take a thousand precautions, we had to resort to a multitude of wiles lest we be surprised by some gendarme. For instance we had to go along the road for a short distance if we wished to reach a certain other wood on the opposite hill. It was with great precaution we left the shrubbery for that purpose. The road appeared deserted and we began to cross, but just as we had reached the center, we saw two men in uniform, with rifles slung over their shoulders turn the nearby corner. Only a second passed, but in that second I clearly perceived upon their sleeves the black and yellow band. Not a moment to be lost. Those two figures were two gendarmes and we needed to take to our heels at once in the hope that they had not seen us. Fortunately, immediately on the other side of the road the wood began again and we ran madly, changing our direction often to hide our tracks. We reached the thickest wood, and

were compelled to stop, being out of breath. From above a cluster of rocks, thorny bushes curved their branches; we crouched under them and for a seemingly interminable length of time waited in the expectation of seeing one of those figures on our trail. But it appeared no one had followed us. Again we thanked heaven and our clothes which enabled us to get off so easily! After such an episode we had to make up for time lost. It was noon and if we wished to arrive at the house of my soldier's aunts before night-fall we had to hasten.

The weather was still fair, in fact, it was almost too warm for us, who had to do so much walking. Heavy clouds veiled at times the disk of the sun and threw huge shadows on the mountain sides. To our left rose the hills of San Martino and upon them the village of Minelle where the relatives of Bottecchia lived. My soldier stopped for a moment to recognize his dwelling. Suddenly, having climbed over the ridge of a

hill which obstructed the view, there appeared before us the chain of mountains surrounding Vittorio Veneto and pricked up between the sides of two hills there rose the lofty spire of the belfry of Fregona. The steeple seemed very near to us, though distances among the mountains are very deceiving. At last the road became familiar to us. Bottecchia knew it in every detail. We passed near a little wooden house with a sloping roof all covered with reeds closely bound together. An old woman and a girl were standing before the door. The girl was eating. This did not make us linger, but these two followed us with so goodly a smile and gave us so pleasant a "Good day," that for a moment we forgot all danger and stopped to speak with them. They wanted to know whence we came. Hearing we had traveled afar they inquired whether we were hungry and offered us a cup of milk. We drank it with avidity especially as it was offered with such homely

grace and by the gentle hands of the pretty brunette who looked at us with interest.

“It is so seldom,” she said, “that one meets able-bodied men now. The few remaining were recently taken away by the gendarmes who have now increased their guard, and no one whose papers are not exactly in accord with all the regulations can risk staying in any house or traveling on the roads. And you too, if you are not strictly within the orders and if you have not, in addition to your legitimization papers, your classification papers, also refrain from showing yourselves or they will take you to headquarters. We have the good fortune to be living in an isolated spot and are so poor that they do not bother us. Our great fortune is a little cow which we succeeded in hiding from the very beginning, and which we keep always in the deep woods so that no one can lay hands on her. When do you think the Italians will come to liberate us? And to think there were some who, at the

retreat, said we were all comrades and that the Germans would treat us as the Italians had. In the first place they are Germans, and if I had no other reason for hating them I should always remember that I have two brothers fighting on the other side. One is a corporal in a regiment of Alpini, and let us hope he was not taken prisoner, for I'd rather know he was dead than see him subjected to the privations and indescribable sufferings endured by those unfortunates who have fallen into their hands. Tell me, do you think our soldiers will be able to resist the tremendous offensive they are preparing? We are terribly afraid for we have seen such huge preparations. The other day I was passing near Vittorio and I saw them unloading a quantity of cases with red bands. A soldier from Trieste told me those cases were filled with projectiles containing a new asphyxiating gas from which the Austrians expect extraordinary results. Damn them! . . . If I could find one of them

alone and I had your strong fists I swear I should not be afraid to kill him as one does a mad dog."

Such deep faith moved me and I knew not how to hide from her the force of my thoughts and sentiments.

"Rest assured; wait yet awhile; wait until the grain is ripe and the grapes on the vines begin to redden; for I tell you truly that the time of your liberation cannot be far distant."

She looked at me, and reaching forth for my hand asked, "But who are you who know the secrets of the future?"

"I cannot disclose my name, but I come from afar, and you must ask no more. All you have suffered recently will be repaid to you; for all the tears you have shed you will live again in the great joyous days of triumph, for you have believed, and your faith cannot be deceived. I see you are poor and I want to leave you a slight token; some day, not far distant, you may learn

my name and rank." I took a bill from the roll of crowns I held in my hand, and we hastened away before the young woman had time to thank us or question us further.

X

THROUGHOUT the entire day we heard continued puffings of steam locomotives; we noticed an uninterrupted movement of trains carrying equipment to the station of Costa. There also passed a long train full of cannon, and wagons whose canvasses flapped in the breeze. The engine proceeded slowly and from the smokestack an acrid, nauseating odor escaped. I wondered what the Austrians were burning in their furnaces since I did not believe they could have much coal.

We passed the juncture of the Friga and the Meschio beyond the village of Capella and now only a short stretch of road separated us from the house we wished to reach. We followed the foamy course of the torrent and, arriving at an intersecting

point we saw approaching us a truck full of hay, drawn by the arms of a young mountaineer. We saluted him in our dialect and he answered with a pronounced Tuscan accent. That boy certainly was not a native of our regions; he must have escaped from prison and through some good fortune succeeded in establishing himself with a peasant family. It was strange that the Austrian gendarmes, among whom there are many Dalmatians and Istrians, had not noticed his manner of speaking which was not at all like that of our mountaineers.

We resumed our journey, eager to reach the coveted goal. By following a country road we suddenly found ourselves in front of a group of houses. Near the small church a peasant, seated on the ground, was swinging his scythe and at the noise of our footsteps turned his emaciated face towards us, eyeing us suspiciously. We crossed a courtyard where the chickens, frightened at our footsteps, scurried quickly away and we

found ourselves on a little bridge which crossed the Friga. The road continued towards the mill. We knew the village and further recognized it from the photographs made from our aeroplanes. Bottecchia started running and I ran after him. At last we arrived at a wide courtyard where there were gathered many men whom I did not know. They were seated on a narrow bench and from a large ornate bowl of majolica they helped themselves to hot, smoking soup and in their hands they held broad yellow slices of *polenta* (pudding made of Indian meal). The door of the house was ajar. Within the large kitchen a brilliant, playful fire was flickering. From the massive gridirons hung a large round caldron. A woman bending over it mixed and turned the yellow flour at intervals. The woman had her shoulders turned towards us and Bottecchia sought in vain among those present for someone he knew. We approached her, and lo, from a side door

there appeared a little nervous woman with an emaciated face and bony hands seamed with heavy blue veins.

“Cietta, Cietta,” cried my soldier, “stare at my face and do not tremble. It is I, really I, your Giovannino!” The old woman stared at him with her eyes opened wide. Her hands fell heavily upon her apron; she leaned against the table as not to fall. Suddenly, as she wavered, Giovannino took her in his arms, and embraced and caressed her a long time. Finally she regained her self-possession and passed her lean hand over his forehead.

“Let me look at you, let me touch you, let me feel the life of my life. But how you have changed; how big you have become, how handsome!” She smiled through her tears. “Do you remember the happy days when we were all together and I used to take you on my knees and sing sweet lullabies to you, before nightfall? Then no one could harm you, but now, instead! . . .

Tell me, are you in danger? Tell me is anyone following you, for I am afraid, terribly afraid." She eyed him steadily as though to divine his secret; she threw her arms around him as though to protect him. "Tell me they will not come to take you away. Are you tired? Are you hungry? Ah, we have nothing to give you!"

The poor woman, terribly agitated, ran from one end of the kitchen to the other not knowing where to begin. She wanted to do everything at once, she wanted to feed us, she wanted to call her daughter, to confide in her sister, to tell the old men outside to watch out for us and warn us.

"And who is this man? Is he your comrade? When did you succeed in escaping? Do you come from afar?"

We tried to calm her, to tell her that no danger threatened us, and she poured some milk into two deep cups and cut for us two enormous slices of *polenta*, not too large however for our appetites.

“Cietta, Cietta,” Giovanni began, “rest assured, do not be afraid. Don’t you see how well we look, and how happy? This is an Italian officer,” and Bottecchia made a mysterious sign of silence by placing his finger before his mouth.

“What? An Italian officer?” Everyone gathered round me.

“It is safe to talk here, isn’t it? All those here are good Italians?”

“Yes, you may talk, but be very careful because now one is not safe even in his own house, and at any moment, when one least expects it, he is likely to be dispatched to the other world before he even has time to recommend his soul to the sacred Madonna.”

The sister of Cietta, who expressed in her thin face a suppressed grief, making it all the more pitiful, took me by the hands and said with sobs, “I too, had a son, big and strong like you and they have killed him. One day as he was walking here in front of the house a platoon of Germans arrived

for the requisitions, and he, frightened, began to run down the slope. One of the gendarmes called after him to halt, but my poor dear one, believing himself far enough to be out of danger, continued running without obeying. The gendarme at once aimed his rifle and fired. He fell in a pool of blood with a leg and an arm shattered. We lifted him up. He was pale and did not utter a word. For a long time we nursed him here because I preferred to keep him under my care, because he wanted to die near his mother, but at length they took him away from me to the hospital, where his condition grew worse every day, every hour. The wounds would not heal and after two months of indescribable suffering he died on the night when the swallows returned. I always see him before me as he was, strong as you; but taller, yes, taller than you." As she spoke she clutched my arms as though in pressing my flesh she pressed the flesh of the son she had lost. "Who will

bring my boy back to me, who will bring him back? Oh, unjust war, oh, ruthless war, and you German assassins, may you be damned forever! May the stain of the blood of that innocent lad fall upon you and your children so that throughout all eternity you never shall have peace!"

Softly I pressed her hand and whispered, "Courage, courage, life is made up of terrible sorrows and we must face them bravely and with resignation, but God is just and your appeal to Him in malediction is worth maybe more than the fire of a thousand guns. The day shall come when they will have to pay, and pay in blood the measure of your sighs and all these your tears."

I asked the mistress of the house who the people were about us and she answered that they were refugees from villages along the Piave, especially San Stefano and Valdobia-dine, now under the fire of our guns. They had had to abandon everything. The enemy did not even allow them to take with them

their mattresses and the most necessary things, so that they were now compelled to sleep on the ground. Among the refugees there was a man, about fifty years old, whose heavy skeleton expressed the strength of his days now past. He approached me, looked at me cautiously and asked, "Is it really true that you are an Italian officer? If you are an officer you ought to try to get to the other side, to cross the lines so as to tell them on the other side what the Austrians are preparing because for the past two months, both night and day, we have seen nothing but thousands of cannon and interminable lines of soldiers and wagons passing along the roads."

"Yes, it is true, I am an Italian officer and I have been sent here to do exactly what you have said, to try to find out something. I am an aviator and I landed here with an aeroplane to try to learn and communicate to our forces the day of the offensive and everything else I can gather about the

enemy's plans. And you who are good Italians, if you really believe in our cause, if you really hope on some not distant day to see our troops return and if all of you do not wish to die here of hunger, everyone of you must, in all seriousness, help me, for all has been organized, all has been prepared. We Italians have the habit of being enthusiastic at the beginning but do not always have enough seriousness and constancy to carry a project through to the end. Now, I want you to act as soldiers for me, I want each one of you to choose a sector in which to act, but the method of obtaining information must be the one I suggest, must be so organized that the reports are safe, that I may communicate them without doubts to our headquarters."

Giovanni was talking with his aunt who was telling him of all the many trials and tribulations she had had to endure since our retreat. She anxiously asked him of news of her sons on the other side.

“Tell me, then you are not jesting? You have really seen Pietro? And is Antonio still in the artillery? And Uncle Baldassarre who went with his family to Italy, has he anything to eat? Has he found work?”

“Cietta, Cietta, why didn't you heed me, why didn't you follow the advice of Antonio who wanted you at all costs to follow him to the other side? Had you listened to him you would not now be in so perilous a position for it seems to me that unless our soldiers hurry over we shall all soon run the risk of dying of hunger.”

“You have spoken the truth; the corn meal for that *polenta* which you ate came from a hiding place under the stairs; but we always fear lest the gendarmes will take it away, because they go from house to house and sound the walls to see if they are solid. If they are hollow, then they at once begin to dig for hidden treasure, and if they succeed in finding anything they not only take it away but they begin to maltreat the

people in the house. Our neighbor, the woman at the mill, has been dangerously ill. A platoon of Croats in trying to tear a necklace from her throat treated her so roughly that she fainted and she had to stay in the hospital for more than a month."

"Cietta, we have some money, if that can help you."

"But what can one do with money since gold is the only thing worth anything here. We have returned to the old custom of barter. Nothing can be had without merchandise and one is fortunate if he can find a bit of flour in exchange for linen, but no one will ever give merchandise for money. The only money which still has a little value is the Italian."

With anxiety I bethought me of what we should do with the precious roll to which we had attached so much importance and which apparently was not to be of great assistance.

"Cietta, if we were to remain here for a while to fulfill our mission, could you house

us?" asked Giovanni who at last felt the need of expressing himself and of making known our plan.

As an answer the old woman ran to the door and approaching her daughter asked her anxiously whether she had stationed the children around the house and if someone was watching from the windows to avoid any surprise. The refugee tried to reassure her by telling her that the hour in which the gendarmes usually made their rounds was still far distant, but the poor old woman would not listen to reason and with a worried expression turned to Bottecchia.

"No, no, it is not possible for you to remain here. Almost every night, when we least expect it, we see platoons of soldiers arriving who, with the pretext of seeing whether there are prisoners or deserters in the house, begin to search from cellar to attic in all our rooms always hoping to find something which they can take away. There is no spot so hidden that it escapes their

notice and even were you to hide in the hay-loft, they often climb up even to that to see if there is someone hidden in the forage. If you want to stay nearby you can sleep in a little isolated stable hidden in the wood which descends towards the Friga. Ever since the Germans have been here, no one has ever gone in that direction, and I am certain they do not know that under the thick foliage of the trees there is that little stable."

"Then we have no time to lose," I said turning toward the refugee who had lighted his pipe.

"Do you see this tobacco?" he said as he puffed a mouthful of smoke into the air. "You would believe this tobacco was real, instead of which it is mostly crushed plantain leaves which the Austrians sell in small packages at three crowns apiece. I only wish we could still buy it. This I got from certain Russians who guard the live stock

and I had to give them in exchange a goodly amount of flour.”

“Now mark my words well, and forget about the tobacco, the Russians and the live stock. You ought to go to your own village, near the regions of San Stefano where someone surely has succeeded in remaining on his own land; in the house of this someone there must be some Austrian soldiers. Well, you should do your utmost to get me some postcards or newspapers which the soldiers leave in the houses. These postcards can be far more useful than you suspect. Along the road try to enter as many houses as possible and in every one, without arousing suspicion, try to steal some mail. Newspapers alone will suffice, but be sure the address is not missing because I should not know what to do with unaddressed postcards and newspapers.”

The old man looked as if he had understood me; he seemed to have entered into the spirit of my reasoning and answered,

“I have a cousin whose house near Miane the Austrians have taken as their headquarters, and I am sure he will be able to give me some interesting news. Then I know a refugee from Segusin who is a clerk at the headquarters of Tappa di Vittorio. He is always frequenting the Austrians and ought to be able to give you some important information.”

“Very well, very well. By the way, tomorrow you will have to pass through Vittorio to reach the valley. When you have arrived on the further side of the clock tower, in front of the wheat market you will see a large mansion. Enter and ask for a man called De Luca. He is one of my agents and I should like to see him as soon as possible.”

“I understand,” answered the old man in a thoughtful way, “but how shall I get to your agent, for I know that in the house you speak of the Germans have established their headquarters.”

“That does not matter, that does not matter,” I answered trying to conceal the emotions aroused by the news that there were in truth enemy officers in my house. “I am certain that in so large a house they have left a room vacant for my agent. In case the Germans are no longer there find out where they have gone. Then, above all, I beg you to tell this secretary to show himself as soon as possible because I absolutely must talk to him. He is a staunch Italian isn’t he?”

“Yes, I can vouch for this. I believe that now they are all loyal Italians. Would that my children had succeeded in escaping to the other side! Would they were not here with me! I’d rather have them in the trenches with our soldiers than here with me, subject to the violence of the gendarmes and the drunken soldiers. For every day it seems as if they will take them away and put them at work in the interior of Austria where they will certainly die of hunger.”

