

'Generous and affecting ... the men, women and children,
weather and woodsmoke are as fresh as yesterday'

OBSERVER

ERIC NEWBY



*Love and War
in the
Apennines*

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Love and War in the Apennines



Dedication

To all those Italians who helped
me, and thousands like me, at
the risk of their lives, I dedicate
this book.

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Preface

Anyone who reads this book is entitled to ask how anyone can remember events which happened twenty-eight years ago and, what is even more extraordinary and unbelievable, what happened on a particular day. It is, of course, impossible, except for some rare people who have the gift of total recall, which I do not possess.

The events described fall into three distinct periods: the one in which I was captured; the time spent as a prisoner of war; and the third period when I was free after the Italian Armistice. I find no difficulty in remembering being captured. It is something, as most people who have been captured would agree, that is such a disagreeable experience that one remembers the circumstances for the rest of one's life. Neither does one forget what it was like to be a prisoner, although it is impossible to separate one day from another unless one keeps a journal, which I didn't.

The third period was the one which I really needed to remember in order to write this book, and I was able to do so because I kept a skeletal day-by-day diary, without naming people or places, and I used this record to write a detailed account of what happened while I was in a prison camp in Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1944 soon after I was recaptured. This, although I didn't think of it as such, was the first draft of the present book.

The reader may also ask another, equally sensible question. Why have I allowed such a long time to pass before writing it?

Not long after the war finished a minor flood of books about prison camps, escapes and life with the Resistance appeared. Some of them were so good – George Millar's *Horned Pigeon* and *Maquis* for instance – that I felt that a book about an escape that was nothing but a mass walk-out from a camp and my subsequent experiences, did not seem exciting enough to write about – I myself didn't even succeed in getting through the enemy line as so many people did. In fact I did not even attempt to. Nor did I join the Partisans. There were none to join at that time in the particular part of the Apennines in which I was hiding, anyway. Scarcely a help in producing an exciting book. I let the whole thing drop.

I finally decided to write the book because I felt that comparatively little had been written about the ordinary Italian people who helped prisoners of war at great personal risk and without thought of personal gain, purely out of kindness of heart. The sort of people one can still see today working in the fields as one whizzes down the Autostrada del Sole and on any mountain road in the Apennines. Only I had been able to speak the language better at that time perhaps their qualities would have emerged more clearly than they do now.

There are certain omissions and additions. In the Autumn of 1943 there were more prisoners of war in the part of the Apennines described in this book than actually appear in it. There have also been widespread changes in the names of people and places, and many characters are composite. As Bellow wrote in *Cautionary Tales for Children*:

And is it true?

It is not true.

And if it were it wouldn't do.

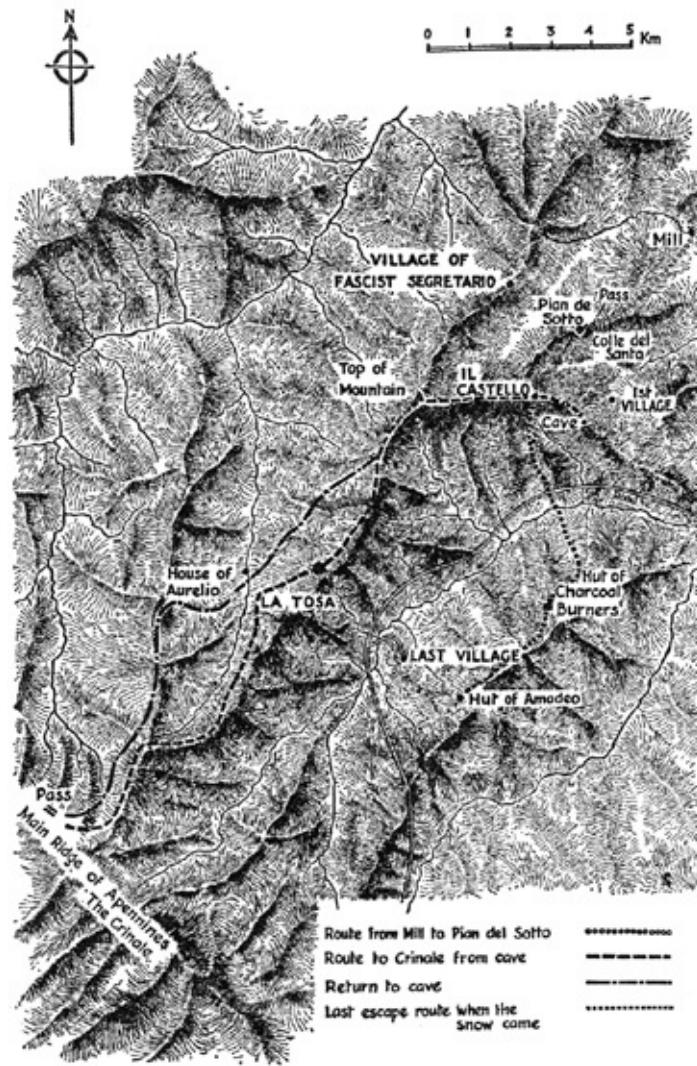
If I have only succeeded in producing an inferior version of 'Mademoiselle from Armentières' without the music and the song, then I can only apologise. I can't give the reader his money back.

Those who are bored by descriptions of abortive cloak and dagger operations should skip the first chapter.

The peasants are the great sanctuary of sanity, the country the last stronghold of happiness. When they disappear there is no hope for the race.

Virginia Woolf

Map



CHAPTER ONE

Operation Whynot

We were captured off the east coast of Sicily on the morning of the twelfth of August, 1942, about four miles out in the Bay of Catania. It was a beautiful morning. As the sun rose I could see Etna, a truncated cone with a plume of smoke over it like the quill of a pen stuck in a pewter inkpot, rising out of the haze to the north of where I was treading water.

There were five of us. Originally there had been seven, but one, a marine, had had to be left behind on the submarine and another, Sergeant Dunbar of the Argylls was missing, killed, wounded or captured, we none of us knew, lost among the coast defences in the dunes. We were all that remained of M Detachment of the Special Boat Section. Three officers, of whom I was one, Corporal Butler of the South Lancashire Regiment and Guardsman Duffy of the Coldstream, one of the smallest sub-units in the British Army, now about to be wiped out completely.

About eight o'clock we were picked up by some Sicilian fishermen who hauled us into their boat like a lot of half-dead fish. They were surprised. We were thankful, although we knew that we would now never make the rendezvous off Capo Campolato which had been fixed for the following night. We failed to reach the submarine by one o'clock on the morning of the twelfth.

I remember lying among the freshly caught fish in the bottom of the boat, some of them exotic, and displaying considerably greater liveliness than we did, and discussing with the others the possibility of taking it over and forcing the fishermen to head for Malta, 120 miles to the south, for the boat had no sail, as well as an engine. And if we had been in a war film made twenty years later this is what we undoubtedly would have done, but we had been in the water for nearly five hours and were very cold and could hardly stand.