A young lean boy with large blue eyes expressive of calm and goodness entered the kitchen at this point. His emaciated, thin face showed his past sufferings and the hunger endured.

"Here is Rino, the oldest of my boys. He too, will try to help you to the best of his ability."

Giovannino's intentions were far from wrong; he was searching for a way in which to get something to eat.

"Listen, Cietta, if you can't find a way in which to get flour, send for my sister at San Martino. You told me she was still grinding the flour for the Austrian command, and who knows but she may be able to take a little away. Anyway we must tell her I am here because I must see her, for she can be of great use to us in our undertaking."

"We'll do anything you want, but for mercy's sake, for mercy's sake, don't let yourselves be caught. You do not know these savages yet, you do not know what

they are capable of doing. After having taken you away they would come back here to our house and would set fire to it, the way they did at Mezza Villa in an isolated house where they found some prisoners. And now it is late and you are tired."

Cietta had entrusted several blankets to Rino who was to guide us to the little hut where we were to spend the night. I still wished to ask many questions and to continue talking with them and express all my appreciation for what they were doing for us, but perhaps they would not have understood me, for I realized that my way of speaking was not always the best way in which to make my thoughts understood to peasants. I feared that they might perhaps consider as haughtiness that which was merely reserve, and I experienced a vague feeling of being an outsider, of not being one of them.

We stumbled on the little hut almost before seeing it, for it was so well hidden and covered by the thick vegetation. We entered the lower part which in the past must

have been used as a stable; the upper part had evidently served as a hay-loft. The beams yet stood which formerly supported the hay and a bit of forage must have been left in the place because in one part the beams were still covered. Rino climbed up a little straight wooden ladder and where we thought there lay but hay there were instead several boards laid across the beams so as to form a little platform. We threw some hay on it and made ready to lie down. Rino, before leaving us, advised us to pull up the ladder and throw it across the beams, so that if someone were to enter beneath, he would never suspect we could have climbed to the little platform and therefore would not molest us. Our little lair was not far from a window and in case of alarm we could always escape by it and take to the open country. Soon fatigue overcame us and the bed, though in truth it was not very soft, seemed to us like a comfortable couch of feathers.

XI

JUNE 5. Several days following our arrival in enemy territory passed smoothly without anything particular happening. Every morning and every night one of the refugees brought us a basket of food and we suspended it from a cord that the ants and other insects might not spoil our precious treasure. Bottecchia's sister came. The meeting between the two was truly moving. Giovanni's sister is a little woman, angular and nervous, all fire and pepper. She offered to help us and we gave her some money to find something for us. She soon brought me some postcards from which I derived useful information about the movement of certain troops and I preserved these documents in a little tin box, which I buried in a spot I could readily

recognize. De Luca, my agent, also brought me important news and the number of a division and a regiment which he saw passing. But all of them had only a vague idea of what was about to happen and could not give me the exact details I desired. All, however, were unanimous in affirming that the offensive could not delay much longer and that it would be especially violent in the sector from the Montello to the sea.

More exact, more detailed, were the notices brought to me from Miane by the refugee. His cousin in the Austrian headquarters seemed to be a crafty, intelligent person. He was in touch with the general situation, and beside sending me a great many postcards, he referred to me some important details. From many symptoms he deduced that the offensive was imminent. All the transportation of ammunition had by now been completed and it was probable that the preliminary orders for the relief of the troops in the trenches by troops of

assault had been issued. One of the most significant indications was that all the shock troops, especially the Hungarians who form the staunchest troops in the army of the enemy, had received the order to be in readiness and several divisions had already left their old position so as to be nearer the front. There was also much talk of change of headquarters which, for the day on which the action was to open, must be in a far more advanced zone. The troops had recently enjoyed special treatment. The ration, which usually was very scanty and not sufficient to appease the hunger of a robust man, had been gradually increased in the past days, and there were daily distributions of wine, coffee, liquors and other comforts. The enemy command was attempting by every means to raise the *morale* of its soldiers. The officers delivered lectures before the troops in which they affirmed that from news received from the other side it was certain that the *morale* of the Italians was still

very low and that a single heavy blow would be sufficient to make the entire defensive system crumble, thus compelling the Italians to make a precipitate and disorderly flight. The victorious army would, therefore, be able to advance without great sacrifices, and would be able to take advantage of all the wonderful riches which were on the further side, and among these the army was bidden not to overlook the gem of the Adriatic, Venice. Even the Hungarian chaplains helped in this propaganda. They endeavored to convince the troops that this was to be the last effort required of them; an effort which would ensure a victorious peace. Bulletins were continuously distributed in which the German victories on the French front were praised to such an extent that the soldiers daily expected to hear that the Germans had arrived, at least, in Paris.

My informer did not know exactly at what point the offensive was to be struck,

but from several conversations he had overheard and from the general trend of events he did not think he erred in saying that the greatest effort would not be made from the side of the mountain, but that the bulk of the Austrian army was already concentrated between the bridge of the Priula and the Vidor bridge. This concentration had as its objective the crushing in of the Montello. The foregoing was what he wrote in his brief report, written in such a clear, fine handwriting as denoted an educated person of some culture. He could not be far from the truth because, from all the information I had at hand, it seemed as if the Austrians' plan of attack was in truth against the objective he had outlined. But this information could not suffice. It was a matter of absolute necessity that I set eyes, in person, on Armando Brunora, the friend of the refugee; this Brunora who resided in the headquarters at Vittorio and who seemed to know many important secrets. He had not

been able to move as yet because it had been raining heavily, and the road which separated us from Vittorio was rather long, considering the scanty means of transportation available.

During a brief interval when the rain ceased, we went to look for the field near which we had arranged to place our signals. It was easy to distinguish it at once. The only difficulty about it now was that it did not belong to the uncles of my soldier but belonged to certain peasants who lived in a little group of houses near the square. Obviously we could not place our signals there until we had communicated with the owner. I therefore asked the refugee to summon the owner for me.

These little difficulties were a nuisance because in my mind I had planned never to venture forth from the house of my soldier's relatives. Certainly not at first did I purpose to do so, but events so turned out that I saw myself compelled to enlarge the

number of persons to whom we had to communicate our secret. However, I easily overcame even this test, because an overpowering fatality now took possession of me, and I cared very little for my life, did I but succeed in obtaining the information I had so much at heart. The owner of the land had received our request most kindly and was greatly interested in what we told him. He consented to my project with good grace and furthermore said that, not at once, but within a few days, his two sisters when they returned from visiting distant relatives would be of great help to us because they would be able to place the sheets on the ground and so avoid the necessity of our showing ourselves. This was really a very practical idea because after all, two men placing sheets on the ground might arouse the suspicion of the guards, whereas women such as are wont to wash and lay the laundry on the ground, are not an out-of-the-way sight.

The weather continued to be unfavorable, and if on the one hand I grieved because it interfered with our progress in getting into communication, on the other hand I was glad we knew how to take advantage of the only time in which it was possible to accomplish the undertaking. Then, too, the offensive surely could not begin, while it rained, because despite the fact that the Austrians do not usually attach much importance to the climatic conditions, yet this time they had a river in front of them and they must realize with a degree of apprehension that if their first attempt should not succeed in driving back our resistance, they might find themselves in the critical condition of having many troops on the other side with a high river at their backs. This might indeed prove rather inconvenient, because the Piave at times becomes a rushing torrent such as hinders the building of any bridges or the sending over of any reinforcements of food or ammunition.

For several days we had not seen a ray of sun even for a second. The rain continued to fall unceasingly, so that the wood had become a veritable bog. We hardly dared thrust our heads out of our little stable for fear of a drenching. During these days the refugee brought me for the first time a copy of the *Gazetta del Veneto*, a filthy newspaper published at Udine by a renegade Italian in the pay of Austria. It was really impressive to read those pages in which were printed sentiments and opinions which, written in German, would not astonish me in the least, but which disgusted me profoundly when written in our beautiful language. They invented a multitude of things about the internal situation in Italy. According to them a revolution was about to break out because of the lack of food, a lack become more severe owing to the intensive submarine warfare. "Our enemies," the newspaper said, "have little reason to rejoice because they hoped to see

many Americans arrive on their front, in the springtime, but instead thanks to the indefatigable work of our submarines, these reinforcements cannot come and all the provisions sent from the other side of the ocean are regularly lost at sea."

The days seemed interminable, especially because we could not venture out from our lowly hut. We did not even dare return to the house of the Toneli because we feared to upset them and that our presence might annoy them. We trusted to the little woman who lost her son to find us eggs, and at once she began to go about offering money for them, but found it difficult because most of the peasants bring the little they produce to the board of the Austrian officers at Vittorio so as to get some flour in exchange.

On awakening on the morning of June 7th we had a pleasant surprise. We found the sun shining. The trees, on which the dewdrops still trembled, swayed their

branches in the slight wind from across the mountain. The mountains seemed clear and clean-cut in the atmosphere about them. As the sun peeped over the top of the Cansiglio an anti-aircraft battery near Conegliano began firing and soon the aerial bombardment increased. All the sky was dotted with little pink and grayish clouds which blossomed and then dissolved in the clear upper air of the morning. . . . Even the battery at Vittorio had begun to fire. Soon after we observed in the pure sky above us the powerful wings of many of our "Caproni" in single file surrounded by many little chasing planes. The Caproni were directed towards an aviation camp near San Giacomo di Veglia, and meanwhile our chasing planes, gathered in a compact formation, were patrolling the air above the aerodrome of the enemy chasers in order to down any such impudent plane as dared to take rise and molest our bombing planes. A bombing machine with a chasing plane near it gives

the impression of a young girl about whom a young colt cuts a thousand capers. All the people from the nearby houses came out into the open, unmindful of the shower of splinters which fell from the air. The women raised their arms towards the sky in supplication, and pointing out the Italian wings to the children murmured, "They are ours, ours." An old white-haired man raised his hat as the Italian flag passed above him.

But the Austrians, who cannot be accused of extreme temerity, waited until all our planes had departed before rising in flight and as the last of our planes was passing over our lines on its return flight, the heavy enemy chasers arose, filling the sky with the coarse, deep roaring of their motors. Their method of flying is altogether different from ours. At times I enjoyed watching them in their movements; I found none of that agility, none of that rapidity of movement which so distinguishes our chasers.

If the weather continued favorable we intended that afternoon at one o'clock to begin placing our sheets. I decided to set a signal on the field which would indicate that the offensive was imminent on the sector of the Montello. I examined my conscience and questioned whether this report was not premature, but as time passed and I gathered more information from all sides, I became all the more convinced that the day could not be far distant when a rumbling, rolling bombardment would indicate that the offensive had been begun. Even the weather, which was now fair, could but help hasten events.

The sister of Bottecchia had brought me the sheets which we were going to use as signals and cautiously we approached the place where they were to be extended. We traversed the little field once again so as to be certain we were not making a mistake, and by half-past twelve the sheet was in its proper place. We hid behind a tree on the

other side of the river to guard it and hinder any petty thief from stealing the precious material.

The sky which at first was very clear was streaked with those small light clouds which indicate that in the higher strata of the air a swift wind is blowing. Above the clouds a squadron of enemy planes, readily recognizable from the heavy noise of their motors, was completing a series of slow evolutions. These aeroplanes, whose task was certainly to obstruct the way for any of our planes, cruised continually between Vittorio and Pordenone. We glanced at the little watch given to Giovanni by his sister; it was 12.55. Suddenly the anti-aircraft battery near us began to fire. Yes, they had come. After a few seconds we glimpsed among the clouds a reconnoitring plane escorted by three chasing planes. And now what would happen; now that four of our aeroplanes would be against twelve of theirs? The adversary's chance in attack was better than ours be-

cause they were able to rise above the clouds and crash down unexpectedly on our planes which, flying beneath them, were certainly not aware of their presence. I distinctly heard the cadenced, sibilant note of our motors and the deeper, heavier noise of the enemy motors. In a second the enemy had divided into two platoons of six planes each and each had selected its own objectives. Six had placed themselves against our reconnoitring plane and six were combating our three chasing planes. From among the clouds I heard the first faint reports of the machine-guns. The reconnoitring plane which appeared and disappeared among the white curls did not let itself be surprised; at times it made some daring evolutions and seemed as if it were going to nose-dive forever but retook its position and answered with brief rallies to the prolonged bursts of fire from the enemy guns. The Austrians in accord with their usual tactics tried to keep our plane in play with a concentration

of their forces so that finally one of them could attempt a fatal volley, but our pilots did not lose heart and with repeated tricks and wiles endeavored to escape the net. There!—five planes had surrounded it, and one all painted red, the swiftest, a “D 5,” tried to take position on its tail. I held my breath; the enemy plane was but a few yards from our plane and fired lengthy bursts at it but ours answered only with a brief volley. Suddenly the Austrian plane reeled and seemed to go out of control; for a time it spun downward like a dead leaf, and finally nose-dived in a great flame. I raised my arms in the air; I wished to express to that little speck with the tricolor all my joy, all my satisfaction. The other planes, who had viewed the havoc, divided and turned towards their aerodromes. Our planes remained lords of the air. One flew several times over our signals as if the observer wished to take many negatives so as to make

certain that one good photograph would result. I looked into the eyes of Bottecchia who was near me, and I could not conceal the emotions I felt within me.

Within a few hours the staff would know of our signals; of what was about to happen; it would be certain that the offensive was imminent and that it was about to be loosed against the sector of the Montello. From that moment I was certain that events favored us. From the combat which took place above our heads I had received another proof of the superiority of our race and from this I derived pleasant predictions for the future. In the sky, as always, we were absolute masters, in this sky which they had tried to take from us but which remained ever ours. Soon, I was certain this mastery would extend even to the land. We would win, absolutely we would win! And how could a nation, which in enemy territory exhibits such feats as those I had just

witnessed, do otherwise than win? And furthermore, my modesty did not forbid me to forget that I too was a sample of the country which would win. Even on land Italy was not unworthily represented.

XII

NOW that we had announced that the offensive was imminent, it was all the more necessary for us to gather as much information as possible; it was all the more necessary to have carrier-pigeons with which to send the information we already had at hand. Through the refugee I sent a notice to the secretary at Vittorio that I was waiting for him, that he must try to send me all the information he had, that above all he must not delay in coming to me. We decided to meet somewhere, for he feared he might be tracked and therefore wished to avoid going to a place whither he could not find a logical excuse for going. Our meeting was to take place near a farmhouse of the present mayor of Vittorio, Cav. Troier, and were the Aus-

trians to inquire the reason for his journey he would be able to say that he went for business reasons to see some peasants we had talked about.

While we were eating we were surprised by hurried steps and as we were trying to hide we saw the refugee approaching with a tall, slender man, clothed in civilian garb and very pale.

"This is the Italian officer I mentioned to you," said the refugee, "and this is Mr. Brunora." (Even in the woods in enemy territory introductions are made!)

"I beg you to pardon my clothing which has nothing military about it, but I hope you will recognize me under other circumstances, without this deceptive apparel. Please be seated and tell me quickly what you know."

The secretary sat on a rock, looked about in a preoccupied fashion and then said, "I did not want to come here; I wished to wait till to-morrow and see you at the established

spot but I have received such detailed exact information, so important, that after appealing to such courage as I still possess after many months of privation and hunger, I decided to come to you at once to communicate what I know. This information I received from an Austrian Captain from Trieste. He is a very important person on account of the relations he has with the command of the Sixth Army. I think he knows Archduke Joseph very well and I know he is very intimate with the wife of one of the Staff Officers. From the information he gave me I understand that he is informed not only of the situation at the front as regards this army, but that he also has information about other sectors. I do not know if he be prompted by the desire to tell our command what the Austrians are preparing or whether his talk be merely due to lightness. This one thing is certain: he has told me things so extraordinary that I wanted to refer them to you at once."

“Tell me them, tell me them,” I added, not understanding why he bothered me with so much detail before coming to the points which really interested me. He drew forth slowly from his pocket a tobacco pouch and opened it. It was full of tobacco but under the tobacco there was a small piece of tissue paper which he took out with great precaution and I saw there were many ciphers on the paper. He then continued:

“Austria-Hungary has at present concentrated on our front 73 divisions equal to 960 battalions. These forces are supported by about 7500 guns. Fifty-four divisions equal to 774 battalions are now massed near the firing line and await only the order to ‘march’ to hurl themselves into the greatest battle in history. Six thousand cannon of every caliber are placed in batteries ready for action and to support with their terrible fire the advance of the infantry. Other masses are ready to exert further pressure between the Astico and

Val Lagarina should the attack between the Piave and the Grappa prove successful. The Austrians have been preparing for the offensive for a long time and every detail has been cared for. The troops have been exercised and drilled in the new German tactics of attack. Light machine-guns and flammenwerfer continually supplemented by successive waves of men and new methods of destruction are expected to effect the success of the first attack. Not only is a great deal of bridge-building material hidden behind the dikes of the Piave, but in several points there have been collected many light pontoons which will be of great help to little isolated detachments, whose task is to try to cross the river and to attempt a dangerous infiltration movement, and so facilitate the task of the bulk of the troops which would follow at once across the bridge. Great use will be made of lachrymose and asphyxiating gases. The preliminary bombardment will not be very long but will be intensive

and at the end a rapid fire of smoky projectiles will cover the Piave with fog so as to hinder our soldiers from seeing where they are constructing passageways. In the region of the Montello bridges will be constructed near Casa Serena and in a place called Casa de Favari along the lower Piave near Fagari and Musile. The offensive will begin on the fifteenth and will be preceded on the thirteenth by a serious action towards the Tonale. On the day of the attack an intensive, convincing bombardment will be launched towards Val D'Arsa and Val Lagarina. Three armies will be operating at the same time, the eleventh, commanded by General Scheuchenstuel, will operate towards Alti Piani; the sixth, led by Archduke Joseph will undertake the greatest and chief task of breaking through; the fifth commanded by General von Vurm will attack violently towards the sea. The attack of the infantry is scheduled to take place between seven and eight o'clock on

the morning of the fifteenth. The special task entrusted to the Austrian troops operating between the Plateau of Asiago and the valley of the Brenta is that of opening the road towards the plain, first with ten divisions operating in Val D'Arsa, which have the task of forcing Valle Frenzela and then with six other divisions which must descend from the Astico valley through the valley of Canaglia and occupy the western slope of the Grappa. Two other divisions will be in reserve so that eighteen divisions, equal to 228 battalions, and 1500 cannon will be in action on the Plateau of Asiago. In the region of the Grappa between the Brenta and the Piave the intention of the Austrian command is to open the attack at first with great violence, to descend to the plain and by surrounding the Grappa to effect the downfall of the entire Italian defensive system. The first attack is to be made with troops especially trained for mountain warfare between the Brenta and

Mount Pertica. Four divisions are to attack the salient of Solarolo with the objective of encircling the line Monte Tomba and Monte Fenera; of securing for itself an opening to the Piave in the vicinity of Pederobba and there getting in contact with the sixth army which has the task of forcing the Montello. From the Montello to the lower Piave the Austrian strategical plan has divided its forces into three principal columns of attack. Two columns, having broken through between the Montello and San Dona di Piave are designated to advance between Treviso and Castelfranco and on the Mestre-Treviso railroad they are to make several thrusts in all the region about Treviso and, by isolating Venice, compel this city to surrender. The three columns in close alliance with the two preceding, after crossing the Piave at the Grave di Pappadopoli, will march directly from Maserada on Treviso. The forces on the two wings are composed on the north by six divisions

of the sixth army (Archduke Joseph) which will attack the Montello, and on the south by eight divisions of the fifth army, the army of the Isonzo (von Vurm) which will operate from Ponte di Piave to the sea. The center will be composed of two army corps, the 16th and 4th of the army of the Isonzo, equal to four divisions and a half."

My informer, Mr. Brunora, looked about again with suspicion and said, "These reports seem to me of prime importance; it is up to you now to find a means of despatching them at once to our command. I am well pleased to be able to risk my life with the certainty that what I have referred to you can be of inestimable value to our people. . . . However, I must be cautious because under this terrible régime, if they were to discover me, the least which could happen to me would be to be shot, but at times they use the gallows and I really should not care to meet with the fate of poor Battisti." He looked me steadily in the eyes,

for I had been greatly shocked by the news he had given me. I did not believe that anywhere, in any other circumstances, any man had ever been able to know so precisely, so minutely, every particular, every secret of the enemy as this man knew. This Brunora really seemed to know a little too much. A terrible doubt suddenly crossed my mind. Might he not be an emissary of the enemy sent by the Austrians, who had possibly learnt of my presence. Was it his purpose to deceive me and to make me believe false reports the better to hide their plans?

“But are you really certain you are not mistaken?”

“I am absolutely certain,” he answered, “and I would not have spoken had I not been able to account for what I have told you. The same captain who gave me this information used to prophesy even during the desperate German attacks against our position on the Grappa in last December.

Everything he told me then has since come to pass."

His answer was not sufficient to remove my doubts. But if, on reconsidering everything I had learnt from other sources, and comparing it with the information the secretary had just given me, I were to find that everything tallied and there was not a single contradiction, I must believe him. If all this corresponded, even in the smallest detail, it was not possible that he was trying to deceive me, or that he was trying to cheat me, and all he told me must be true.

He continued, "As a further proof that the offensive is about to begin I can add this, and I can personally guarantee it for I myself read it from an Austrian order; in fact, I can show it to you for I have it in my pocket. . . . 'The Command at Tappa di Vittorio has been enlarged to cover all the region between the Ponte della Priula and Vidor and the aforementioned city is now considered as a *retrovia* in case

of a possible early action.' Therefore, not only will there be an offensive but the Austrians feel confident they will break through because they are considering as back lines the zones between the Piave and Vittorio, whereas up to now this region has been considered as a front line."

This document finally convinced me, it dispelled all my doubts, and forsaking the reserved attitude I had adopted up to then, I cordially took him by the arm and said, "Our people will have to erect a monument in your honor if all you have told me comes to pass, for on these reports the fate of our army may depend. You understand. . . ." Again I gazed steadily into his eyes. At last a faint smile illumined his wan, unexpressive face imparting to it for a moment a new look, an expression strange to him, almost a look of beauty.

"I am certain they will not pass," he added. "The Piave is our old friend and it certainly will not tolerate their building

bridges over its old faithful waters; you will see that at the propitious moment it will shrug its shoulders and all their machinations will disappear into thin air as though by magic."

"I, too, feel certain that the Piave is our great helper, but when it comes to preventing the Austrians from building bridges, our artillery will see to that."

"Are their masks good?" asked Brunora on whose face a new look of pain was depicted.

"Yes, our masks are good."

"For," he continued, "at the station of Corta the aerial cable railways have done nothing in the past few days except transport projectiles of asphyxiating gases."

This too is a bit of news which tallies perfectly with what the brunette in the woods told me and I am grateful to him for having given me another proof of the veracity of his communications.

"Thank you, thank you once again for

what you are doing for Italy, for the Italians; pardon me if I said 'the Italians,' I meant to say for us, because we too are still Italians even though apparently separated from the other side. But as I see you are so well informed, that you can find out the minutest details of the secrets of the great enemy machine, I cannot consider your task completed with these precious reports you have given me to-day. Every Italian has certain obligations towards his country and you who cannot be a soldier in this moment must continue to help me as heroically as you have begun. By means of the refugee whom you know well and in whom we can trust absolutely, I wish you to send me daily reports on what you hear and on the day preceding the battle keep me well-informed on what is about to happen. Besides the signals, which you know of, that we are in the habit of placing in a certain spot, we can communicate with our lines by means of carrier pigeons and the more de-

tailed and precise the information which you give me, the greater will be the help which we can render to our army. Do not think anything useless; a report which you might judge devoid of any value may have a great deal of significance on the other side, but we must be careful to report everything with great accuracy, exactly as we have heard it, without amplifications or embellishments, for an extra word in these circumstances may mean losing or winning a battle. Don't you by chance know some Austrian soldier at Vittorio who could give you detailed information on the location of the Austrian forces which are about to operate against us, because although the news you gave me to-day is definite, there is not the name of a single division or regiment, and you certainly know better than I how important it is to know the location of the enemy forces."

Brunora who really did not seem to have realized the importance of my request an-

swered me at once without any show of interest, "Yes, I know a soldier from Trieste who is in the field post-office of Vittorio and he certainly will be able to give me details on the exact number of the divisions to which he daily sends mail."

"And you did not tell me this at once!" (I should have liked to jump on his neck and kiss him, so great was the joy this last announcement gave me.) "Try to keep on good terms with this soldier; try to monopolize him and promise him that within a short time, if he succeeds in giving us the information we want, he will also be helping himself for our soldiers will then come and liberate Trieste."

"Why, do you still believe we shall one day arrive at Trieste?"

I looked wrathfully at my questioner. "I ask how you can doubt it! If our soldiers succeed in resisting this offensive, the entire situation which is now in favor of the enemy will change completely in our favor. Soon

the balance in France will again become even by the intervention of the first American units, and the Germans, who will not have been able to accomplish at once a decisive move, will find themselves in a precarious position. On our front I assure you, if the Austrians hit a snag in this offensive, that no one will be able to hold us back from dealing the final blow which will send the Austrians and Germans flying forever. But meanwhile we must see that the doors to our house are securely fastened so that thieves cannot enter."

Bottecchia was on watch outside to see that no suspicious person approached. If he imitated the cackling of a hen it would indicate that some danger threatened us.

"Excuse my indiscretion, pardon me if I detain you awhile longer, but I would rather clear up everything at once than have to send for you some other time. During these first days I intend to stay in this wood, especially since on the day of the offensive

it will be necessary for someone to be here always, to gather the information which might come from various sources, so as to co-ordinate it and communicate it at once to the other side. However, later, I intend to wander about, I intend to find out with my own eyes what is happening. You who have so much to do with the headquarters at Tappa di Vittorio, where I know they issue papers authorizing one to remain in this territory and legitimization papers, ought to try to get for us some document which would enable us to move about with greater ease. I do not mean to say that these documents can be of great importance; rather, if they were demanded and examined by someone truly competent, they might be serious evidence against us, but instead, they can be used to show to the soldiers or to fool some stupid Croatian gendarme who is easily satisfied so long as he sees the seal with the bicipital eagle, and would never suspect any fraud in it. For bureaucracy, as you well

know, itself supplies the weapons which may prove fatal to it. We, who could not wander about without papers, will find in our spurious papers a safe protection against the stupid; we will make the papers which ought to denounce us, our accomplices. I want to tell you a plan I have in mind and which we may be able to use with the help of a legitimization paper. A servant of mine, classified as not fit for military service, who is a little older than myself and whom I can readily resemble in my present outfit, escaped to the other side before the retreat. I should want to take his name and say that at the time of Caporetto I was far from the villa of my master, where I had left my classification papers, and when I returned to the villa I found everything upside down and could not find the precious documents, so that the Austrian authorities, who knew this, gave me a legitimization paper. Now, you ought to get me this paper so that I can become Mr. Antonio Pandin

in flesh and bones. . . . I suppose you are mentally hurling all sorts of epithets at me and think I am too exigent, that even in enemy territory I am trying to militarize everything. If those are your thoughts, you have guessed correctly for this is my intention. In warfare, as in all other undertakings in life, one of the most valuable attributes is order; therefore I urge you to keep me regularly informed; I shall expect your report every night. The refugee will have charge of consigning it to me. If anything abnormal happens I beg you to inform me at once so that I may communicate it without delay to our command by means of my signals. During the days of the offensive I shall be especially interested in the movement of the troops. Of course I mean the big movements because at present we cannot be bothered with the little ones. For the present I hope you will believe that I am truly appreciative of all you have done and that the whole na-

tion will appreciate your conduct when it learns of what you have done for us. Who knows how many lives we may be able to save through these reports! Who knows how much suffering we can prevent! We must leave nothing undone which will help our soldiers do their best, which will help them find themselves, and which will finally help them to victory.”

XIII

ON June 13 there was a continual round of visitors and the relatives who had come to see Bottecchia had all brought something for us to eat. Some brought a piece of cheese, some a peasant bread baked under hot ashes, others a stoup of wine preserved by who knows how many sacrifices from the avid throats of our adversaries. I was not present at the meeting between Bottecchia and his parents, for at the time I was walking about in the wood, and when I returned I found my soldier seated on the trunk of a tree between a little old woman and an old man and I understood from their voices and the sweetness of their expressions that they must have been his parents. The father, a lean little old man almost eighty years old, still works

unloading material and pushing hand cars on the new railroad the Austrians are constructing in the vicinity of Sarmede. I kept away from them so as not to interrupt their talk, but after they had left I saw on the face of Giovannino such satisfaction, I read such great joy in his eyes, that I envied him—I who no longer have the fortune of ever being able to see my mother again.

The nights were now dark, even when it did not rain, for there was no moon, and we should have to wait awhile before we were due to receive any pigeons. Every morning I took a long walk in the wood to see if any basket had fallen during the night; I examined carefully the branches of the trees to see if a parachute had perhaps been caught in the foliage, but found nothing. Through the refugee and the other peasants who had placed their services at my disposal, I told everyone whom I could trust, that in case they found little baskets with pigeons on their fields they were to

gather them for they were meant for me. I designated certain vicarages as places to which they should be delivered, for the priests offered to pass them on to me as soon as they received them.

My soldier's sister, to give me an idea of how certain the Austrians were of the success of the first blows of the offensive, told me the following anecdote. A Hungarian officer was bargaining with her for the purchase of a linen sheet which the officers were accustomed to use for making white uniforms for wear in the summertime. The amount asked for the sheet seemed too high and the officer walked away saying, "It really would be a pity to pay so high a price for my uniform when the offensive is scheduled to commence shortly. On the first day we will be in Treviso, on the second in Venice, and there I shall find enough white linen to clothe my entire company in white." I hoped that soon this ugly creature, who was relishing in advance the

joys of pillage and plunder, would find in the whirlpools of the Piave a uniform to suit him!

Another frequent visitor was Rosa, a young woman whose husband was on the other side and who now made a livelihood serving as cook for some Hungarian officers. She listened to all their conversations and every now and then tried to fathom some secret which she referred at once to us. The table at which she served belonged to a group of field artillery officers and she told me that they had a long discussion in which some of them held that a supply of 5000 shots for every gun would be enough in the first battle, whereas others held that, given the enormous waste of munition in modern methods of warfare, this number would not guarantee a sufficient reserve. On the whole, from the reports received I inferred that the Austrians were short of ammunition and had placed their hope in a quick success of the

offensive, for otherwise they would find themselves in a very bad position because there were very few projectiles in the internal depots in Austria to replace those spent at the front. Rosa also told me of the abundant fare the enemy officers allot themselves, for they were not ashamed to give free rein to their gluttonous desires even though their soldiers were kept on truly pitiful rations. Poor Rosa also brought us whatever she could take away from the table and one day she came with a large package of cigarettes which she held out to us saying, "I hope you will not smoke them all in one day; I hope you will appreciate them because I had to pay for these cigarettes with kisses."

I tried to show I appreciated them so as not to displease her, but in truth I preferred never to smoke again in my life rather than force such bargaining on her, but alas, she had often to resort to such methods if she wished to feed her youngsters

who otherwise would die of hunger. Sometimes Rosa, weeping, told us of the compromises she had had to make to appease the hunger of her youngsters.

“Necessity makes me do it,” she would say, “but you should see the disdain with which the gay Viennese women, who have followed the officers thus far, treat me. Many of them go about dressed in clothes stolen from our houses and the other day, in the house of one of these street-walkers I recognized a whole silver coffee set which belonged to a count who ran away during the first days of the retreat.”

From Vittorio I received regularly the messages of Brunora and from his notes I gathered much useful information, especially in regard to the movements of the troops of the sixth army. It seemed that special divisions of swimmers had been trained to cross the river in a surprise attack and that they were to clamber up on the side of the Montello which slopes ver-

tically to the river, by means of hooks and ropes and so surprise our men from behind. On June 13th the regiment stationed at San Martino left unexpectedly for the front and the 31st division which was near Miane left unexpectedly for a destination unknown to us together with the 11th division of cavalry on foot. At the headquarters of Tappa di Vittorio a notice had been posted saying, "Any civilian found damaging the telephone lines will be at once taken before a firing squad." All these indications made me feel certain that on the fifteenth we should visualize the greatest battle in history and I believed I was one of the few privileged characters who would be able to participate in it from the enemy's side.

By now I had exact knowledge of the habits of the gendarmes and I was convinced that even though I had much to fear from them if they should succeed in laying hands on me, still with a little wit and intelligence I could succeed in avoiding them.