Besides, the fishermen were kindly men. They thought that we were survivors from a torpedoed ship and they gave us what little wine and bread they had with them which amounted to a mouthful each. To them the war, as they made clear by various unequivocal gestures, was a misfortune which had brought misery to everyone and, as far as they were concerned, had seriously restricted their fishing. The idea of using violence against such people was unthinkable. And even if we had decided to try and take over the boat it would have been impossible to get away. It was one of a fleet of a dozen or so whose crews now brought them alongside so that they, too, could view this extraordinary haul. We were prisoners without, as yet, having admitted the fact to ourselves. It was too soon. Everything had happened too quickly.

On the afternoon of the tenth, immediately before we sailed from Malta, we had been given the bare, gruesome bones of what had been christened *Operation Whynot*. For the flesh we would have to rely on some last-minute aerial photographs of the target which were still in the darkroom and which we would have to study when we were submerged.

We were told that we were going to attack a German bomber airfield four miles south of Catania in Sicily which was expected to have between fifty and sixty J.U.88s on it on the night of the eleventh and destroy as many of them as we could so that they would be out of action on the twelfth and thirteenth when a British convoy essential to Malta's survival would be within a hundred miles of the island but still beyond effective fighter cover from it. There would be no time for a preliminary

reconnaissance. We had to land and go straight in and come out if we could. The beach was heavily defended and there was a lot of wire. It was not known if it was mined but it was thought highly probable. The whole thing sounded awful but at least it seemed important and worth doing. Irregular forces such as ours were not always employed in such ostensibly useful roles.

We travelled to Sicily in *Una*, one of the smaller submarines. Her commander, Pat Norman, was a charming and cheerful lieutenant of our own age.

I was already in the conning tower and we were just about to sail when a steward came running down the mole brandishing a piece of paper which, after having received permission to climb into the conning tower, he presented to me. It was a bill for an infinitesimal sum for drinks which I had ordered in the wardroom (our hosts, the Tenth Submarine Flotilla were so generous that it was almost impossible to buy them any). Apparently the others had already been presented with theirs while I was elsewhere. Actually, I had been attempting to dig down to my kit which had been buried when a large bomb had fallen that morning on the great impregnable-looking Vaubanesque fort in which we were billeted and destroyed my room.

No one, including Norman, had any money on them. Like me, none of them had thought that they might conceivably need money underwater.

'I'll pay you when I get back,' I said, airily. 'There's nothing to worry about. I'm attached to the Tenth Submarine Flotilla.'

'That's what they all say, sir,' he said, gloomily. 'Military officers attached to the Tenth Submarine Flotilla. And then we never see them again, more often than not. I'm afraid I must ask you to give me a cheque, sir.'

I told him with some relish that, if he wanted a cheque from me, he would have to shift some tons of masonry in order to find one.

'No need for that, sir,' he said. 'I've brought you a blank cheque. All you have to do is fill in the name and address of your bank and sign it.'

Even then it seemed an evil omen.

As soon as we were submerged and clear of Sliema Creek, George Duncan, who was our C.O., gave me all the information about the larger operation of which *Whynot* was a minute part that his superior had thought fit to give him. The rest he had picked up for himself, which he was very good at doing. Listening to him I was glad I was no longer a merchant seaman.

In a final attempt to save Malta from capitulation, a convoy of fourteen merchant ships was being fought through the Mediterranean from the west. One of them was a tanker, the only one that could be found that could attain the sixteen knots at which the ships were to steam. The safe arrival of the tanker was essential, for without it the island would be deprived of fuel.

The convoy had already passed through the Straits of Gibraltar the previous night and it was now somewhere south of the Balearics. The escort and covering forces were prodigious: two battleships, four carriers, one of which was going to fly its entire complement of Spitfires into Malta when it got within range, seven cruisers and twenty-five destroyers. Somewhere at the mouth of the Sicilian Channel the covering force would turn back and the remaining cruisers and destroyers would take the convoy through to Malta. Heavy losses were expected.

The enemy's preparations for the destruction of the convoy were on an even grander scale than the arrangements for protecting it. They had been following its movements with great interest ever since it had left the west coast of Scotland and they probably knew its destination (crates marked MALTA had been left conspicuously on the quayside at Glasgow while the ships were loading them for anyone

interested to see but, mercifully, none of us knew this at the time). All the Sardinian and Sicilian airfields were crammed with bombers of the Second and Tenth German Air Fleets, and the remarkable military jack-of-all-trades and master of most of them, Field-Marshal Kesselring, was in overall command of the air operations. There was also a force of Italian torpedo bombers, which were to play an important part in the operation, and large numbers of German and Italian submarines and motor torpedo boats had been deployed along the route.

The code name of the convoy was *Pedestal*. It was commanded by a rear-admiral, and the cruiser and destroyer force which had the truly awful task of taking the convoy through to Malta, by a vice-admiral. George didn't know their names but it was unimportant. I did not envy them; but I envied much less the men in the merchant ships. Besides, we had enough on our hands with our own piddling little *Whynot* to worry about them. By this time, one o'clock in the afternoon of the tenth, although none of us knew it, the carrier *Eagle* had already been sunk by an Italian submarine. And this was only the beginning.

It would be tedious to relate the details of the voyage. They were the same as any other for passengers in a submarine. The wardroom was so minute that apart from the times when I emerged to eat and discuss our plans, such as they were, and pore over the aerial photographs which had been taken from such an altitude that they needed an expert to interpret them and we soon gave up trying to do so, I spent the rest of the time lying on a mattress under the wardroom table, a place to which I had been relegated as the most junior officer of the party. I shared this humble couch with Socks, a dachshund, the property of Desmond Buchanan, an officer in the Grenadiers who was one of our party and who had persuaded Pat Norman to allow him to bring her with him because of the noise of the air raids on Malta which were practically continuous. ('I wouldn't dream of leaving my little girl here. Her nerves are going to pieces.') From time to time Socks went off to other parts of the submarine from which she returned bloated with food and with her low-slung chassis covered with oil, a good deal of which she imparted to me. But on the whole it was a cheerful journey and we laughed a lot although most of it was the laughter of bravado. We all knew that we were embarked on the worst possible kind of operation, one that had been hastily conceived by someone a long way from the target, and one which we had not had the opportunity to think out in detail for ourselves. I felt like one of those rather ludicrous, illbriefed agents who had been landed by night on Romney Marsh in the summer of 1940, all of whom had been captured and shot.

By four o'clock in the afternoon of the eleventh we were in the Bay of Catania, about a mile offshore, and Pat brought *Una* up to periscope depth so that we could have a look at the coast.