The gendarmes who most frequented our region were those from Mezza Villa and therefore I entrusted the owner of the house in which they live, who knew all their habits, to warn me if he should notice anything unusual in their plans. In this way I eliminated the danger of being surprised. I knew they usually went out at eight in the morning; that they made brief rounds on the road between Mezza Villa and Fregona and that they returned for mess at eleven and rested until four, so that during those hours there was little fear of meeting them. Frankly, if one wished to wander there was really no need of promenading on the main highways and it seemed that the gendarmes did not deviate much from the main roads since the day in which they lost all track of one of their comrades who penetrated a little more deeply into the wood. As for the soldiers who roamed about the country, they did not bother about stopping the peasants; they thought only of trying to

steal whatever they could lay their hands on without attracting the attention of the owner, so if the wanderer could make believe he was an owner, he was certain never to be molested.

I began to walk in the wood and with a little trepidation I ventured as far as the summit of a hill which dominates all the plain. From my observation point one could see all Vittorio and when it was clear one could also see the Montello. An Austrian Drago balloon rose in the vicinity of Cuzuolo. Suddenly I saw shrapnel bursts and immediately the sausage began to descend hurriedly. It must have been attacked by one of our aeroplanes but this time it escaped too easily.

Far away in the distance, behind the line of the Piave, which on clear days outlines itself as a thin silver streak on the plain, our observation balloons arose. I counted twelve and with an incredible feeling of homesickness I remembered that under them

lay our dear land. While descending the hill I saw a little hut, half demolished, from which came a thin stream of smoke. I wished to see who could live within such battered walls. As I opened the door a nauseating stench came forth. At first I thought the place uninhabited, but near the manger I espied two human bodies enveloped in a long wrap. I tried to get them to talk, but at first they would not answer me. Finally, from above that confusion of rags, I saw not a head, but something which looked more like a skull than a head. A feeble voice which seemed to come from afar murmured, "Leave us in peace, leave us alone, let us die here. We are two escaped Italian prisoners from the concentration camp at Vittorio, where they used to give us nothing to eat and would nourish us with beatings. As long as the Russian prisoners stayed here we fed ourselves on their herd of cattle, but now it is fifteen days since they have gone and we have had nothing but

snails and the mushrooms in the woods. We are here at the end of the manger so that if a gendarme should open the door he would not see us (the man coughed), but for some time we have not had even enough strength to get up and we lie here all day waiting for the hour of liberation, in the hope that death at least will free us forever from our torturers!"

XIV.

IT was June 14th. Time 11:30 P.M.: the night was serene; great peace reigned over the hills and mountains; no sound reached us. From afar off in the direction of Capella the feeble voice of a piano brought us the echoes of a Viennese waltz. All this calm surprised and frightened me for I knew what was preparing beneath the calm exterior. That evening I had received a note from Brunora on which were written the sole words, "until to-morrow."

I asked myself with anxiety and incredible emotion what would happen when the fatal struggle began. I was not kept waiting long, for suddenly, as if a diabolical orchestra had been let loose, a thousand sounds spread through the mountain repeated by the echoes in the valleys. The

din increased, traveled, stopped at times and then recommenced; it seemed as if a giant machine-gun were winding off shots from a long ribbon. The voices of the cannon of different caliber followed without interruption in their clamor. The piercing shrieks from the meadows were at intervals drowned by the round rumblings of the medium calibers followed by the hideous roars from the firing mouths of large caliber. The bombardment seemed to be on the side of the mountain, but lighter in the region of the Montello and again became intensive in the region towards the sea. I could not keep still, I was restless and ran madly to the top of the hill, towards the spot I had selected as my observation post. The entire plain beneath me was in flames, the line of the Piave was easily recognizable, even at night, from the shooting stars incessantly ascending; it seemed as if a wonderful forest of resplendent flowers was rising and far off on the horizon was blossoming

in a metamorphosis of light. The white, red, and green intermingled in a golden rain. The region before the Piave was continually broken by the enemy's flashes and in answer came shelling from our artillery grouped on the slope of the Montello. The flare of the gun discharges seemed, in the diffused light, like the leaping flash of magnesium light illumining at intervals a certain region. A shell of large caliber struck not far from us in the direction of Carpesica; our soldiers could not have been taken by surprise, they answered, they regulated their fire, they prevented the masses of the enemy from flooding the roads which lead to the front. My signals had been significant; they must have understood. . . .

All night I anxiously kept watch on the hill; all night I tried to discern from the noise of the bombardment some indication of the outcome of the battle. Bottecchia was near me and about us there were

grouped several peasants and a few women who were praying for the boys fighting on the other side, and above the deafening rumble of the battle the feeble mumbling of their litanies at times reached my ears. Day was about to dawn and from all the aviation camps aeroplanes rose in uninterrupted flight directed towards the front. Who knew how terrible the conflict in the air would be and how many of our adversaries would fall under our straight shooting! I wished to move, to run, to participate in some way in the action, instead I was compelled to stay immobile, I was detained far from the struggle in which the fate of my country was being decided, and I, who had never missed an offensive since the first day of the war, felt as if I had abandoned my post, as if I had deserted because in this moment I was not, as usual, where the fray was thickest, the action most heated and deadly.

It was seven in the morning, the hour in

which the infantry was scheduled to advance. The bombardment from the big-caliber guns had lessened and naught but the piercing shriek of field pieces from the meadows was heard. At times, wafted by the wind, I knew not if it were real or imagined, I seemed to hear the light rattle of the machine-guns. A thick fog spread over the Piave and it seemed as if the entire line had been suddenly submerged. It appeared to be the effect of the smoke projectiles intended to hide from our men the places in which the enemy was building bridges. Suddenly someone broke through the little group of people surrounding me. A priest in a long black robe and with something hidden under his shirt asked anxiously where he could find the Italian officer.

“Here, I am the Italian officer.”

He took from under his tunic a small rectangular box and excitedly handed it to me. I did not thank him, but clasped his hand. Hastily I descended the hill carry-

ing the little box with me and ran to the stable to copy the documents which were hidden in the little tin box. I removed a piece of glass from the window, above it I placed a thin piece of paper and with a pencil which I found in the box I began to transcribe; I knew the code and the handwriting and soon I had filled six sheets. Bottecchia was standing on guard outside in front of the door. Now my actions were not useless, now I felt as if I had again become a combatant, now I knew that my life again had a value. We folded the little sheets in a compact roll, we pressed and tightened them to make them fit in the small tube, and fastened on the cover, being careful to place it with the colored part turned up so that during the flight the cork would not fall out and the risk be run of losing the pigeon despatch. With great precaution we took the dear bird from the cage and placing one of its legs between the index and middle finger held it curved, violet breast facing us.

The docile creature did not flutter, but calmly let us work. We opened the rings fastened to the tube and placed them about the leg of the pigeon, being careful not to tighten them too much lest the bird suffer, yet not too loose, lest the tube be lost. Then still holding fast to the bird, I threw a jacket over my shoulder to hide the bird, and we went out on the hill. We hid in a wheat field so that no one about could see us, and launched the gentle bird towards the sky. It ascended at once and made several turns over our heads. The rustle of its wings was cadenced and even and we followed the bird in flight for a long time with an anxious look. Again it passed over our heads in ever-widening circles and then flew directly toward our territory. Within an hour our forces would know the plan of battle. I returned to my observation post at the top of the hill.

Time, 9.30. To me the bombardment seemed to be increasing in intensity and at

the same time I noticed that our batteries were not answering with the same violence as formerly. Had our forces been surprised? . . . Had the enemy the upper hand? . . . The hours fled with startling rapidity. At four in the afternoon Rino, greatly fatigued, brought me a message sent from Vittorio. The message was thus constructed:

“Time, 3.30 P.M. Between the Astico and the Brenta the Austrians have conquered Val Bella Point, Col del Rosso, and Col d’Echele. The 32nd Austrian division has broken the front on Mount Asolone reaching Mount Coston and quota 1503. The 60th division has reached Mount Pertica and quota 1581. On the Solarolo salient the 55th division has been successful in the direction of Salton, but are strongly opposed by the great Italian resistance. The 20th division Honved and the 50th

division have suffered great losses in their attack on Mount Tomba. On the Montello, the 31st division has crossed the Piave at Campagnole di Sopra and is advancing rapidly. The 13th and 17th divisions Schützen have crossed the Piave at Villa Iacur and at Campagnole their gains extend from Giavera to the bridge of Priula.”

These successes of the enemy, although considerable, did not seem to me cause for great worry. Nevertheless I had hope that the later reports which the refugee would bring me, would be more encouraging! At about seven he came with another message:

“In the region of the Montello there have been strong counter-attacks by the Italians, but they have not kept the 31st and 41st Honved and the 11th division (dismounted), from crossing the Piave and from reinforcing the posi-

tions captured from Candulu to the sea. The Austrians have at all points reached the right bank of the Piave. Their advance in certain points is one and a quarter miles deep, but the Italians yet hold the bank of the river between Candulu and the bridge of the Priula. The resistance of the Italians continues heated."

That summarized the first day of battle. These last reports were far less comforting than the former because if the Austrians succeeded in driving on a little farther they would attack the key positions and then the Italians would have to decide on a retreat, and this setback would mean enormous sacrifices. But I could not admit it, I could not even think of it. Something must intervene in our favor. The fresh reserves which had not taken part in the battle as yet would turn the tide in our favor. But ere this happened how many days of terrible anguish

must I still pass, for how many more nights must I stand on guard questioning the flashes I saw on the other side, questioning the flames of discharge from our batteries to see if they are still in the same place, if they were silent, or had been forced to retreat! I looked towards the Montello and it seemed to me that the fire of our cannon still came from the same place, but that was not a convincing proof, because those batteries might have fallen into the hands of the enemy who then could have brought them into action against our men. But, observing and analyzing everything well, I did not think the enemy had reached any important objective. As the battle developed I saw the accuracy of the information reported to me by Brunora, and since he reported that the objectives of the first day were to be the line, Montebelluna, Treviso, San Michele del Quarto to the sea, and these had not been reached at any point, I had reason to be cheerful. I should have liked to know,

however, how great a force the Austrians had used in this fighting, whether their losses had been great, whether the tenacity of our troops had really surpassed their expectations; I should have liked to know the condition of the Piave which must have swollen from the recent rains.

During the night we could not get a moment's rest. The bombardment was so deafening that even if one wished to sleep it would have been impossible. Moreover every report made me start and I anxiously awaited the hour of dawn when I hoped to receive the coveted reports. I should have liked to fall asleep for several days and awaken when our forces had repulsed the enemy. However, I had to lay aside my personal worries and try to gather as much information as possible, for it would be all the more valuable to our command at such critical moments as these!

Brunora wrote in his morning bulletin that all night there had been a great movement

of troops towards the lower Piave, for the Austrian command, realizing that the attacks on the mountain had failed, had decided to give greater impetus to the attack from the Montello to the sea and especially towards the coast-line. I was anxious to see the Austrian despatch, which would certainly be printed in the *Gazetta del Veneto*, and I eagerly opened the newspaper which the refugee brought me. The despatch mentioned 30,000 prisoners, marvelous assaults, positions conquered, but it named no definite regions, and finally spoke of the tenacious resistance of the Italians and the opposition which had to be overcome by heroic shock troops to open up a way through the territory which was favorable to a defensive position and on which the Italians concentrated all their knowledge and their most valiant troops. On the whole, the article, although emphatic and verbose, did not seem exactly the kind one would write to celebrate a great victory and be-

tween the lines I seemed to read a hidden preoccupation.

The signals indicating "Troops are being moved towards the plain" was placed on the ground and at two o'clock our aeroplanes came to take photographs.

The despatch of the evening of June 16th follows:

"Situation on the Montello unchanged. The greatest effort of the enemy has been on the lower Piave. Ten enemy divisions have engaged in a terrific struggle and have occupied Fagaré and Bocca di Collalta from which they had been driven. The resistance of the Italians continues to be strong. Archduke Joseph this morning was supposed to be present at a great meeting rendering thanks to God for the victory of the Piave, but instead the meeting has been postponed."

This day too passed without any im-

portant victory for the Austrians and this gratified me because every day that passed gave our men more time in which to gather the reserves and disclosed further the objectives of the enemy. The bombardment on the side of the mountain was now silent, but grew more intense between the bridge of the Priula and the sea. Evidently they were preparing the most obstinate attacks for the coming days in that region, but I was certain that if the Austrians had not succeeded in their surprise attacks they would never succeed. And this was the day they had planned to arrive in Venice . . . but thank God, Venice was still far distant!

With the evening bulletin Brunora also sent me my legitimization paper and one for Bottecchia. From it I gathered that I was thirty-five, that I was a peasant, that I could not speak German. To make it valid I had to place the print of my thumb in a certain place, and the thoughtful secretary had provided even for this by sending me

some blotting paper soaked in copying ink. I pressed my finger on the paper and made a fingerprint under my signature. Of course, while signing my name I tried to change my handwriting in imitation of the irregular writing of the peasants and smilingly I admired the round puffy "P" with which I began my name. I practiced copying my name so that I should be able to write it always in the same way. This paper enabled me at last to wander about, and I decided to go on the following morning, before it was time to place the signals, as far as Sarmede where there was a large enemy auto-park and great movements of troops and material.

XV

ON the following morning (June 17th), I went to Sarmede as I had planned. With my jacket on my shoulder and my slow weary step, imitated from that of the mountaineers, I did not arouse any suspicion, and passed unnoticed.

All the streets were congested with a great deal of material and the small number of wagons at the disposal of the Austrians surprised me. They made great use of heavy steam tractors for hauling ordnance, and as I was hiding behind a group of trees, I saw a long procession of cannon, all covered with leaves, pass, which from their bulk looked like "305's." These troops and this material seemed directed towards the lower Piave. The roads were also congested by

auto-ambulances full of wounded, and wagons transporting the slightly wounded. In several places the movement was so great and so badly regulated that the long lines of cars had to stand still for some time to open up a passage for other columns going in the opposite direction. The Austrians also made extensive use of little low wagons with broad wheels, drawn by Hungarian ponies which were lean and seemed to have suffered a great deal. The freight belonged to the 41st army corps which was the one operating towards the Grave di Pappadopoli and which had not succeeded in passing.

I mingled with the soldiers and they permitted me to pass without suspecting anything. On my return I was compelled to view a scene so terrible that I shall never forget it. I had reached an isolated house in front of which stood a platoon of Austrians commanded by a Bosnian officer. (These troops could be readily recognized

by their caps with a fez which resembles somewhat the cap of our Bersaglieri.) A shapely young woman was speaking with some soldiers who were trying to overcome her reluctance and were trying to lay their hands on her. The young girl tried to resist them and answered them brusquely and with indignation. Even the officer approached and took part with his men in the discussion, which seemed to me to be heated.

“Come on, now, don’t be affected, we know what you women of the Veneto are worth, you, who do not give yourselves for love but know only how to sell yourselves. Well then, I promise you that from Venice, where we shall surely be within a few days, I will send you all sorts of presents and a beautiful dress for Sundays so that you can play the coquette with whomever you like.”

The girl drew up with pride, vehemently pushed aside the officer who stood in front of her and exclaimed, “The only way in which you will be able to see Venice will be

through your binoculars." The shove made the officer lose his equilibrium and as he fell to the ground the girl began to laugh. The officer sprang up at once, drew his revolver and without uttering a word fired several shots at her. The poor girl bent forward murmuring, "Oh mother, mother," and fell in a pool of blood. The Bosnian officer and the other soldiers hastened away without even turning to look at the poor creature. And I had to stand by, motionless, during this scene! . . . a scene more swift and violent than the human mind can imagine. She was breathing no more and an abundant flow of blood came from her temples giving a reddish tint to her beautiful, disheveled hair. As though turned to stone I stood still a long time contemplating her. In a courtyard nearby a red rose bush was in bloom and close to it a white rose gave forth its fragrance. I plucked the white rose, two large red ones and with a few green leaves I placed them near the corpse. Our sol-

diers were buried enveloped in the tricolor and this young martyr should receive from the hands of an Italian officer the comfort and honor of the tricolor. She was not the first nor the last victim of the Bosnians.

Still trembling with horror at the scene I had just witnessed I hurried away towards the hill hoping to find there some important news; instead I found nothing except another pigeon which a priest had given Bottecchia. I wrote over again all I had sent in the former message, adding a little about the possibility of action in the near future on the lower Piave, and despatched the bird, which at once flew toward our lines, disappearing soon in the region where the battle raged.

The cannonading began again and it seemed more intense to me than ever before. Perhaps that depended on the acoustics, because to-day the clouds were lower and the ground damp, and because the distance which separated me from the Piave was less

than that which separated me from the Grappa.

Rino brought me the evening bulletin and the news was anything but good and troubled me very much. The bulletin read:

“Between the Piave and San Mauro the Austrians have launched a heavy attack and after a bloody struggle have succeeded in crossing the Narvesa Montebelluna railroad reaching to Casa da Ruos. In the region of the lower Piave, after a violent attack, the enemy has succeeded, in the region of Zenson, in uniting its two bridge defenses and in reaching Meolo and pushing forth some platoons towards Monastir. The resistance of the Italians was weaker to-day.”

On the Narvesa Montebelluna railroad and around Meolo passed our line of resistance, and therefore the report that the Austrians had succeeded in forcing several

points there was disturbing. If they should succeed in widening their possessions there would be no alternative but to withdraw; retreat would be inevitable.

I was still impressed by the barbarous event which I had been compelled to witness without being able to assist the poor victim, and perhaps fatigue helped to make things appear blacker, for I had had no sleep for three days and three nights. I had to rest, and find again the freshness, the optimism which now began to fail me.

On the 18th, nothing interesting happened. The bombardment lessened slightly towards noon and began again with great violence later. I asked myself how, after so heated a fight, both sides did not feel the need of a brief respite; I wondered why the Austrians did not ease up a little so as to gain new strength for a last desperate attack.

The rain fell abundantly during these days and I thought with horror of the con-

ditions on the battlefield, where the wounded must lie for hours immersed in the mud under the torrential fall of water which seemed to have no intention of abating. The evening bulletin reported the situation as stationary and said that the successive Austrian attacks in the conquered regions of the Montello and Meolo had failed in front of the indomitable resistance of our men. Again I breathed freely because the former reports had truly been little comforting. Who knows but that these might be the last efforts of the enemy, and once the crisis had been overcome, as in a terrible sickness, our organism might rapidly recover all its energies and its formidable character. Four days had already passed and I did not believe the Austrians would be capable of a further great drive. The night was even more agitated than usual, but it seemed to me as if in answer to the constant fire of the Austrian artillery there had been no little action by our cannon as though in

preparation for a counter-attack. Could it be that the point of equilibrium had been reached and the scales were now turning in our favor?

The hours and minutes seemed never to pass and I lived only to await the evening reports which would certainly be decisive. I thought I heard Rino coming slowly towards me and to lessen further the short time I still had to wait I ran out to meet him. Rino had a look of joy and as soon as he saw me he said smilingly, "Good news, good news. It seems they can't go any farther, that they have been definitely stopped, and the full Piave is behind their backs. May they all get drowned in its currents!"

"Quick, give me the bulletin." He handed me the precious sheet and I read it with avidity. The Austrians had been driven back to the other side of the Narvesa Montebelluna railroad and were being pressed by our men who were gaining

ground on all sides and were approaching the village of Narvesa. The enemy command, in view of the torrential condition of the Piave had decided to retire. Five divisions which were in the vicinity of Belluno were being transferred towards Susegana to cover the retreat and to defend the left bank of the river in case the Italians decided on a counter-attack. All the Austrian attacks in the region of the lower Piave near Capo D'argine and Candulu had failed. . . . I could scarcely believe my own eyes, I wanted to die, I wanted to cry my joy to all, and throwing my arms about the neck of Bottecchia who met us, I told him the comforting news. Then they really had not passed; then the battle on which we had concentrated all our efforts, all our sacrifices for several months, was about to end more advantageously than I had ever dared to hope! In these four days of battle the Austrians were bound to have lost the flower of their troops. All their vain glory

had been drowned forever in the whirlpools of the Piave and it was now for us to finish them. I thought of the poor dead we left in the distant trenches of the Carso, of all those whose sacrifice seemed useless to me during the terrible day of Caporetto and I felt they had been vindicated, that the hour was not far distant in which the great destinies of Italy would be fulfilled.

I had received information about the prisoners taken by the Austrians during the last offensive; they were left for several days without food and were assigned to the transportation of ammunition on the front line so that many of them had been severely wounded by the fire of our artillery. This treatment was, of course, in open contradiction of every international convention, and our kindness and generosity in the treatment of their prisoners embittered me.

The little old woman who had the task of finding eggs for us had been to the hospital at Vittorio and had spoken with

several of our wounded who were still thrilled by the joy of combat and eagerly awaited news of the progress of the battle, of the outcome of which they were no longer in doubt. Among the wounded was a Captain of the Bersaglieri whose name the old woman had brought me in the hope that I might be of some help to him.

Our soldiers, who did not realize the conditions existing in the invaded regions, wondered why the population gave them nothing to eat and asked where the bakeries were from which they could buy bread. They were greatly surprised when they heard there were not only no more bakeries, but ever since our retreat, there had been no sale or trade whatever in eatables.

The Austrians, in an attempt to give a different impression to the population of the outcome of their attack and to feign that the number of prisoners taken was much greater than it was in reality added

to the men taken in this offensive some of those taken at the time of Caporetto, and marched through the villages long lines of these poor young men who could barely hold themselves erect because they were so weak and hungry. But the intelligent population would not let itself be fooled, for how could they account for the great difference between the flourishing condition of some and the exhausted condition of others.

On this day the secretary at Vittorio sent me some sensational photographs of men who had been lynched. I recognized the square of Conegliano and was horrified when I read that the victims were Czecho-Slovaks who fought in our army and, being taken prisoners by the Austrians, were condemned to so terrible a fate. To complete the carnage their bodies were for four consecutive days exposed to the mockery of the troops marching toward the front. They were true martyrs and I bowed to their memory,

mindful of the many occasions in which they had given proof of their loyalty and faith to the cause of the Allies.

June 24. As I had foreseen, on the last day the scales turned completely in favor of the Italians. On the Piave from the Montello to the sea the pressure of the Italian infantry continued strong, decisive, irresistible, while the artillery fired with extreme accuracy on the Austrian troops in retreat and scored direct hits on their defences, bridges, passageways, and back lines. The Piave, swollen from the recent rainfall, had torn away the bridges and by adding new difficulties increased the disaster of the enemy, who, pressed on all sides, had begun to retreat towards the river and had at last crossed back to the left bank of the Piave. On this night the situation was exactly the same as at the beginning of the offensive.

XVI

JULY 7. I thought it was much more difficult to become accustomed to joys than to sorrows. All the happenings of those recent days seemed so great, so incommensurable, so complete, that even though I had always had faith in the future of our arms, yet my expectations had been truly surpassed. After the complete failure of the Austrian offensive, after the situation had assumed the same status as before the offensive, I did not dare hope for more. But now reports reached me of our counter-offensive.

The conduct of the enemy after his complete failure was really impressive. I saw despairing soldiers with the same lost, wondering look in their eyes as I saw in the eyes of our soldiers during the period of

Caporetto. I heard it said that several Austrian officers had wept with rage, for they asserted that this was the first great offensive which Austria had really lost.

The reports sent to me by Brunora were truly comforting. The Austrians had lost more than 250,000 men, including dead, wounded and missing, and as though this were not enough, on this day I was able to read a report sent down to the population from the aeroplanes:

“All the region between the old Piave and the new Piave has been reconquered and, furthermore, since the fifteenth of June we have taken 24,000 prisoners, 63 cannon with a great deal of material and have also recaptured our guns which were in the advanced zone and which had to be abandoned during the early phases of the struggle. The side thrust, the terrible salient which menaced Venice exists no more. Venice is safe forever!”

My joy reached its culmination at the news of this counter-offensive; certainly it was attempted also because of the information given in all my pigeon messages. I had given them detailed information concerning the losses suffered by eighteen enemy divisions which could no longer be considered efficient; I told them of the exhaustion of forces on the lower Piave thus inviting our forces to attempt a counter-offensive if the condition of our army and that of the Allies permitted it. Everything had happened as I had foreseen, it had all ended in a victory which, if not decisive, had enabled us to take a great step forward towards the final solution, towards the end of the war. I had not even noticed that our aeroplanes had not come to fetch me as they had promised.

The long journey I had to take to arrive at the field of Praterie Forcate on the evening of the twenty-sixth did not seem long to me for I carried the joy of victory in my

heart. I was not at all disappointed that I did not see the "Voisin" land, in fact, I felt pleased, for I believed my presence might still be useful on the enemy side of the lines.

It was really diverting to read the comments in the Austrian newspapers on the failure of the Piave offensive. The *Gazetta del Veneto* said that events had followed exactly their outlined plans, that the aim of the offensive was not absolutely to break through the line, but to compel all the Italian troops to congregate on their front so that no reinforcements might be sent to the French that the Germans might thereby be enabled to obtain decisive results. These decisive results, however, had still to come to pass. The *Allotmany* of Budapest found solace in the fact that the Austrian command had been more considerate of the safety of the troops than of gaining tactical points. The *Az Uisag* said that while the Italians had used their reserves, the Aus-

trians still held theirs intact. The *Pesti Naplo* wrote, "Our infantry did its best to try to achieve brilliant successes during the first days, but if the Italian artillery bombarded all our bridges and so made it impossible to send reinforcements of munition and food and heavy artillery, it certainly is not the fault of the Magyar troops." Truly elegiac is the tone with which the *Budapesti Hirlap* described the battle of the Montello: "Among the precipices of the Montello the horrors of the battle of Doberdó were renewed; there were Italian mortars of 40 cm., fire hurlers, heavy grenades, and above re-appeared the reckless Italian aviators from whom it was impossible to find a refuge in the cruel ground." The Italian aviators did not "re-appear," they have always been active and the Austrian aviators, who at the time of Caporetto tried to be audacious, know something of the result of their activities.

But beside all these more or less ridiculous

phrases which tried to hide the failure of the offensive, there was in the Hungarian press a strong resentment against the leaders who did not know how to lead the troops to the coveted victory, and all the factions which for the time being had been quieted in the hope of a decisive action, resumed their wrangling in tones more threatening than formerly.

The great work of cleaning up was in full blast. All the troops, especially those who had been put to the hardest test, were sent to regions far from the front to receive auxiliary forces and to renew their supplies of arms and equipment. Therefore, even the region we were living in, which at first was so calm, was now often traversed by soldiers who came to the woods to cut grass for their horses. Near Fregona artillery regiments which expected to be sent to France were stationed. According to the latest reports it seemed that five Austrian divisions would be sent to the French front.

I reported this also to our command and as I did not know whether they had received my pigeon messages I wanted to try to find out. In my last message I had asked that our next plane coming to photograph the signals, fire as many shots as the number of pigeons received. Great was my satisfaction when the plane which came to photograph my signals (calm on all the front), fired five shots, indicating that they had received five pigeons. This was excellent news and I wished I might decorate the brave little creatures which had fulfilled their duty so well.

Important changes had occurred in our daily life. For several days now we had ceased to live in the little stable which sheltered us for more than a month and pitched our tent on the other side of the hill near the house of a poor woman who had assumed the task of feeding us. This change was instigated by the arrival of many soldiers in our region. The house of the Toneli which was

near the road was not well-suited for sheltering us. Furthermore, after having been for so long in one place it was better to make a change so as not to make our presence too noticeable. The poor woman whose name was Maria de Luca and whose progeny was abundant, willingly prepared our frugal repast, and we gained a point because in this way we now ate warm meals. At night we slept in a little hut covered with straw which was well-concealed in a field of wheat surrounded by several rows of grape-vines. However, affairs in general were becoming more complicated and even Brunora reported that in these days the surveillance had greatly increased, because in the first place many of the gendarmes who were at the front with the troops had returned; secondly, because there were many deserters about, and finally because it seemed as if the Austrians were beginning to suspect something and to attribute the failure of their offensive to the presence of a spy in

their territory. They had found several pigeons and had posted a notice at Vittorio announcing that whoever found a pigeon must bring it at once to the command and anyone found despatching a bird would be shot. Searches in the vicarages had been begun under the pretext of looking for precious metals. The gendarmes hoped to find through them some clue to the ramifications of the spy-work they suspected was being carried on in their midst. The pastor of Castel Roganzio whom I did not know at all had been arrested, and it was said he had been transported to the interior of Austria. Nevertheless I continued to wander about and now that I knew well the habits of the invading army I increased the number of my peregrinations and wandered far with Rino, because my soldier, especially on account of his youthful appearance, preferred to remain hidden.

In one of these trips I went as far as Cimetta, where my father owns vast tracts

of land, and for a day I was the guest of the peasants there who greeted me cordially and with great hospitality. The meeting with old Tomasella, who was almost eighty years old, and who still remembered my great grandfather was really touching. Not to arouse suspicion and that the women might not learn of my presence, I stopped in a wheat-field near the house of our planters. The sun was high in the heavens and its burning rays gave life to the country and tinged with red the wheat in the fast ripening fields.

The old man had come to meet me at a spot whither one of his sons had escorted me. He leaned heavily on a stick and I found him completely changed; the strong man I knew formerly had been reduced to a truly pitiful condition by a few months of privation. When he saw me he took off his hat and embraced me. Out of respect for his venerable old-age I also removed my hat and kissed him with great feeling while

several tears slowly streaked the bronzed cheeks of two other men who witnessed the scene.

“Make haste and return here, else I cannot hope to see you ever again. I shall die peacefully on the day that I know I shall die Italian.”

I started on my return journey and along the road I passed several Austrian aviation camps, among them the one in San Fior where the chasing machines were concentrated. Several “D-5’s” were practicing firing; they would make a few rapid evolutions and then volplane, directing their volley against a target. Perhaps the Austrians, anticipating an Italian counter-offensive and having realized the utility of their aviation branch in warfare through the heavy losses they had suffered at the hands of our airmen, were trying to prepare this weapon for use in future contingencies. The Austrians however, did not realize that the fault lay not in their machines but in their men.

I spoke several times, to the great terror of Bottecchia, who feared I was too hazardous, with Austrian soldiers I met in the woods. I adopted the theory that the best way in which not to arouse suspicion, and to avoid being seized, was to play one's cards with audacity. For instance, at times when I must cross a district in which I feared to meet gendarmes, I waited for a military wagon with some kind-hearted driver, preferably an old soldier, and I asked him if I might ride with him. Usually he offered no objection and so I was certain to be safe because the gendarmes would not dream of arresting a man who was with one of their soldiers. To gain the good graces of the soldiers and to commence a conversation I asked them for a bit of tobacco and exchanged some flour for it. They were usually well pleased with this barter and so they adopted a rather friendly, confidential, tone and told me their feelings and opinions. I spoke to them in German which, I told

them, I learnt during the many years I worked in Prussia as a mason, as might be true of many of our mountaineers. They spoke sincerely with me, but when their army was mentioned, even though they were not very enthusiastic about the war, they hid their true feelings and opinions, prompted by shame and a sense of discipline. The different nationalities which compose the Austro-Hungarian army mutually hated one another. An intelligent soldier explained to me that what we considered the weakness of the Austro-Hungarian army was really its strength, because the government, by taking advantage of the schisms and divergences, applied with excellent results the old system of "Divide at Impera." For example, when a Bohemian regiment revolted, and in these times mutinies were frequent, it was easy to find a Hungarian regiment eager to fire on the rebels. With the exception of the few Italians, all the other peoples of the vast

empire were united by their great sentiment of devotion towards the House of Hapsburg. For example, once on meeting a group of Slovene soldiers who seemed unusually hilarious and joyous, I stopped them on some pretext and asked them the reason for their unbounded glee, and one of them answered they had just seen the Emperor, their Charles; that he had stopped and spoken familiarly with them, and that they had been able to express all their reverence for him by repeating the word, "servus-servus."

The soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian army were very badly informed on military matters and when they asserted one thing, the very opposite was sure to occur. For instance, they now assured me that the places of Austrian divisions, which were leaving for the French front, would be taken by German troops, whereas, I was certain from reports received from Brunora that the con-

dition of the Germans would not permit them to send a single man to our front.

I was now beginning to believe that my presence in enemy territory was commencing to be useless. I was convinced that the conditions of the Austrian army were such as would not permit of another offensive for a long time; in fact, I was certain that they would never again be able to attempt a heavy offensive and that hereinafter their program would have to be limited to defensive warfare for the protection of the boundaries of the empire.

I learned of great fortification works which were being constructed on the Tagliamento and from several prisoners who worked recently on the Carso I heard that the majority of the artillery which took part in the last move had been sent back to be stationed beyond the Isonzo in view of a possible future offensive by our forces.