He got a bit of a shock when he did. He had come up in the midst of a fleet of Sicilian fishing boats and they swam into the eye of the periscope like oversize fish in an aquarium. Raising the periscope he was lucky not to have impaled one of them on the end of it. Nevertheless, with what I thought an excess of zeal, he insisted on giving each of us an opportunity to look at the coast which he did, hastily, before causing *Una* to sink to the bottom where she remained for the next five hours with everything shut off that might produce a detectable noise. It had not been a very successful reconnaissance; but there had been nothing to see anyway. With an immense sun glaring at us from behind a low-lying coast, the shore had appeared as nothing more than a thin, tremulous black line with a shimmering sea in front of it.

We surfaced at nine o'clock and the four folboats were brought up on to the casing through the torpedo hatch without their midship frames in position, the only way we could get them through and we carried out the final assembly.

It was not a very dark night, but after thirty-six hours in artificial light underwater it seemed

terribly black until we became accustomed to it, when it seemed altogether too bright. To the north we could see the lights of Catania and to the west the landing lights of the airfield. Planes were coming to land a couple of hundred feet above our heads, and when they were directly above us the noise was deafening. The wind was on-shore and there was a nasty swell running which made the launching of the canoes over the bulges difficult with the tanks blown, and the loading of them once they were in the water even more so. One canoe was so badly damaged getting it into the water that it had to be left behind, together with the marine who was going to travel in it. He was very disappointed at the time. How fortunate he was.

'Rather you than me, mate, but good luck anyway,' were the last words addressed to me by a rating as he threw me the stern line; then we set off in arrowhead formation towards the shore, if three canoes can be said to constitute an arrowhead.

The water was extraordinarily phosphorescent. We might have been in a tropical sea and as we dipped the blades of the paddles it exploded into brilliant green and blue fire and as we lifted them out of it they shed what looked like drops of molten metal which vanished when they fell back into the water. At any other time these effects would have seemed beautiful; now they seemed an additional hazard. Surely to the sentries patrolling the beach it must look as if there was a fire out at sea, and surely the crews of the bombers which were still coming in to land over our heads from dead astern must see it, just as surely as they must have already seen the submarine. Together with Corporal Butler of the South Lancashire Regiment, my companion at bow who was no doubt sharing the gloomy thoughts, I paddled towards the shore, trying to hearten myself with the prospect of the bacon and eggs which we had been promised if and when we returned on board.

After a few minutes we heard the boom of surf and soon we were on the outer edge of it. It was not very heavy, but we got out of the canoes as we knew how to without capsizing them, and swam in with them until our feet touched bottom and we could stand. It is better to arrive sopping wet on two feet on a hostile shore than to be capsized or thrown up on it dry but immobile in a sitting position, unless you are a secret agent who must immediately enter the market place and mingle with the crowds.

The beach, with the wind blowing over it and the surf beating on it, seemed the loneliest place in the world. The wire began about fifty feet from the water's edge. We carried the canoes up over the sand and put them down close to the entanglements without being blown to pieces. At least this part of the beach did not seem to be mined with anything that a man's weight would set off, or perhaps we were lucky, there was no way of knowing.

Now we attached the time pencils to the bombs, which were a mixture of plastic and thermit (With the white cordtex fuses they looked like big black conkers on strings.) This was something that could not safely be done on board a submarine costing a mint of money, because time pencils were rather erratic, and I always hoped that the workers in the factory in which they had been made had not got all mixed up and substituted a thin, thirty-second delay wire for a thicker, thirty-minute one, or simply painted the outside casing with the wrong colour paint, which was one of the methods of identifying them, mistakes that could quite easily happen after a pre-Christmas factory beano.

When the bombs were ready we buried the canoes upside down in the sand and obliterated our footprints, working upwards from the water's edge.

The wire entanglements were about twenty yards wide and they stretched away along the shore north and south as far as the eye could see. Behind them, there were two blockhouses about 150 yards apart. We had landed exactly half way between them. I felt as if I had survived the first round in a game of Russian roulette.

Now we began to cut a narrow swathe through the wire at a place where there appeared to be none

of the more visible sorts of anti-personnel mines with which we were acquainted. Nevertheless, it was a disagreeable sensation. Only God and the enemy knew what was buried underfoot.

By the time we got to the other side it was ten o'clock. An hour had passed since we had left the submarine. We were already late, but it was difficult to see how we could have been any quicker. The earliest possible time at which we could arrive back at the submarine had been estimated to be eleven o'clock. The latest possible time, providing that *Una* had not been discovered, in which case she would have to submerge and leave us anyway, was one o'clock in the morning. If all went well it still seemed that we might make it by midnight, or earlier.

On the far side of the wire at the edge of the dunes, we came to a track which ran parallel with the shore and presumably linked all the blockhouses on this stretch of coast. Fortunately, it was deserted and we pressed on across it and pushed our way through a hedge of some kind of coarse vegetation which had probably been planted to stop the sand drifting inland. For the first time in my life I was in Europe.

Behind this windbreak there was a line of stunted pines and a low drystone wall with a sunk field on the other side of it. Coming from this field was an appalling noise which sounded like a body of men marching along a road and we crouched behind the wall for what seemed an age, waiting for them to pass, until we realised that it was only a horse that was munching grass.

Feeling very stupid we dropped down into the field and crossed it. The horse went on munching. It was a white horse. How I envied it. How silly the whole business seemed at this moment. It was a nice horse but at this moment it was an enemy horse. If it whinneyed or began to gallop around the field we might be discovered; but it did neither of these things. It simply went on eating its dinner.

On the far side of the field there was a high stone wall which, like the wire entanglements on the beach, seemed to be endless, and we pushed George up on to the top of it so that he could see what there was on the other side; but all that he could report was that the landing lights on the airfield had been put out. No more planes were coming in and everything seemed quiet. Our prospects began to seem quite good.

He hauled us up one by one, on to the top of the wall and we dropped down into what proved to be a farmyard full of dogs. Previously they must have been dozing, but the thump of our great boots as we landed on the cobbles brought them to life and they came at us barking and yelping furiously.

The farmhouse had been invisible from the top of the wall, hidden among trees, and now we had to pass the front door, but in spite of the din the dogs were making, no windows or doors were flung open and we made a dash for the far side of the yard where there was a gate which opened on to a dark lane overshadowed by trees, which seemed to lead in the direction of the airfield. And as we went along an engine, which sounded as if it was on a test bench, began to scream and sob, drowning the din the dogs were still making, and then died away, tried to start again, but failed.

After about a mile, the lane suddenly came to an end and we found ourselves in the workshop area of the airfield, among buildings with bright lights burning in them. One of them had a number of large wooden crates standing outside it, some of which had only recently been broken open. They contained aircraft engines. On as many of these as we dared expend them we stuck a bomb. It was a terrible waste of explosive; but if we failed on the airfield itself we wanted to leave something to be remembered by. Perhaps, unconsciously, in destroying the engines we were performing some primitive ritual of atonement.