Lately, in Brunora's messages I had read a certain fear, not so much for the

military situation, as for our personal safety. He told me that from certain circumstances which he could not yet explain and which perhaps were not yet ripe he inferred it was very dangerous for us to delay much longer in enemy territory. He therefore advised me to hasten my preparations for arriving on the other side even without the help of aeroplanes. Brunora told me that he knew the surveillance on the Piave near Vidor had been so reduced that several prisoners succeeded in crossing to the other side. The river there is so broad and shallow that it is easily waded. Furthermore, our supply of food which, during the first days of our stay was abundant, had gradually decreased and all those who at first helped us in the belief that our stop would be very brief, now found they could not continue to give us aid. Our supply of money had also decreased and I had had to send to my agent at Vittorio for funds. However, all he sent me was a few crowns and a great many Vene-

tian bank notes, issued by the Austrians but considered worthless by the population. For all these reasons it was no longer possible for us to remain in this region and it seemed well for us to try to escape in the direction indicated by Brunora. I had found out that in the region about Vidor, in many wheat-fields which had been sown before the retreat, the grain was now ripe. I had further learnt that the Austrian authorities, cognizant of the terrible condition of the people in the invaded territories because of the depleted food stocks, had at times stretched a point and permitted the refugees from those districts to return and reap the wheat. Therefore, I did not see why we might not venture so far. Not to arouse suspicion, it seemed well to have some refugee from those districts to act as our guide. In the very house in which they now prepared our meals there were refugees who used to live in the region about Vidor before the retreat, and several of the women

were eager to attempt a return in the hope that they might bring back with them something to eat for the nestful of hungry children they had to feed.

XVII

JULY 18. The sun was very high. It was noon, the hour in which the gendarmes were accustomed to begin their period of rest. We started on our journey. Before arriving at Vittorio we met numerous squads of Russian and Italian prisoners working on the roads, breaking stones with hammers. The roads were so badly kept that whenever a vehicle passed huge clouds of white dust arose. Those miserable remnants of men whose faces and bodies were evidence of the unheard of sufferings they had endured, staggered and swayed, for they were drunk from the heat of the sun and fatigue. An enemy soldier, armed with rifle and drawn bayonet, superintended the work and another oppressor held a whip in his hand. As soon as one of them fell,

overcome by heat and weariness, the watchman cracked his whip in the air, and unless the prisoner resumed his work at once the watchman struck him heavily on the poor, lacerated shoulders and the torn flesh. I should have liked to delay a moment with one of them; I should have liked to pour out to them all my compassion, all my sympathy, but I restrained myself to avoid arousing suspicion and the need for explaining to them who I was, for, from my way of talking, they might suspect that I was an Italian officer.

It was very warm and the pack on my shoulders weighed heavily upon me. The bundle was full of wood which I took with me as a precaution, since I intended to go into my house which had been turned into an Austrian headquarters. If someone were to ask me the reason why I entered I could say that I was a peasant who had come to bring some wood to the civilians who were still living in the house. Along

the entire road there was a great deal of commotion and everywhere the hungry, weary prisoners trailed heavily about. An immense sultriness weighed us down, and the mountains, burned and tanned by the sun, flung back their heat upon the white roads. We arrived at Costa where the Austrians had constructed a large station for despatching the aerial cable cars with material and food for the army at the front. On that day I scarcely recognized the scenery which I have known for so many years, because it was so changed. Where there used to be broad, tranquil cultivated fields there was now the noise and excitement of a great railroad station despatching along many tracks the traffic of its trains. Only one thing had survived, the little church surrounded by cypress trees which adjoined the cemetery.

My comrades continued on their weary way, but I entered the cemetery for a moment to bring a greeting to the tomb of

my mother. Nothing had changed, the little graves were still there, so were the round wreaths which trembled in the wind, and at the background near the encircling wall was our family tomb. The sepulchral stone was still intact and on it were yet engraved the words, "Famiglia De Carlo Granelli." The great rose bush which climbed up the cross looked weary; its fallen petals rested on the tomb. I knelt with one knee on the ground. All my life reappeared before me with the sweetness of infancy, and from my dry lips there came the cry of suffering humanity, the cry I have heard so often from the mouths of the wounded and dying, "Mother, Mother!" I prayed for a moment, then I plucked one of the red roses which still bloomed for the dead and their survivors and returned to the dusty road.

As I reached the first houses of Vittorio everything seemed devastated, everything seemed changed. It was as if I were meeting

a person I had known as young and beautiful and whom I now saw again after his surviving some terrible skin disease. Every place was cluttered with filth left by the soldiers and reeked with the nauseating stench of their refuse. I recognized the smell; it was the smell which would greet us on entering the trenches seized from the enemy, it was the smell of the enemy, of the Austrians. I slowly sauntered along the road flanked by mansions on which bulletins in German were posted, "Weg nach Fadalto." I had reached the great gate in front of my house, the façade had not been touched, the large coat-of-arms in hammered brass was still in its place. This was strange because they had gone about requisitioning all metals for making projectiles. On the threshold I met several Austrian officers who were leaving the house and they did not even look at me. I went up the service stairs and reached one of the ante-rooms. The doors were open, an inch

of dust lay on the old furniture, and on the huge, round chest of drawers under which we used to hide when we were children. The huge carved portals of the ballroom were open and I entered. The great mural paintings which celebrate the glories and clemency of Alexander—because one of my ancestors was called Alexander—were still hanging on the walls. The chandeliers of Venetian glass still depended from the high ceiling and the beams in the Sansovinian style still displayed the whiteness of their plaster and their gilt coatings. The room seemed larger than usual and more severe in its nakedness. The furniture had been removed so that I could better appreciate the calm, harmonious lines of the Corinthian columns supporting the beams. The gilt painted figures high up near the gallery were still in their places and seemed to gaze out at me from their carved frames. In that gallery, in the eighteenth century the musicians were wont

to sit, and powdered ladies bent in courtesies to the gay sound of violins. Now the room was filled with little beds; it looked like a ward in a hospital. The transient Austrian officers slept here and several Generals had occupied the inner rooms in which the tapestries hung. Therefore, I was not able to venture in for I was a stranger in my own home. Several Russian prisoners were polishing the brass knobs on the doors and dusting the heavy woodwork. No one looked at me, no one bothered about me.

I entered the ante-chamber which leads into what used to be our dining room, I entered and found before me all the portraits of my ancestors who looked down upon me from their frames. "Jacopos Minuzius, 1593-1652." It was strange the way they all seemed to be directing their glance towards me from the canvasses blackened by time. The walls were still covered by the antique brocade and above the chimney, little flying cupids supported a crown of

laurel over the portrait of an august cavalier with powdered wig, who wore a light breast-plate ornamented with beautiful carvings. Beneath was the map of a turreted city about which an attacking army aims its cannon, and the name "Andreas Minuzius," a date, "Anno 1662," and the inscription, "Buda ruens Bavaros claret augetque triumphos." Farther on stands Marco Antonio Minuzius, Bishop of Zara, his hand white against the red of his cardinal robe.

"Good sirs, my ancestors, do you recognize your grandchild? The grandchild who is fighting a far different war from the one you fought, but not less worthy nor less adventurous. The enemies are always the same, Turks and Bavarians. Good sirs, my ancestors, are you proud of these poor rags which I have made my armor? Are you satisfied with your distant offspring?"

On the dark canvas a slanting ray of sunlight gleamed and I did not await their answer.

After having hurriedly greeted De Luca and Marietta, our old domestic, I rapidly resumed my weary way to overtake my companions on the road towards Serravalle. At the market-place I met two Austrian gendarmes who, with drawn bayonets, were accompanying three of our prisoners and with the butts of their guns were inciting them to hasten their steps. Ugly encounter! . . . Naturally, not to arouse suspicion, I retarded my pace and stopped for a moment feigning to contemplate the prisoners. Outside of Vittorio I overtook Bottecchia and the women, and we resumed our journey through the hills which lead to Tarzo where we found a road which led to Vidor.

The way was long and arduous and we followed the back of the hills which divide the plain from Valle di Folina. The little lakes of Revine and Santa Maria di Lago reflected in their deep waters the heavy azure of the sky, and the shadows of the mountains met in the changing reflections

of the water. The road ascended continually until it became almost a path. We descended the little decline on which is nestled the village of Tarzo and, strengthened by some good warm soup, we stole a few hours of sleep. At one o'clock after midnight, when all was still, everyone was asleep and even the gendarmes were not accustomed to be about on the roads, we traveled on. An old man who had often been on the front lines and who knew the ground inch by inch had added himself to our group. Bottecchia was not happy in these days; he questioned everything which might prove a sign of the future and he was greatly depressed because when starting, a woman was the first person he met, a sign, which, according to his theory, denoted bad luck. At times we followed the road, and at times followed short-cuts which enabled us to gain time. After many hours, during which we traversed a long stretch of road, we passed through the villages of Refrentolo,

Soliga and Solighetto only to find that soldiers were quartered in most of the houses.

We now had to cross a bridge where a sentinel was on guard, but after we had shown him our papers he permitted us to pass without further trouble. We reached Fara, the last village in which there were still civilians and we sat on the ground for a moment to eat a bite. The women spoke aloud since there did not seem to be a living soul about us. Suddenly, when we least expected it, there appeared before us a little, shriveled soldier who spoke German very badly and appeared to be a Slovene. He asked us for our legitimization papers; we showed them to him and kept on eating so as not to arouse suspicion. He frowned, wanted to know why we had come here, and told us that it was prohibited to go and glean wheat near the front lines because several women had been wounded recently by projectiles fired from the Italian side and because the sight of people attracts

the fire of the Italian artillery onto the trenches. A magical method which usually succeeded in calming the Austrians was to offer them something to eat and we hoped that even our questioner could be calmed, like Cerberus, by throwing a cake into his mouth. I therefore offered to share our meal with him, but would that I had never done it! He was resentful, angry, said he was not to be bought, and that we must be spies. He drew his bayonet and ordered us to follow him to the nearest guard post. He made us march in line in front of him while he followed with his gun ready to fire at anyone of us who offered any opposition. We had no alternative but to follow and to try to win by using our wits. The stick I carried worried me for it was a hollow cane with corks at the ends, and in it I had concealed all the documents sent to me by Brunora for transporting them to the other side. But, before they arrested us, I should

always have time to throw it away without being noticed.

We reached the guard post which was a little hut of straw. Two soldiers were asleep and only a corporal was on guard. A heated discussion now ensued between our captor and the corporal but I did not understand them for they spoke in Slav. From their gestures I understood that the corporal, after having examined our papers, found them valid, whereas, the other insisted that we be sent to the Command of Gendarmes at Miane where they could better judge of the validity of our papers. The women began to whimper, entreating the corporal to set us free, for at home our children awaited us. The corporal, a tall young man with a pleasant look, let himself be persuaded and ordered us to return home at once. We pretended to start on our journey home but instead, after we had gone a short distance, we changed direction, crossed the main road and walked for a long

distance close to the embankment of the road that the soldiers on the other side might not see us. After we had traversed a goodly distance and had watched several wagons of artillery pass towards the front, we tried to reach the left side of the road to rediscover the short-cut we had been compelled to leave. At that point there was a little bridge and near the bridge were many tree-trunks. As we were about to pass behind the tree-trunks a soldier with drawn bayonet appeared crying, "züruck, züruck." We did not make him repeat his command and hurriedly returned to the country on the other side. The man on guard was confident that he had obstructed our passage and did not suspect that as soon as he was out of sight we should resume our journey in the direction towards the front. To avoid being seen we stepped into a little ditch where the water was low and which had two very high hedges of acacia on either side. The water reached to our knees, but this

was an excellent way of not being discovered and after we had passed the most dangerous zone we should be able to travel more freely.

Having journeyed for several hundred yards in the ditch we again followed the path through the country and fortunately we found no more sentinels to bar our way. We were now crossing the district where the artillery which took part in the recent combat had probably been stationed. Now there remained only little squares cluttered with torn telephone wires and tablets which must have indicated the division occupying that region. We crossed a demolished village with shattered houses and torn rooms, where bits of familiar objects which showed through the ruins reminded us of the tranquil life of days gone by. All the fountains were destroyed and in vain we sought everywhere for a draught of water to moisten our dry throats.

The country was now rougher and more

wild for we were not far from the stream of the Piave. We began to come to extensive wheat fields from which almost all the sheaves had been cut and where women eagerly gathered the few left and threw them into their sacks that they might bring home the means of making a little bread. Near the long rows of grape-vines there were many store-houses for guns and artillery and I looked carefully about to see if there was a guard anywhere, but I saw no sign of an Austrian. The last one we saw before arriving at this spot was a Hungarian with a long mustache, who was resting peacefully on the grass beside a stud of horses at their meal. The vines of American grapes were heavy with fruit, and they were the only fruit-bearing vines I had seen in a long time because the others, which all needed sulphur, had shriveled and dried up. We reached the Chapel of the Madonna del Carmine which is a few hundred yards from the rim of the Piave. We should

now have to be very cautious for there would be guards on the front lines. I could not understand how we had been able to come so far without finding any wire entanglements or a trench. We traveled on, keeping close to the grape-vines. When hidden in the wheat we imitated the women, who had begun sheaving. I tried to reach a point whence I could see the course of the Piave to get an idea of the defenses constructed by the Austrians and the difficulties we should have to overcome in crossing. Near the margin the enemy had dug huge holes lined with boards and prepared for machine-guns, but no soldiers were on guard. By crawling on the ground I reached another hole and I saw two Austrians who, instead of standing on guard were sleeping heavily. The trees were thicker near the brink, and with infinite precaution I arrived as far as a spot from which I could see the course of the river. The bed was very broad; the Piave sepa-

rated into an infinite number of little streams and about half a mile away the real, strong current flowed. Along the entire bank beneath us ran a little wood and on the exterior edge of the wood there were entanglements. Then the gravel began and there were two lines of entanglements which did not seem to me to be firmly anchored to the ground. Our artillery was firing and its shells exploded on the other side of the major current where perhaps the enemy had some small posts.

I gained a sufficiently accurate notion of the topography of the place and when night fell we were to try to pass. All day we lay crouching on the ground covered by the wheat and chewed the little grass we could find, that we might feel less the terrible thirst which burned us. The sun had never felt so hot to me, and its ball of fire seemed never to wish to set. Toward evening several Italian aeroplanes flew low and performed tricks over our heads, upon which

the outpost began to fire. Blessed are the flying men who have no entanglements to separate them from our lines, whereas we, as soon as the sun had set, would have to commence our struggle against man and the elements.

XVIII

THE women who came with us, after having filled their sacks, returned and Rino, Bottecchia and myself were left alone to await a propitious moment. Our artillery molested us a little towards evening but the firing was light and intermittent and I wished that that was the greatest difficulty we had to overcome in reaching the other side. The moon rose as soon as dusk fell and we slept for several hours in a shell hole. We were awakened by the sound of picks in the trenches where the Austrians were working.

The moon was now low on the horizon and would soon disappear behind the hills; we should then be able to try our luck. What worried us most was the thought that beyond the main current of the Piave there

might be small enemy posts and it really would not be very pleasant to encounter an enemy post as soon as we left the stream. We took off all our clothing and left our clothes in a hole in the wheat-field. We kept on only our stockings to protect our feet somewhat from the rough stones and gravel on the river bed. Advancing cautiously we reached the brink of the river and slowly we pushed aside the leaves which closed noisily behind us after we had passed. The loose earth on the slope made a crunching sound beneath our weight although we wished to avoid making any suspicious sound. A dry twig crackled and we crouched and listened. We heard several voices coming from the path under the trees. We squatted on the ground, holding our breath, and we saw two soldiers pass. . . . Silence. . . . The noise of their iron shoes was lost in the distance. We continued our descent, we reached the first Cavallo di Frina and jumped over it, not

without hurting ourselves on the sharp stones which pierced our flesh so that we bled. We had to cross the most dangerous point, the one most exposed, because the vegetation was less dense. We threw ourselves on all fours and crawled along on the gravel until we reached the first entanglement. Instead of trying to pass over it, we looked for the attachments which anchored it to the ground and unfastening them we passed under. We did the same with the next. We heard no suspicious sound, there was absolute calm. An Italian searchlight which swerved at intervals annoyed us somewhat for fear its light might by chance fall on us. We silently crossed the short stretch which separated us from the first branch of the stream. When we reached the water we bathed our temples and drank a cool draught which gave us great relief. A deep joy possessed us for we believed we were free. We believed we could easily reach the other side. We

crossed many small courses where the water was very low and not rapid. At last we found ourselves in front of the main current and at once, from the noise of the current we realized this crossing would be far different from the others. We tried to enter the stream, but as soon as we had taken a few steps forward the impetuous water threatened to engulf us. We clasped ourselves tightly one to the other and tried to resist that we might advance, but the rushing current reached up to our necks and we should have had to struggle hard and long before reaching the other side. None of us was an expert swimmer, no one knew how to conquer the current, and after numerous attempts we returned to the bank, disappointed and disgusted that we could not cross. And now what should we do? I preferred to face a platoon of armed Austrians rather than struggle with this whirling water which I did not know, for unknown dangers have ever frightened me.