We were now very close to the edge of the airfield and we were just about to split up into pairs and set off for our various targets, Butler's and my own being the bombers on the far side of it, more than half a mile away, when we ran straight into a body of men, one of whom shouted at us in Italian

demanding to know who we were. We said nothing but pressed on through them until the same man shouted at us again, this time more insistently – what sounded to me like ‘Eh! Eh! Eh!’ – so insistently that George was forced to reply, using one of the phrases which we had all memorised, ‘*Camera Tedeschi*’, which we had been told meant ‘German Comrades’.

It sounded even less convincing now, on enemy soil, coming from the mouth of a captain in the Black Watch who had been a sheep farmer in Dumfriesshire before the war, than it had when we had all practised it, and other Italian and German phrases, on one another in the submarine. And it must have sounded even more so to the Italian because he immediately took a pot shot at us with some sort of firearm. Fortunately it was not an automatic weapon, or perhaps it was on single rounds. If it had been he would probably have rubbed us out completely. Whatever it was, he only fired a single shot.

Then one of our party, I never knew who it was, fired back, a single round from a machine pistol.

The effect of the two shots was positively magical. Immediately the airfield was brightly lit by searchlights which were disposed around the perimeter – as if the man who had fired at us had his hand on the switches – and then pandemonium broke loose: lorries and trucks started up; Verrey lights rose; the air was filled with the ghastly sounds of commands being issued in Italian and German; and there was the, to me, equally terrifying noise made by men in boots running on hard surfaces in step. It was difficult to repress the thought that we were expected.

I was not surprised. What had surprised me, had surprised us all, was that we had managed to land at all. This kind of operation had been successfully attempted so many times in the past and with such losses in aircraft to the enemy, that by now it was inconceivable that they would not be permanent on the qui vive, and on the very eve of a major action, doubly so. Probably the only reason we had got this far unchallenged was because not even the Germans could imagine that the sort of small party that had done such damage on their airfields in the past would be crazy enough to make a frontal assault on a target of this magnitude. We were lucky to have got over the wall into the farmyard. In this way we seemed to have avoided the official way in.

There were men all round us now but they were confused as to who was who, and afraid to open fire for fear of killing some of their own side. Fortunately the workshop area was one of the few parts of the place which were still comparatively dark, because it was masked by the buildings.

It was at this moment, with everyone milling around in the darkness as if they were playing Murder at a party, that a man loomed up in front of me speaking excitedly in German. There seemed no alternative but to shoot him before he shot me and I stuck my pistol hard against his ribs and was just about to press the trigger when he said in Lowland Scots ‘Don’t shoot you stupid bastard. It’s me!’

Then we dodged round the corner of one of the buildings and ran as hard as we could across a piece of brilliantly illuminated ground on which some clumps of bushes partly hid us from view towards a wood, a hundred yards or so away.

As soon as we reached it we lay down and tried to make out what was happening. There was no need to use night glasses. With half a dozen searchlights playing on it, the airfield looked more or less as it must have done under the midday sun, except that now it was swarming with infantry who were being formed up to carry out a large-scale *battue*, and every moment more lorry loads were arriving. It felt like a pheasant looking out on the approaching beaters from the false security of a cover. Surprisingly, there seemed to be no guard dogs. I had expected the place to be seething with them, as some of the Cretan airfields had been, according to those who had visited them.

And beyond the soldiers were the planes. I had never seen so many J.U.88s in my life.

‘What I think we should do,’ George said, ‘is ...’

‘Fuck off,’ said a readily identifiable voice which was not that of an officer. ‘That’s what we ought to do, fuck off, while there’s still time.’

The suggestion was so eminently sensible, and the person who made it so experienced in the matters, that it only remained to put it into practice. The operation was off for anyone who was not trying for a posthumous award of the Victoria Cross, and there would be no one left alive to write the citation if he was. There was now not a hope of crossing the airfield and reaching the planes, and even if one succeeded there would still be the guards to deal with. The thing to do now was to get out before we were cut off from the beach.

We moved back through the wood which was all lit up and reminded me vividly of Act Two, Scene One of *As You Like It*, the Forest of Arden in the Open Air Theatre in Regent’s Park, until we came to an expanse of open heath in the middle of which stood a tall electric pylon, one of a long line which stretched away in the direction of Catania – strange things to find close to an airfield where one would have thought that they would have been a serious obstacle to flying; and we stuck a couple of bombs on it and piled the rest at the foot of it and set them going too. It was a puerile thing to do. The pylon would certainly be repaired in a couple of days.

It was now eleven-twenty. To get back to where we had started from we had to travel on a diagonal course across country, roughly south-east, and we set off very fast in single file until we reached a wood filled with dead and dying trees which had fallen across one another and dry branches which made a shattering noise when they broke underfoot. Beyond the wood there were some fields planted with lines of vines supported by wires at right angles to the direction in which we were travelling and beyond them there was a swamp with thousands of frogs croaking madly in it and in this we floundered miserably, and beyond the swamp were the dunes. It was midnight. Just as we reached the dunes we heard the sound of an approaching aircraft and immediately all the lights on the airfield went out and so did those to the north in Catania, sirens wailed and flak began to rise lazily in the air from around the perimeter. This was a solitary Wellington gallantly coming in to drop its bombs and create a diversion in order to help us, although what purpose this diversion was to serve when no one except ourselves could know where we would be at this particular time, or what stage the operation would have reached, had not been clear to any of us; but whether we liked it or not there had been no one on Malta who had known how to stop the diversion happening. It was something out of Kafka, immutable.

Our feelings were expressed by the man who said that we ought to fuck off.

‘If they can send one Wellington to bomb the bloody airfield why not send six, knock shit out of it even if they only get the runways, and save us getting our feet wet.’

But although we were unappreciative, the arrival of the Wellington was very opportune and coincided with the explosion of our own first lot of bombs which we had planted in the crates outside the workshops.

We were in among the coastal batteries now. It was a place in which to move warily. If you fell into one of the trenches which linked them you could easily break your neck. Fortunately they were deserted. Everyone was in the casemates and in spite of the din of the air raid we could hear the mumbling and rumbling of conversation inside. The occupants were the coastal gunners, and probably the infantry as well, who should have been manning the trenches and machine-gun emplacements; and of them prudently keeping their heads down.

It was here, among the trenches that we lost Sergeant Dunbar who had been bringing up the rear of the retreat. One moment he was with us, the next he was gone and it was not until some days later that we found out what had happened to him. He had trodden on what he thought was terra firma, but was

really nothing but a camouflaged groundsheet which a number of Italian soldiers had erected over an open strongpoint so that they could play cards without showing a light (not all of them had taken refuge under concrete) and he had fallen through it on to their makeshift table and in the ensuing struggle had been wounded and overpowered. It was lucky for the rest of us that there seemed to be no communication between the defenders of the airfield and those on the coast who did not appear to have been alerted to what was going on at all.

By the time we reached the wire the Wellington had droned away and it had begun to rain. There was no time to waste if we were to get back to the submarine before it submerged, which it was due to do in just over three-quarters of an hour. But while we were trapped in the middle of the entanglement we saw a party of men walking along the beach on the seaward side of it and they saw us, too.

There were about a dozen of them and it was obvious that they had seen us, because when they were opposite us they stopped and, literally, put their heads together. The effect was both alarming and comical. We must have had the same effect on them, frozen in the attitudes in which they had discovered us, most of us hooked on the wire, some of us, although they could not see this, with the rings of Mill's grenades between our teeth, wondering whether to pull the pins and chuck them, or wait and see what happened. (How I prayed that the hothead who had returned the fire of the Italian outside the workshops would not do this. If he did we would never get off alive.) But they must have been as reluctant as we were to start any trouble, because, after what seemed an eternity, they turned round and went off southwards along the shore in the direction from which they had come, and no doubt they reported that they had seen nothing out of the ordinary in the course of what was probably a routine patrol. Both parties had had a very lucky escape.

Our route back to the beach had been so roundabout that when we finally emerged from the wire on the foreshore we were not sure whether the place where we had buried the canoes was to the north or south of us. I wondered why, if we had been travelling roughly south-east, as we all thought we had, we had not crossed the dark lane from the farm to the airfield or, failing that, had not seen the sunken field with the horse in it if the boats were now to the north of us. But as we were all reluctant to go in the same direction as the enemy, even an enemy as pusillanimous as they had been, we turned left which was north, walking in the sea, so that we should be less visible from the blockhouses. And while we were splashing along the edge of the surf which was heavier now, the wind having freshened, there was a succession of glares and heavy thuds inland as the pylon charges and those in the haversacks, perhaps the whole lot of them, went up. It was now twelve-thirty on the morning of the twelfth. A home in a few hours, as George reminded us, grouse shooting would be beginning.

Luckily we were heading in the right direction and soon we found the canoes, or rather the place where we had cut the wire. It was fortunate that we had met the patrol where we did, otherwise they would have gone on and seen the hole in the wire and this would have been something that they could not possibly have ignored. They were going to have some difficulty in explaining why they hadn't seen it, anyway.

Now we dug up the canoes. What had been George's and Sergeant Dunbar's was in such bad shape, having been smashed against the side of the submarine while it was being launched, that we decided to abandon it and after we had punctured the flotation bags and had made an unsuccessful attempt to sink it, I took George into my canoe. We were now three men to a two-man canoe and we had some difficulty in getting into it once we were through the surf and when we did there was very little freeboard.

It was now a quarter to one and there were only fifteen minutes left before *Una* was due to submerge. We paddled the two canoes off on the back bearing, occasionally flashing a hooded torch

which was a terribly risky thing to do and might have imperilled the submarine if there had been a patrol boat offshore; but we could think of nothing now beyond being picked up and saving our skins.

But we were not picked up. By the following year a homing device had been produced which was used successfully in the Far East and with which we would have been able to find her. As it was, in the rain and darkness, we never saw her. We must have gone out and beyond her, probably passing quite close, and then the north-east wind and the tidal stream, which was setting southwest, must have taken us down to leeward of her.

By three in the morning there was a nasty sea running and shortly afterwards my canoe filled with water and we had to abandon it; and although we tried to get the flotation bags out of the bow and stern, which would have been a great help in keeping us afloat, we were not able to do so. The other canoe, with Desmond and Duffy in it, was not in much better condition, and if any of us had tried to hold on to it in such weather it would have gone too.

It was very dark, the water was surprisingly cold and I was very frightened, more frightened than I had ever been. What upset me more than anything, quite irrationally, was the thought that if we were drowned – which seemed more than probable – none of our people would ever know what had happened to us and why.

I had just succeeded in getting my boots off when I saw George swimming away into the darkness and I knew immediately that he was doing so because he felt that he could not keep afloat much longer and did not want to be a burden to the rest of us. He was not a strong swimmer and he had no spare flesh on him to combat the cold.

I was the only one who saw this and I went after him and persuaded him to come back, after a fantastic conversation in the sea of which I shall never forget the gist but have completely forgotten the actual words which passed between us; all I can remember was that he was very calm and determined, just as Captain Oates must have been, walking out of that tent in the Antarctic; but eventually he swam back with me and Desmond insisted on getting out of his canoe and giving George his place, which was difficult to do but undoubtedly saved George's life.

Now we tried to swim shorewards to where we thought the mouth of the Simentto River ought to be. If we could only reach the right bank before dawn we might be able to lie up among the trees until nightfall and then make the rendezvous for the second night with the submarine, by Capo Campolattaro six miles to the south. But although by first light the wind died away, we never reached the mouth of the river or the rendezvous. It was a pity because, at great risk, Pat brought *Una* back three nights running to wait for us although he and his crew having seen the explosions on the airfield and heard the shooting, were more or less convinced that we were captured or dead.

Of the fourteen merchant ships which took part in *Operation Pedestal*, five reached Malta, including the tanker *Ohio*, which was enough to save it. The remaining nine were all sunk, at least four of them by J.U.88s operating from Sicily on August the twelfth and thirteenth. *Operation Whynot* was not one on which I look back with either pride or pleasure. The fishermen took us in to Catania where we were surrounded by a hastily assembled escort, and marched, presumably for the edification of the inhabitants, bootless and in the few clothes which remained to us – some of us were without trousers – up past palaces and convents, some of them like those on Malta and equally golden in the sunshine, to a more modern building in the centre of the city. Here we were subjected to a long, inexperienced interrogation by unpleasant men in civilian clothes. We were still very sure of ourselves and Desmond made the kind of rude remarks about the Duce, whose photograph glowered down at us from the wall, which only Guards officers are really capable of making, and to such an extent that we were in danger of being badly beaten up, as we certainly would have been if we had been Italian prisoners insulting

portrait of Churchill.

The Italians were angry enough without being taunted. We had penetrated their coast defences and the Germans, whose aircraft had been in some danger, had already pointed this out to them. That we had failed completely to do what we had set out to do did nothing to appease them. It was now that we made a rather feeble attempt to escape from the window of a lavatory to which the guards had, rather stupidly, taken us *en masse*. What we would have all done in the middle of Catania with hardly any clothes on, none of us had stopped to think; we were too bemused.

We were given nothing to eat or drink, and all that morning we sat shivering in our damp underwear and shirts in a northfacing room; and George, who had not recovered from his immersion, became ill. Finally an Italian colonel arrived and cursed our hosts for keeping us in such a condition and we were issued with cotton trousers and shirts and cotton socks and canvas boots made from old rucksacks, which were very comfortable, and we were also given food. Later in the afternoon we were put in a lorry and taken to a fort with a moat round it in which the conducting officer told us, we were to be shot at dawn the following morning as saboteurs because we had not been wearing any sort of recognisable uniform when we were captured. Looking out of the window into the dry moat in which the firing party was going to operate, I remembered the innumerable books about first war spies that I had read at school which invariably ended with ghastly descriptions of their executions. Mostly they were cowardly spies whose legs gave way under them, so that they had to be carried, shrieking, to the place of execution and tied to stakes to prevent them sinking to the ground, and although I hoped that wouldn't be like this, I wondered if I would be.