We dared not delay any longer and the only course left open to us was to return before dawn surprised us.

After numerous difficulties we succeeded in reaching the place where we had left our clothing; we dressed hurriedly and commenced our journey back. We felt very weary and hungry and all these sensations were rendered more acute by the disillusion and grief within us at not having got through. The distance to be traversed before we reached home again was great and after resting a short while in a house at Miane we walked by day on the main highway without worrying much about the gendarmes. We wished to reach Tarzo before night, to reach the hospitable house where we should find a bit of food. Hunger gave wings to our feet. On the way we passed several platoons of gendarmes and in accordance with their usual system they all let us pass and then called us back at once to show our papers. These papers must have

been truly marvelous because no one questioned them and we proceeded without difficulties. My poor feet were in a pitiful condition and the rough, heavy underwear rubbing against the bruises made by the wires and entanglements hurt terribly.

Toward evening we reach Tarzo and after sleeping quietly for a few hours we sat on a little wall in the courtyard of the dwelling which housed us. While we are talking peacefully a marshal of the gendarmes followed by an interpreter entered. The marshal came straight towards us as though warned of our presence and asked us for our papers. He was a tall, heavy man with drooping mustache. His lean, yellowish face with high cheek bones bore the expression of one who is accustomed to command; his was the fierce face of the Magyars. In his hand he held a heavy stick which he struck impatiently on the ground. He turned towards the interpreter and said in German, "What ugly faces; they have a

suspicious appearance, especially that young man," he points to Bottecchia, "he looks too young and strong not to be a soldier."

The interpreter slowly repeated the questions of the marshal. "Show your papers." I took out my paper, granting me permission to stay in invaded territory, very slowly not to betray by any excited gesture the inward apprehension which tortured me. I did not fear for myself, I did not tremble for my fate, but I feared for Bottecchia because I saw his strength was failing him, because I saw him grow pale.

The marshal examined my paper carefully and said, "Thirty-five years old and works at Vittorio . . . we shall see. . . ." He then turned toward my soldier and began to question him in detail. His questions were sharp and penetrating like steady drops of water which dig into a stone. I, who am fortunate enough to know German and can prepare an answer before the question is translated and repeated in Italian

by the interpreter, followed with indescribable trepidation the questions which fell like thunder-bolts on the head of Bottecchia. He betrayed himself in a thousand ways, he flushed and then at once became pale again, his voice was unsteady, uncertain, to be suspected. I stared steadily at him, I tried to support him with my look, to impress in his eyes my firm determination to resist, my fixed desire not to cede; I felt stronger than my opponent, I felt that finally with the help of God I should conquer, with the strength of my nerves, the brutal bestiality of the Germans. Giovannino on the other hand was preparing his ruin.

“Well, my pretty young man, look into my eyes. Where were you born?”

“I was born at San Martino di Colle.”

The marshal was thoughtful, looked again at his papers and continued, “How is it you were born at San Martino di Colle when your papers say you were born at Vittorio?”

"That's true," answers Giovannino who for a moment seemed to have regained his wits at which I again had hope for him. "I was born at San Martino di Colle but I work at Vittorio and I had them draw up my papers in the place where I am stopping at present."

"Where have you been?"

"We have been to see some friends here at Tarzo."

"And how is it you are not working to-day?"

"Because I have been sick and for several days I have not been to work."

The marshal mumbled in German, "Nice face for a sick man, with such high color. This young man must be one of those notorious ones."

"What work do you do, if I am not indiscreet, and if you will permit me to question you?" He resumed his nervous whacking of the stick on the ground. "Come, now, answer. If you won't answer when

we treat you kindly there are other treatments which will make you talk."

"I am a carpenter."

"And where are you employed at present?"

"I am working at the threshing-machine plant near Vittorio."

"Show me your hands."

Bottecchia showed his hands, but, alas, they were as clean and white as those of a girl. The poor boy never would listen to me, he would never understand that every detail must be in tune with the character he was impersonating, and since we look like peasants our hands must be stained and hardened like those of peasants. The first day I landed in enemy territory I began to chop wood and to stain my fingers with mud and fig skin.

"These are not the hands of a laborer. I understand. Come with us. Step inside the house for I want to see what you have on you."

They took him between them, led him to the nearby house, and disappeared in the shadow of the doorway. From that moment I have never more seen Bottecchia.

Nothing could be done, there was no way for me to help him. A damning fact stood out against him. We had to try to save ourselves, to find a refuge before they returned and with Rino, who sat apart on the little wall and had looked on passively at the terrible scene, I began to run rapidly. Giovannino's arrest troubled me but I had not lost all hope. My soldier could not have any incriminating documents on him and in the end, when they realized the validity of his papers, for they are valid because Brunora had reported them formerly in the register at the Headquarters at Tappa di Vittorio, they would let him free and the worst that could happen to him was a good beating such as the Austrians always give out on similar occasions.

Without much haste we followed the

road back home and reached our familiar wood in the early hours of the morning. There I found several pigeons brought by the priests. I eagerly asked whether any aeroplane had sent forth the smoke signal for which we have been waiting and they answered that no Italian plane had flown over that territory since the day we had left. While I was eating a bite in the house of Maria de Luca, who had done her best to comfort me and assure me that Giovannino would soon return, a woman, disheveled and weeping, entered hurriedly. I recognized her, for she was the wife of our host at Tarzo. She gesticulated more than she spoke and at first was so excited that I could not understand a single word. Finally from the brief phrases which rose above her whimpers and sobs I understood the seriousness of the situation.

“They have arrested even my husband, they have taken Giovannino to headquarters. They searched him and have dis-

covered that you are spies, and now they are beating both him and my husband because they say they are the accomplices and they want to find out who is the organizer, the principal, the man with the beard who has escaped and whom they are now seeking. On my way here I met a platoon of gendarmes going about to arrest the man with the beard because on him falls the greatest suspicion.”

I tried to comfort her. I could believe all she said to be exact. How could they know we were spies unless these two had confessed? I knew that the peasant women had a habit of exaggerating and therefore, it was probable that the situation was far less serious than she reported it to be. However, I deemed it well to shave off my beard and to keep only my mustache. If they should arrest me, not knowing me, they could not suspect I was the man with the beard. However, there was another difficulty; without a beard and with my hair cut short I

should appear much younger than before and so with a soft piece of bread I erased the "3" on my paper and changed it into a "2." By now my paper was so soiled and creased that they would never be able to discern this slight falsification. However, the outlook was not cheerful and to find out more exactly what was happening I begged my landlady to go to the pastor at Tarzo who would probably be able to give her some details. Maria, with her customary kindness, left the oldest of her boys and I hid in the woods anxiously awaiting her return. After several hours she came to my hiding place in the woods and brought me the following news: "It is true they have arrested the owner of the house and they are now beating him and Giovannino. They suspect both of them of being spies for they have found on Giovannino a compromising document."

"How could they find a compromising document when he did not have any?"

“Yes, they have found one of those small slips of paper on which you used to write the pigeon messages. Nothing is written on the slip but there are printed directions on it about like this, ‘Hour of departure, hour of arrival, pigeon-house, register of the pigeon.’”

These details proved beyond a doubt that what Maria told me was exact.

“This proof confirmed their suspicions and they are now using violence on them to try to make them confess where the man with the beard is hidden. Giovannino has not said a single word and they are torturing him in many ways. They keep him handcuffed, they will not let him sleep and they try to trick him into confessing in a moment of weakness.”

The situation was really far more serious than I had suspected and as though this were not enough, towards evening they brought me news that Maria Bottecchia, the sister of Giovannino, had also been arrested

in Minelle, by a platoon of gendarmes. At last I fully realized the danger which threatened me, and I decided it was absolutely necessary to move from this region that the gendarmes might lose track of me. I still had two pigeons with me. I filled several pages with reports, made an appointment with the "Voisin" for the twenty-sixth and considered the danger which menaced me. As Bottecchia had been arrested and the gendarmes were almost at my heels I decided to leave for Sarone, and try to find lodging in the little isolated house at the top of the hill near which we had rested on the first day after our arrival.

On a recent journey to the field where the aeroplane was supposed to come for us I recognized certain peasants who still had some food hidden and they were truly hospitable. They had fed me and would not accept any recompense. They were ignorant of my mission, that I was an Italian officer, and therefore, without offering them any

explanation I would be able to return there and ask them for hospitality.

While a terrible thunder-storm raged through the mountains and the rain fell in torrents I traversed the long stretch of road which separated me from Sarone. That terrible weather was really favorable because no gendarme would venture forth in such weather. When I reached the house on the top of the hill the welcome was not what I had expected. Recently the Austrians had seized all the food the peasants had hidden and a requisitioning commission had taken away the wheat and left them with barely enough to appease their hunger. Under such conditions the peasants could not be as generous as in the past. Furthermore, a gendarme was killed recently in the surrounding woods and the police wandered about continuously seeking traces of the assassin. The mistress of the house made me understand that it would be difficult for them to house me a long time and, for the

present, so as not to arouse suspicion she preferred that I live in the wood.

Every day the absence of Bottecchia became more painful and I tormented myself when I thought that I was indirectly the cause of his misfortune because I was the one who had invited him to essay this undertaking. I wished to share his lot with him, to comfort and sustain him in the sorrows and anguishes of prison life. This isolation oppressed me. The absolute lack of any news worried me. Our aeroplanes who undoubtedly came to photograph the signals, did not find any and from this, and my last message which announced I was in danger, they must infer that I had disappeared and who knows when I should be able to resume communications with them! I did not think it likely that the "Voisin" would come to Praterie Forcate on the twenty-sixth without first warning me with a smoke signal.

For almost three days I lived sleeping in the woods and eating the little which the

owners of the house could spare. The hot rays of the sun fell obliquely over my head and in certain hours of the day it was impossible to find a patch of shade under the thorny, burnt trees. The heavy atmosphere was really unbearable. The flies buzzed and tormented me continuously and the ants and mosquitoes did not give me a moment's rest. I felt as if I had been forsaken by everyone, and after so many hardships I began to feel that my strength was diminishing, whereas, I needed all my calm, all my cold, steady nerves to carry me through my present predicament. For the past twenty-four hours I had not been able to eat or drink because the gendarmes were always about in the woods and the women feared to bring me the little food they usually did, lest they arouse the suspicion of the guards. All day long I lay exhausted on the ground, and I believed that if the gendarmes were to come I should not have enough strength even to get up, much less

to flee. I felt so changed, and I began to realize that courage is for the most part due to a full stomach. When I moved, my head whirled, and when I tried to walk a few steps to see if the gendarmes were still around, my legs would not support me; I tottered and fell heavily to the ground.

“Oh God, God, do not forsake me. If you have willed these sufferings should fall on me as expiation, may they be welcome, but do not take from me the strength to support them, do not take from me the strength to endure them to the very end with resignation.”

XIX

TOWARDS evening, when a light breeze made breathing more easy, I heard the leaves rustle and found Rino in front of me with provisions and good news. I could eat very little for I was too weak, but the little I did eat, gave me new strength. Rino told me that Bottecchia was still alive, that they had ceased beating him and that they brought him to the headquarters at Vittorio where they confronted him with his sister. She answered very ably to a long, strenuous examination. She made a false confession that Giovannino had been taken prisoner in the last offensive in June; that she had procured the false papers which they had found on him by sending to the headquarters at Tappa di Vittorio a peasant classified unfit

for military service who greatly resembled her brother, that this peasant had obtained a legitimization paper and had passed it on to Giovannino. The Austrian authorities with unusual clemency had believed her tale, had set her free, and had kept my soldier as a prisoner of war. No aeroplane had come to give a smoke signal. Furthermore, Rino told me that everything seemed more peaceful, but I could put little faith in this for I feared that under the calm a storm was brewing. I consented to follow him for it was absolutely impossible for me to continue living under present conditions, and because I had to be nearer friends, and had to be better informed of what was happening, to see what shape events were taking.

Therefore, after having decided that the "Voisin" would not keep its appointment, I returned to Fregona and again visited Maria de Luca, the good woman who had already helped me so much. She was not

in the least impressed by all that had happened and she offered to give me lodgings in her house where the gendarmes had not entered for a long time. I willingly accepted, also because I thought that by being near Vittorio I might be able to help Giovannino escape. On the very day I arrived, when we least expected it, a platoon of gendarmes arrived and asked to search the house for hidden metals. I barely had time to go from the cellar to the stable and climb up to the hay-loft before they entered. I buried myself in the hay close to the wall where the hay was thickest. The gendarmes entered the house, examined every inch without leaving a thing unturned. Finally, as they did not find what they were searching for, they came to the barn, and as they climbed up the stairs to the hay-loft, I heard one of them mumble in German, "Still, he must be here, I am certain." Without hesitating a second they began digging their bayonets in the hay to see if someone were

hidden in it. I crouched as close to the wall as possible and heard the sharp points pass a few inches above my head. At last they went! I drew a long breath and the close call I had just had made me think of the future. I decided not to be over-confident. This visit probably was the first of a series of other careful searches, and therefore, I had better keep my eyes open and try every means of escaping from their vigilance. I shaved off my mustache, put on a worn, patched skirt, a torn waist and a black handkerchief on my head, as is the custom of our peasant women, and with a hoe on my shoulder I went towards the grain fields on the hill. I crouched between two furrows and pretended to work so that a passing gendarme would never suspect that the ugly old woman working with her shoulders towards him was the man with the beard whom they were hunting. But even this disguise had its disadvantages. I should not have liked to meet a gendarme in

the woods at night while dressed as a woman. I looked like an old hag, but one never can tell. I appealed for another disguise to wear at night to a cousin of Maria de Luca who lived at Fregona and who mended all the uniforms of the transient soldiers who stopped there. I acquired one of the Italian uniforms left in a house by one of our soldiers at the time of the retreat and I sent it to this seamstress asking her to make the changes necessary for transforming it into an Austrian uniform. The son of my landlady had a rifle and some German cartridges stolen from the Germans during the first days of the invasion. To please me he dug up the weapon and the shoulder straps from the wheat-field where they had been buried. With this and the help of a yellow and black band on which the magic word "Gendarmerie" had been written I became a perfect Austrian gendarme in flesh and bones. Naturally I did not use this disguise in the day-time. As

long as it was light I would stay hidden under a projecting rock concealed by shrubs which one could reach after a long, difficult and rough ascent. This little promontory was almost inaccessible, a veritable eagle's nest. Nevertheless, during the dangerous hours the children would station themselves at points from which they could dominate the movement on the roads and as soon as they saw a platoon of gendarmes approaching they would make a certain noise and I would hide under the bushes where I was certain no one would find me. By night, however, I would take long walks about the country to exercise my legs and to visit the people I wanted to see. I then also exercised my gendarme's privilege of searching for pigeons.

As I walked in the woods at night disguised as a gendarme, to avoid meeting anyone, I occasionally fired a shot in air. For deserters and prisoners, on hearing these shots, would flee in the direction op-

posite to the one from which the shot is fired, and the very gendarmes, who amused themselves by frightening the population in this way and then entering their houses to steal, avoided the area in which they have heard the shots supposing that some of their comrades are there already. In these nocturnal peregrinations I communicated with the community teacher and doctor at Fregona, and together with the pastor we plotted a means for attempting to escape. Although I had taken all these precautions not to be discovered, someone might be shadowing me and referring my every move to the Austrians. I learnt, for instance, that the enemy knew that my beard had been cut. Therefore, I should have to be even more careful and not let anyone see me.