By this time George was very ill. He had a high temperature and lay on one of the grubby cots, semi-delirious. We hammered on the door and shouted to the sentries to bring a doctor, but of course none came.

Finally, sometime in the middle of the night (our watches had been taken away from us so we no longer knew what time it was), a young priest arrived, escorted by two soldiers, as we imagined to prepare us for the ordeal ahead; but, instead, he dismissed the sentries and knelt down by the side of George's bed and prayed for him.

The priest spoke a little English and before he left he told us that the Germans were even more angry about the Italians' decision to execute us without consulting them first, than they had been about the attack on the airfield, and that they had given orders that we were on no account to be shot but sent to Rome at once for further interrogation. Perhaps they never meant to shoot us but, all the same, we thought ourselves lucky.

The next day George was better, although still very weak, and later that day we left for Rome by train with a heavy escort of infantry under the command of an elderly *maggiore* who had with him an insufferably conceited and bloodthirsty *sotto-tenente* who had obviously been recently commissioned.

By now we were all very depressed but Desmond, who had a positively royal eye for the minutiae of military dress, had the pleasure of pointing out to the *sotto-tenente* that he had his spurs on the wrong feet.

'He is quite right,' said the *maggiore* who was not enjoying his escort duty and appeared to dislike the *sotto-tenente* as much as we did. 'Go, instantly and change them. You are a disgrace to your regiment.'

At Rome station while being marched down the platform to the exit, we were able to pick up some of the ruinous and extensive baggage belonging to some very pretty peasant girls who had travelled up from the south on the same train. Happy to be given this assistance, for there were no porters even if they had known how to hire one, they trotted up the platform beside us between the escorting lines

soldiers who had been given orders only to shoot or bayonet us if we tried to escape, with the residue of their possessions balanced on their noddles, while the *sotto-tenente* screeched at us to put their bayonets down and the *maggiore*, not wishing to make an exhibition of himself, disembarked from the carriage in a leisurely fashion. These were the last girls any of us spoke to for a long time.

In the city we were housed in barracks occupied by the *Cavalleria di Genova*, a regiment in Italy of similar status at that time to one or other of the regiments of the Household Cavalry in Britain. They still had their horses and the few officers and men who were about looked like ardent royalists. They certainly all knew about which was the right boot for the right spur, which was more than I did. And, although they were not allowed to speak to us, their demeanour was friendly. They sent us magazines and newspapers and the food, which was provided by the officers' mess and brought to us by a white-jacketed mess waiter who had the air of a family retainer, was of an excellence to which none of us were accustomed in our own regiments, although there was not much of it.

After the first day we were all separated from one another and we began a period of unadvised solitary confinement in the course of which we contrived to communicate with one another by way of the mess waiter who carried our innocuous written messages from one room to another among the dishes. At intervals we were all interrogated, but never really expertly, by people from military intelligence. As we had been taught never to answer any questions whatsoever, however fatuous they might seem, we learned more from our interrogators than they did from us. It was interesting to find out how much they knew about our organisation. About some parts of it they knew more than we imagined they would; about others they seemed to know much less.

Once a day, but never together, we were let out to exercise on the pathway which surrounded the *manège*. Here 'by chance', we met other 'prisoners', an extraordinarily sleazy collection of renegades and traitors, most of them South African or Irish, dressed in various British uniforms, some in civilian clothes, who called us 'old boy' and offered to fix us up with nights on the town and escape routes into the Vatican in exchange for information.

I enjoyed being alone. It was so long since I had been. From my room, high up under the eaves of the barracks, I used to watch a solitary, elegant officer taking a succession of chargers around the track. He was a wonderful horseman, even I could tell this without knowing anything about horses. The days were poignantly beautiful. The leaves on the plane trees were golden. Here, in Rome, in late August, it was already autumn. I was nearly twenty-three and this was my first visit to Europe. Locked up and isolated in the centre of the city, I felt like the traitor Baillie-Stewart, 'the Officer in the Tower', or, even less romantically, someone awaiting court martial for conduct scandalous and unbecoming, looking out across the Park in the years before the war.

After a few days we were dispersed, the officers to one camp, the men to another. We all survived the war and so did Socks, the dachshund. Pat, in accordance with Desmond's last wishes, took her to Beirut where she took up residence with Princess Aly Khan. And George recovered sufficiently within a few days to make one of the most cold-bloodedly successful escape attempts from the camp in which we were sent when he, in company with a number of others, marched out through the main gate disguised as Italian soldiers. Unfortunately, they were all re-captured soon afterwards.

CHAPTER TWO

Grand Illusion

A year later, on the seventh of September, 1943, the day before Italy went out of the war, I was taken to the prison hospital with a broken ankle, the result of an absurd accident in which I had fallen down an entire flight of the marble staircase which extended from the top of the building to the basement while wearing a pair of nailed boots which my parents had managed to send me by way of the Red Cross. The prison camp was on the outskirts of a large village in the Pianura Padana, the great plain through which the river Po flows on its way from the Cottian Alps to the sea. The nearest city was Parma on the Via Emilia, the Roman road which runs through the plain in an almost straight line from Milan to the Adriatic.

‘That’s right, knock the bloody place clown,’ someone said, unsympathetically, as it shuddered under the impact. The doctor who examined my ankle, who was also a prisoner, took much the same view. He couldn’t do much, anyway, because he hadn’t got any plaster of paris. It was, however, he said, ‘on order’ and for the time being he did it up with some adhesive plaster which was a rather wobbly arrangement.

The only other occupant of the hospital was another officer who was suffering from a boil on his behind. He was the one who had proposed that we should dig a tunnel, the most dreary and unimaginative way of getting out of any prison, on which a number of us had been working for some months, and which we had only recently abandoned because events seemed to have rendered it unnecessary. The head of the shaft of this tunnel was in a bedroom on the *piano nobile* of the building, practically in mid-air, and the shaft went down through the middle of one of the solid brick pillars which supported it and down into the cellars. When we reached mother earth, somewhere below the floor of the cellar, if ever, he had planned to construct a chamber, in which the spoil could be put into sacks and hauled to the surface, and from it the tunnel would be driven outwards under the wire. The shaft had a false lid, designed and made by a South African mining engineer. It was a marvellous piece of work – a great block of cement with tiles set in it that was so thick that when the *carabinieri* tapped the floor of the bedroom with hammers, which they sometimes did, the lid gave off the same sound as the rest of it. This lid was so heavy that special tools had had to be devised to lift it.

There were a lot of attempts at escape, some successful, some of them funny. One prisoner hid himself in a basket of dirty linen, destined for the nuns’ laundry over the wall. We wondered what would have happened if they had actually unpacked him inside the convent. Some were very ingenious – two people had had themselves buried in the exercise field which was outside the main perimeter wire and was not guarded at night. They nearly got to Switzerland.¹

No one from our camp ever reached Switzerland before the Italian Armistice in 1943. It was generally believed that two British prisoners of war had succeeded in getting there, but I have never met anyone who actually knew who they were or which camps they came from. It was very difficult to get out of a prison camp in Italy. Italian soldiers might be figures of fun to us, but some of them were extraordinarily observant and very suspicious and far better at guarding prisoners than the Germans were. It was also very difficult to travel in Italy if you did get out. The Italians are fascinated by the minutiae of dress and the behaviour of their fellow men, perhaps to a greater degree than almost any

other race in Europe, and the ingenious subterfuges and disguises which escaping prisoners of war habitually resorted to and which were often enough to take in the Germans: the documents, train tickets and ration cards, lovingly fabricated by the camp's staff of expert forgers; the suits made from dyed blankets; the desert boots cut down to look like shoes and the carefully bleached army shirts were hardly ever sufficiently genuine-looking to fool even the most myopic Italian ticket collector and get the owner past the barrier, let alone survive the scrutiny of the occupants of a compartment on an Italian train. The kind of going over to which an escaping Anglo-Saxon was subjected by other travellers was usually enough to finish him off unless he was a professional actor or spoke fluent Italian. And in Italy, before the Armistice, there were no members of the Resistance or railway employees of the Left, as there were in France, to help escaping prisoners out of the country along an organised route.

The building in which we were housed had originally been built as an *orfanotrofio*, an orphanage, with the help of money contributed by pilgrims to the shrine of the miraculous *Madonna del Rosario* who, in 1628, had performed the first of a succession of miracles when, in answer to his prayers, she raised a man called Giovanni Pietro Ugalotti from his death bed.

The foundations had been laid back in 1928, but the work had proceeded so slowly that the work began before it could be completed, and it remained empty until the spring of 1943 when it became a prisoner of war camp for officers and a few other ranks who acted as orderlies.

It was a large, three-storeyed building with a sham classical façade, so unstable that if anyone jumped up and down on one of the upper floors, or even got out of bed heavily, it appeared to wobble like a jelly. To those of us who were lodged on one of these upper floors, it seemed so unstable that we were convinced that if any bombs fell in the immediate neighbourhood it would collapse.

Next door to the *orfanotrofio* was the *santuario* in which the miraculous *Madonna del Rosario* was enshrined, and on its walls there were large quantities of ex-votos contributed by those who had been cured of some bodily affliction or saved from disaster by divine intervention – crutches, pale wax replicas of various parts of the human body that had been restored to health, primitive paintings of ships sinking, houses and barns on fire, or being struck by lightning, motor cars and aeroplanes crashing and farm carts being overturned, from all of which, and many other more fantastic mishaps, the occupants were depicted as emerging or being ejected relatively unscathed.

Behind the *santuario*, and joined to it, there was a convent in which a body of nuns resided in complete seclusion from which they never emerged except in case of grave illness or when they were being conveyed to another house of their order. Otherwise, their nearest approach to contact with the outer world was when they participated in the masses celebrated in the *santuario*, at which times they could look out on the congregation in the body of the church unseen, hidden from view behind an iron grille.

All the laundry for the prisoners was done in the convent and from time to time we discovered little notes wrapped up in our clean sheets or tucked inside our shirts, which said that those who had washed them were praying for us and were calling down the blessings of the *Madonna del Rosario* on our unworthy heads.

Although we never saw them most of us liked having the nuns next door, and the *santuario*, too. The clanging of its bells broke the monotony of the long days, making the campanile sway with the violence and frightening the swallows, making them sweep in panic to the sky, until some prisoners who had migraine, or were atheists, or simply disliked bells or noise generally, used to put their heads out of the windows and scream, at the top of their voices, 'I SAY, WOULD YOU MIND TERRIBLY STOP TURNING IT IN?' And if by chance the bells did stop at that particular moment, 'THANK YOU S

MUCH!' Or, if they knew a little Italian, 'GRAZIE TANTO!'

In the centre of the village, which was called Fontanellato, out of sight of the prisoners in the camp, was the Rocca Sanvitale, a forbidding-looking fifteenth-century castle, isolated behind a water-filled moat. In the castle, until the war came, had lived the *Conte Giovanni*, the last of the Sanvitale, one of the most ancient and illustrious families in Italy, which, today, is extinct. The buildings which faced the castle had deep, shadowy arcades under which there were shops and cafés where farmers used to congregate on Saturday, which was market day; and in the street which led to the *santuario* and the *orfanotrofio*, there was a war memorial of the First World War, which for Italy had been much more bloody than the one she was at present engaged in, with a long list of dead on a plaque at the foot of it. This was more or less all we knew about Fontanellato. Apart from a senior officer who had been taken on a tour of the village for some reason, none of us had ever seen it. What I have written is the sum total of what he told us when he returned. It was rather like listening to a lecture by some medieval traveller and hearing him say, as he pointed to the map, 'Here be dragons'.

Living in such a grandiose-looking building we felt that we could scarcely be regarded as objects of compassion by the local inhabitants. Although some officers when they arrived at it from other camps complained about the overcrowding, which was severe, and the lack of privacy, which was complete, to me and most of my friends who had been brought here from a much more primitive camp, it seemed a luxurious place and we were very surprised to find that we were to sleep in beds instead of the double-tiered bunks to which we were accustomed.

When we first arrived, at the beginning of March, there was no space for exercise outdoors, apart from a small, wired-in compound behind the building in which we assembled twice a day to be counted, or more frequently if the Italians suspected that someone had escaped; but the Italian commandant, an old, regular *colonello*, allowed parties of prisoners to go for route marches in the surrounding countryside once a week under a general parole, which covered the period when we were actually outside the gates. Parole or not, we were heavily guarded during these excursions which always followed routes along unfrequented lanes far from any village.

We looked forward to these outings which were sometimes cancelled at the eleventh hour for unexplained reasons, or because the senior officers refused to come to terms on some piddling point of military etiquette which most of the people in the camp, being temporary soldiers, and almost none of the Italians, because there were only about two regular soldiers among them, were ever able to comprehend. As in every other prison camp, the most lively differences of opinion between the senior British officer and the *colonello* and his staff arose over the interpretation of the various clauses of the Geneva Convention, which governed the treatment of prisoners.

We marched at a tremendous rate, glad of the exercise and taking sadistic pleasure in exhausting our guards who were mostly small men with short legs. We marched along flat, dusty roads; past wheat fields; fields in which forests of Indian corn were growing and into which I longed to take flight; along the foot of high green embankments which protected the land from the torrents which in certain seasons poured down from the Apennines into the River Po; past huge fields of tomato plants and sugar beet, groves of poplars, endless rows of vines and great rambling farmhouses with farmyards full of cows and pigs and ducks and geese, and red-roofed barns with open doors in which we could just see great, mouth-watering Parmesan cheeses ripening in the semi-darkness. Where we went we saw very few people. Perhaps they were told to keep out of the way when we went past.