In the middle of the night when all were asleep, very cautiously I approached the house of Maria de Luca. I climbed up and entered the hay-loft, thence I descended to the stable, from the stable to the cellar

and finally entered the kitchen without making the least noise. By day now I did not feel safe even in my secluded hiding-place. I dared not stop for more than an hour anywhere and I wandered from hill to hill from wood to wood to hide my tracks. I tried to change my disguise as often as possible. Generally by day I went dressed as a woman and by night as a gendarme. I had become convinced that even the clemency used towards the sister of Giovannino was nothing but a feint done in the hope that the poor woman would try to get into communication again with her accomplices, through whom they hoped finally to reach the head of the band, the notorious man with the beard. Therefore, I broke all relations with Minelle and the house of the refugees. Occasionally, however, Rino came at night to meet me on the hill and these were the only moments in which I enjoyed a bit of calm, a bit of rest.

One day, after returning from a more

strenuous walk than usual, I felt dizzy, chills came over me and soon a fever so strong seized me that I became delirious. . . . I remember only the sweet face of a woman bending over my pillow during the long hours filled with terrible nightmares; I remember a charitable hand to which I clung desperately while gasping for breath; then the awakening, the quick convalescence in a comfortable bed surrounded by the whispers of many anxious friends who hoped for my speedy recovery. . . . Later I learnt that I had had the influenza, that I had been near death, and that I owed my recovery to the intelligent care of the doctor of Fregona and the affectionate care of the good Maria who had tended me as carefully as though she had been my own mother. I later learned that while I was sick with very high fever the gendarmes came to search the house. The women carried me on a mattress to the cellar where they hid me under a huge cask. For-

tunately, the gendarmes were contented with a less detailed search than formerly and with my usual good fortune I miraculously escaped the danger of being taken.

One evening while I was still convalescing and as we were seated about the fire, talking, we heard sharp knocks at the door. I ran to hide at once but Maria shortly after came and told me there was no danger, that our visitors were four Italian sergeants who had escaped from the concentration camp at Consiglio and had come to ask for something to eat and the road to Vidor where they wanted to try to cross the Piave. I returned and found myself face to face with the fugitives. Three of them had the worn, tired look of most prisoners, but one looked healthy and sturdy and as if he had not suffered much.

“I am a sergeant in the artillery taken prisoner during the last offensive. My name is Italo Maggi and I was born at Como, therefore, I can swim like a fish and

can row well because I was a boatman on the lake. These three men, who are not at home in the water, have placed their trust in me because they hope I shall be able to get them over to the other side. We don't care if a stray shot hits us, what we do want is to get out of the hands of these tyrants."

Truly this man must have been sent to me by the divine Providence. In our last attempt we had not succeeded in passing because none of us could swim well enough to face so turbulent a stream. But, with the help of the sergeant I was certain to succeed. I could be useful to him as a guide for I knew a place where we could cross and then I would trust to the strength of his robust arms to carry us across. But the other men would be in the way, for experience had taught me that in ventures of such a nature the group must be small. I, therefore, called Italo aside and briefly explained to him that I was an Italian officer, that I knew the road to the Piave very well and

that I could obtain some civilian clothes or an Austrian uniform for him, according to what disguise he would decide to wear. My physical condition then was such that I could not travel so I begged him not to abandon me but to wait a few days. We would then complete the details of our plan and let the others journey alone and try their luck. I hesitated for a long time before forsaking them but at times the necessities of war are cruel. I had no way of getting either the food or the clothing necessary for enabling them to attempt the venture. To journey with them in their actual condition would have meant certain seizure. On the other hand by placing my services at the disposal of Italo I was certain I could bring him and myself to safety. The sergeant accepted at once and placed himself at my disposal. We dressed him in civilian clothes and he wandered about with me for several days while we waited until the uni-

form of an Austrian soldier was prepared for him.

At the last moment we changed our plan; my sergeant was to be dressed as a civilian and was to follow behind me so that if we were to meet a gendarme he, who did not know German, would pretend he was a prisoner, and I, dressed as an Austrian soldier, would pretend I was the gendarme who had arrested him.

XX

AUGUST 10. We were about to start on our journey in accordance with our last plan, when unexpectedly the community teacher from Fregona and the doctor who had attended me during my sickness arrived. The teacher brought me a passport a "verkerschum" made out in accordance with all the rules, good for two persons for the journey from Vittorio to the village of Caorle which is near the sea. They told me it was an exceptional passport and that it had been confirmed by the command at Tappa di Vittorio, at Portogruaro and at Torre di Mosto and that many persons had already made use of it without ever having had any trouble. I was to pretend I was a teacher and would have to dress in civilian clothes

and wear a white band on my arm with the word "Lehrer." Italo was to be a servant who traveled with me to help carry the sack of wheat, for my journey to Caorle was supposedly to be for the purpose of procuring some wheat which was more abundant along the coast than inland. Angelin, the son of Maria de Luca who had been over that territory many times and who knew the land inch by inch, offered to accompany us.

We left at midnight while a terrible storm was raging. Before leaving her son, Maria entrusted him to me and urged me to carry him across to the other side with us if it were possible. As I descended the hill I turned back to give it a parting look for somehow I had the presentiment that this time we would succeed in crossing. As I looked back I recalled all the privations, sufferings and joys we had experienced for almost three months and I thought of my poor soldier whom I should have liked to have had with me, to have had as a com-

panion in this new attempt which I felt would bring us to safety. At one time the rain became so violent that we were compelled to seek shelter under a shed which we thought uninhabited. We had barely entered and had not had time to look about to see whether someone were hidden behind the cases of merchandise when a raucous bold voice arose not far from us and we saw the figure of an armed man coming towards us. We started to run madly and when we were far enough away to be safe we heard the echo of several shots.

As we did not want to pass through the village of Cordignano where we knew there was a command of gendarmes we made a long detour around the outskirts of the houses. As a precaution along the road, 'Angelin was delegated to walk about fifty paces in front of us and if he saw anything suspicious he was to stop and we should understand. In the open country we all walked together without being over-careful.

Walking along in this way we reached a wheat-field and, without noticing it, we landed right in front of a sentinel who at once called, "Halt." Again we took to flight and swiftly ran out of range of his shots. Reassured by the good luck which seemed to favor us in our encounters we continued our journey walking on the main highway and hiding for a moment whenever a noisy car would rumble past and light the road with the glare of its search-lights. We risked crossing the great Conegliano-Sacile road and did not meet anyone and thence we directed our steps towards the village of Corbolon where we knew there was a bridge.

We now reached the most critical stage of our journey for we had to pass a crossing always guarded by gendarmes who challenged all those who tried to pass. I had no desire to face them for I knew how much trouble they could cause, and I could not decide to try my luck. Perhaps it would

be prudent to ask the peasants nearby whether the guards were severe and whether they knew any of the gendarmes who guarded the bridge. We entered a farmhouse and asked the information we wanted. They answered that the policeman on guard was a truly good man and that the preceding evening he had talked with them for a long time. He had told them an extraordinary tale which they could not believe even though he had assured them it was true. He told them he had been instructed to examine carefully the papers of all travelers because the report had spread that an Italian Lieutenant General had descended in an aeroplane in the vicinity of the aviation camp at Aviano and the Austrian command had been searching everywhere for him without success. This tale amused me immensely for I well knew that no Lieutenant General had descended in the aviation camp at Aviano and since I was the only one who had landed in that camp, I had a

further proof that the Austrians were hunting me and that legends were already beginning to be formed about my adventure. But we did not lose courage; we decided to try the crossing at all costs. The waters of the Livenza were at a high level and passed over the little bridge. I approached the gendarme and with the greatest indifference I handed him my papers. He looked at me and said that if I wanted to cross I would have to take off my shoes. I agreed with him and while he examined my passport I started a conversation. "What ugly weather! The Italians and Austrians haven't yet had enough of this terrible, devastating war they are waging against each other; they still are not satisfied with the many innocent victims they have sacrificed for their pride and mania for conquest. This war was desired by the rich, by the munition makers who ask for nothing better than that the war continue so they can make more money. Meanwhile, they send the

poor people to the front to get shot and we, because of these sharks, must go hungry. Now, for instance, if I do not find any wheat at Caorle my children will get nothing to eat. I suppose your children away off in Dalmatia are in a pretty sad state too, because despite all the accusations against Austria of starving our particular regions, I know very well that the conditions there are about the same as here."

The old man sighed and returned my passport. I took off my shoes and crossed with my companions. The kind of talk I had heard so often repeated by Austrian soldiers produced the desired effect when I used it and that poor gendarme certainly could not suspect that the complaining school teacher was the very Lieutenant General for whom he had been warned to be on guard.

The first incident cheered us, and we felt that luck was with us and that everything would turn out for the best. We continued

along the main road, and while passing through Meduna I recognized the villa of a friend where I had often been a guest. We met several platoons of Austrian shock troops returning from practice. They tramped heavily along the road, their large helmets curved above them, and a solemn, slow chant accompanied their rhythmic tread. We slept at Lorenzaga and in the morning we continued on the dusty road. We passed the great market-place at San Stino di Livenza near the river without any incidents and following closely beside the dikes we arrived at Torre di Mosto. Thence we proceeded cautiously to Paese della Salute.

There we had been directed to Don Giovanni Morgantin and he greeted us with great cordiality. He gave us a generous meal, hitched his horse and made us ride in his carriage. He was a great friend of the mayor of Caorle and was to introduce us to him so that the mayor might furnish us with a boat with which to cross the water

which separated us from our lines. The horse's trot made the bells jingle and we marveled that we had again become prosperous and could ride after tramping for so long and envying those who passed us by in carriages. Now we could really call ourselves safe, for the priest who was with us was on very friendly terms with the Austrians and those with him would never be suspected. Furthermore, the band on my arm had already worked miracles. Before arriving at San Stino a gendarme approached me and asked me in the Venetian dialect, "What time is it, Master?" I courteously answered him and gave him the information he desired.

We reached several armed naval pontoons on which were anti-aircraft batteries. The sailors spoke in the Venetian dialect with the soft accent of the Istrians and the Dalmatians. We passed a boat manned by soldiers and entered a courtyard which was full of Hungarians. Here too, rested

an officer dressed in white who was enjoying the cool breeze under a little tent pitched near the water. A peasant to whom the priest had entrusted us led us to the house of the Mayor. This house was in the open country in the midst of the drainage works. As we entered, the atmosphere seemed very luxurious to us, after having seen so many bare homes. The daughter of the Mayor, a pretty dark girl, came towards us. On her work table was a large Italian flag which she was preparing for the day when the Italians should return. I looked about and asked myself whether I was dreaming for everything seemed so cheerful, everything so simple and easy, everything was proceeding with far more facility than I ever could have hoped for. In the room in which we stood conversing there was a photograph of our King, and when the Mayor joined us I asked him how he succeeded in keeping it there. He answered that from the very beginning the

Austrians did their utmost to remove it, that they returned again and again to seize it, but he defended it with all his power, as he had defended the honor of his daughters, and when the Austrians asked him why he gave so much importance to that image he answered, "That is my King and shall always be my King." The enemy, who feels so strongly the sense of dynasty, submitted before such great loyalty and the photograph of the King of Italy was (and is) still in its place.

"So you are an Italian officer and you need the use of a boat? I do not think it will be difficult to get one for you because our fishermen have many and, that the Austrians may not seize them, they have filled them with stones and sunk them in the low canals. We shall have to float one of them and see that it does not leak. Then you will have to try to leave at once because in these days the moon sets early and so, without

light, it will be easier for you to succeed in your attempt."

The next day the Mayor gave us the good news that the boat was ready and that it would be waiting for us in the marshes not far from the beach. As soon as night fell, with a fisherman as our guide, we walked east for several miles to find the spot where the boat awaited us. The fisherman told us that we had better keep about half a mile from shore without ever losing sight of it, and that after about two hours of rowing we should reach the mouth of the Piave on the other side of which are our lines. The fisherman assured us that no motor-boats cruise at night but they usually wait until dawn before they go out, and that the nights in general pass tranquilly.

The night was calm and serene and the sky studded with myriads of stars. The stars of the Great Bear, Aldebaran, Pollux and Cassiope twinkled like blazing torches seen through a thick veil. The milky way

spread its abundant light over the deep blue and the horned moon descended tranquilly towards the sea. Our little skiff, covered with twigs to avoid being discovered by indiscreet eyes, rested on a little canal where tall rushes stood. The wind murmured softly through the reeds and the echo of the bamboo-canes brushing against the bank answered. All the air was mild; the scenery seemed saturated with azure and the greenish houses threw their deep shadows on the ground. About us rose the strident croaking of the frogs and a toad modulated its harmonious whistle. The fisherman from Salute pointed out the way we must follow. Five hundred yards divided us from the sea and we should have to carry the boat over a little raised level of ground which separated the marshes from the beach. Several bushes and thorny plants grew on the bank and a sturdy cardoon raised its curved flowers towards the pale sky. Bits of shells crackled and broke under our feet.

The waves had washed a jellyfish on shore and its bluish gelatinous form mingled with the green of the sea-weed.

Now we had to begin carrying the boat. Angelin, who was still with us, looked about wonderingly and his eyes seem to stray towards the distant horizon and to lose themselves among the starry depths. We tried to lift the boat but it was very heavy and it fell back into the marsh. After numerous attempts we succeeded in getting it over the causeway and we now pushed it down towards the beach by making it roll along over the oars for otherwise it would have sunk so far into the mud that we should not have been able to raise it. Angelin placed the oars in front of us and Italo and I, combining all our strength, pulled the little flat-bottomed skiff. We stopped often to rest, for the distance to be covered was long. Finally we succeeded in carrying the boat to near the water where the ground was damp and hard. The voices of the sailors

singing the songs of Istria afar off on the pontoons reached us. The boat glided over the first waves, balanced itself and then floated. We pushed it towards the deep because we feared to encounter some shallow spot and at last we jumped in. Our weight tilted the boat sideways. Italo took the oars, I sat at the stern and Angelin crouched at my feet.

Midnight had passed and the thirteenth of August was beginning to break. The sea was as calm as oil, the boat glided smoothly cleaving the water with its broad keel and from afar we heard the voices of the white foamy waves chasing one another. The sky was full of falling stars which furrowed the upper darkness and left behind them luminous tracks; iridescent crests fell like flashes of lightning, dimming suddenly the light of the other stars which trembled tranquilly. Overhead it seemed as if there was a wonderful display of fireworks. The curved shore was now lost in the depth of

the night. Along the shore occasional searchlights gleamed, outlining huge semi-circles over the water, and whenever their light struck us Italo stopped rowing and we all crouched in the bottom of the boat so as not to be seen. Along the bank the first fireworks began to ascend and their trembling sparks fell back slowly and were extinguished in the water. Afar off towards the west many searchlights scrutinized the sky and their yellow rays intersected on the starry vault.

We rowed for several hours. Angelin, rocked by the gentle motion of the boat, rested his head on my knees and was sleeping peacefully. We could not see the beach any longer and to get our bearings we followed the line of the fireworks and the milky way which goes from east to west. Suddenly we heard a strange noise near the boat. This was followed by splashes, gliding rustles; at times it seemed as if something were following us. We were fright-

ened; for a moment we believed we were near a submarine; we anxiously expected to see a periscope rise up near us, but finally the glidings approached us and we noticed several foamy dolphins splashing gaily about us. Surely they were Italian dolphins which had come to welcome us, though at first we did not understand, we did not appreciate them.

Dawn rose slowly in the east, the stars faded above the silvery water and a grayish gleam tinged with pink spread over the sky. We did not know whether we had passed the line of the Piave. The fireworks continued to shoot up regularly in the early morning light. We now had to turn our prow towards the shore, even if it be an enemy shore, because anything would be preferable to being seized by the motor-boats which would soon begin cruising. If we landed in enemy territory we should have to try and hide our boat and attempt the feat another night. Italo rowed with

powerful strokes and the boat glided swiftly over the calm waves. Again we saw land and it looked like a thin narrow line of violet; its outline became clearer, more definite as we approached. The light was still dim and we were almost on shore. A wagon to which two oxen were hitched passed slowly along the beach and the curved horns of the meek animals were outlined against the grayish sky.

“Halt! Who goes there, who are you?”

“We are Italians, we are Italians.”

On the shore there appeared the figure of a sailor dressed in white.

“If you are Italians, come on down, come quickly.”

It was our land, our dearest land! We had arrived, we had arrived at last! I embraced the Italian sailor and kissed him as I had kissed our land on my arrival on the further side of the Piave!

THE END

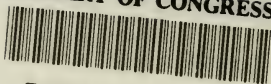
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