Looking at this burgeoning countryside in the spring and summer of 1943 it was difficult for the most optimistic of us to believe that Italy was in danger of collapsing through lack of food, although it was obvious that the Italian army was very badly fed. One had only to look at the exiguous ration

which the soldiers who guarded us drew from their cookhouse. And here, so far as I could make out there were no organisations as there were in Britain to make their life more supportable. No volunteer ladies dishing out fish and chips to them, and great squelchy, jam sandwiches, and cups of orange coloured tea, and, saying 'Hello' and asking where they came from, making them feel that they were doing something worthwhile which somebody cared about. They were like souls in limbo or a lot of untouchables in Hindu India, lost in the low-lying ground which no one ever visited, somewhere between the railway workshops and the cantonment.

By prison standards, the food in the *orfanotrofio* was good. The official rations were not abundant for non-manual workers, which is what we were, and without anything to augment them they had a lowering effect, especially in the previous camp where the British cooks had usually succeeded in making the worst of them – their version of *pasta al sugo* being particularly loathsome; to me it always smelt of dirty dish cloths.

But here, at Fontanellato, for the first time since I had been captured, there was a regular supply of Red Cross parcels and instead of the parcels being issued complete for us to make what we would like from the contents, as had been done in other places, here all the cookable food was removed and prepared in the kitchens. This was much more civilised than keeping a lot of open tins under one's bed, as some of us had previously done (the Italians never allowed us to have unopened tins in case we hoarded them for an escape) and risking death by eating the contents of a tin of disgusting meat loaf that had been open for two or three days or, even worse, spending ages on all fours blowing away at a stove made from old tin cans, stoked up with bits of cardboard or, *in extremis*, pieces of bed board from the bottom of our bunks, as many had done in the past.

Drink and supplementary food were bought on the black market, which was even more extensive and better organised than it was in Britain, and a special float of Red Cross cigarettes was kept for that purpose and for the general corruption of the Italian camp staff, by responsible members of the British administration, ex-bank managers mostly, to whom this sort of thing was second nature.

Officially, we were allowed one tot of vermouth and one of wine each day by our administration which was all that could be allowed if, in theory, everyone took their ration; but you could always buy other people's ration tickets with cigarettes or chocolate if you preferred drinking to smoking. Because of this there were some good parties and some rather awful ones too.

The very first lieutenant-colonel who was sent to us, previously we had scarcely anyone above the rank of captain, gave a memorable one.

'Well, good night gentlemen,' he said when most of the drink was finished. 'Time for bed.'

He opened the door of a tall cupboard which stood against the wall and walked into it shutting the door behind him, presumably under the impression that he was entering his own room. By the time the door had been forced open, which was difficult because his rather ample trousers had caught in it, he was fast asleep. He was a nice, high-spirited old man, much too old in years to have been captured fighting in the Western Desert.

The wines were strange, dark and repulsive with various chemical additives, what the Italians call *vini lavorati*, worked on, primitive harbingers of the more sophisticated, doctored wines which rarely contain any grapes at all and which have made the Italian wine industry the byword that it is today, but like meths drinkers we enjoyed them better than no alcohol at all.

There was even a bar in which these concoctions were served, high up in a sort of minstrel gallery above the chapel, which was used by the more staid prisoners to play bridge, and on Sundays for church services. We were forbidden by the Italians to look out of the windows of the bar which faced the road to the village, and if we did, the sentries in the watchtowers beyond the wire used to fire

shots at us, some of which used to come whistling through the windows – the glass had been blown out long ago – and bury themselves in the walls and ceiling of the bar which had the same ecclesiastical decor as the chapel below. These bullet-holes gave the place a raffish appearance, like a middle-western saloon built by some renegade, gun-toting priest.

But in spite of these fusillades we still continued to risk our lives by putting our heads out of the windows, in order to be able to look at the girls of Fontanellato who, every evening when the weather was fine, used to promenade along the road in front of the *orfanotrofio*.

Some of my fellow prisoners had not spoken to a girl since they had been captured in 1940. Old and new prisoners, few of us had set eyes on girls like these for years and years. They were all shapes and sizes and colours and as they went past they laughed, as if enjoying some private joke, and tossed their heads impertinently in our directions. They all had long hair, short skirts and brown, bare legs and, as they swayed along the road, the high-heeled wooden sandals, which they all wore because there was very little shoe leather in Italy, clacked on the hard surface of the road. Some of them walked arm in arm with other girls carefully chosen for their inferior looks; some were so sure of themselves that they walked with girls who were their equals; others wobbled past in little flocks on bicycles, so slowly that they sometimes fell off uttering squeals of alarm – none was ever injured. There were scarcely ever any men with them. Presumably they were at the war.

The effect of these visions on the wretched Italian guards who were immured high up in the watchtowers, was as powerful as it was on us. Utterly distracted, they turned their backs on the *orfanotrofio* in order to look at them more closely, until some N.C.O., old enough and sour enough to be indifferent to women, screeched at them so loudly that they whirled round and, seeing us, discharged their rifles in the direction of the bar.

But not even the Italian Army in its most bellicose mood was able to stop us looking at the girls of Fontanellato, or the girls at us.

On one side of the *orfanotrofio* was the village cemetery in which the dead were stacked in recesses in the walls, one above the other, as if they had been put away carefully in some giant filing cabinet marked 'Pending' until the last Trump sounded. Every Sunday, wet or fine, what must have been almost the entire girl population of Fontanellato as well as large numbers from the surrounding country, used to make the long pilgrimage up the via Cimitero to the gates, ostensibly to mourn the loved ones, and completely outnumbering the real mourners who could be easily distinguished by their black garb. If all these girls had been visiting the graves of their own kith and kin then the cemetery would have had to have been at least five times the size it was. Like participants in a slow motion film they crawled past the front of the *orfanotrofio*, past the exercise field which had been opened a month after our arrival, and in which all exercise ceased from the moment the first of them came into view, and turned left up the road to the cemetery. Few of them bothered to enter it. Sometimes they waved if they thought the guards were not watching, or they might simply twirl a scarf, and from behind the barbed wire in the field and from every upper window of the *orfanotrofio* from which the occupants could also see on fine days, and equally unattainable, the peaks of the pre-Alps beyond Lake Garda, more than 150 kilometres away to the north, the prisoners cheered and waved at them.

But in spite of these distant encounters with girls we were not unduly troubled by the lusts of the flesh – perhaps it was something to do with the diet. As one of my friends said, after drawing on himself one or two random shots while craning out of one of the windows of the bar, 'It isn't that one just wants to poke them. I'm not sure if I could do it any more, but it would be heaven just to be with

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