DIAMOND TRAILS of ITALY

Sequel to Kiwi Saga

by

MARTYN UREN

DIAMOND TRAILS *of* ITALY

Sequel to "KIWI SAGA"

A personal account of the travels and experiences of the New Zealanders in Italy. Here are pen pictures of life in idyllic surroundings . . . of Roman antiquities standing like rocks amid a surge of bloody conquest . . . of men who fight and live and laugh . . . of fun and laughter . . . of sheer beauty . . . while the men of the Eighth Army give the spirit to every page.

(Continued on back flyleaf)

THE AUTHOR

PRESENTED

TO

THE CORPS OF ROYAL NEW ZEALAND ENGINEERS

by

Colonel Currie.

on

January 1987.

DIAMOND TRAILS *of* ITALY

By the same author

KIWI SAGA

THEY WILL ARISE

FIRST EDITION–NOVEMBER, 1945

DIAMOND TRAILS *of* ITALY

(Sequel to "KIWI SAGA")

By
MARTYN UREN

PUBLISHED BY
COLLINS
WYNDHAM STREET, AUCKLAND, N.Z.

PRINTED BY
ABEL, DYKES LIMITED
AUCKLAND, N.Z.

TO MY FATHER

PREFACE

Since my return from Italy with the Replacement Draft in April, 1945, a host of my friends have asked me why I had not written a book on our Italian travels and adventures. My reply, at first, was that, although people had taken great interest in my first book, I felt that, since its publication in 1943, they had read too many war books and were justly tired of them. Enquiries however, mounted up and I finally succumbed.

Here it is.

It is a collection and miscellany of memoirs, beginning where I left off in "Kiwi Saga": probably a most inadequate contribution to literature and certainly adding little to history. But I feel that what people want is colour and atmosphere, intermingled with travel and the historical associations of the places we saw, together with accounts of our campaigning. These things are what I have written. This it not a history book nor a travel book; although it may possibly be a little of both. Nor is it just another war book; the black horror of war I have passed by.

You will find men in these pages, real men, delightful men. If I have succeeded, too, you will journey with us through the heart and byways of Italy, seeing its beauty on all sides, feeling the history of its stirring times, knowing its age, realising the loveliness of what used to be. Our adventures are here, but they are hidden beneath the leaves, not stark or bloody. Yet I hope it is real. I hope it lives.

Whatever it is, my friends, you or your loved ones have shared similar experiences. If you were there you saw the same things. If you had a son, husband, brother or sweetheart over there, he saw these things too.

M.U.

CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

DIAMOND TRAILS *of* ITALY

DIAMOND TRAILS *of* ITALY

◆

CHAPTER I

STRANGE LABOURS

"The rocky slopes of Alamein," as Winston Churchill described the place, saw the birth of an idea.

This book, before it embarks upon our travels and experiences in Italy, deals with a miscellany of topics. Therefore I am excused of talking on any subject whatsoever. I am commencing upon this literary journey with talk of a book. The events concerned with it link up chronologically, even if they are poles apart as to substance, with my return home and my subsequent departure once again for further service. So here goes. An idea was born.

Where it came from I do not know. My mother tells me that I casually mentioned one day that I might write a book: the next thing they knew was the cable news from the Middle East, featured in the local papers, that a book by me had been published in Cairo. Once again I say, I have no knowledge of the origin of the idea. Looking back on it now, I can remember only the performance of the deed and not its cause. I can recall thinking of the title "Kiwi Saga". That, I do know, I thought of the title before I wrote a single word. I also know that I began writing it for pleasure, for "fun," as people say.

But why?

Yes, why? It is a curious place in which to contemplate the writing of a book, for Alamein was Hell. But not only did I contemplate this thing, I embarked upon it with enthusiasm and wrote two hundred pages in exercise books and on odd pieces of paper, while actually in battle. Curious! Yes, very. And this brings me to my point.

Alamein, and the exhausting weeks of hit-and-run which preceded it, constituted for most of us the greatest test of the whole war. Greece was an adventure, in comparison, wherein we saw fresh fields, exalted in our role as a sacrifice upon the altar of democracy, killed a few Germans, were chased by enemy 'planes from dawn to dark, and ran to safety in the arms of the Navy. The show in Libya which began in November 1941 and ended, for some of us, in the confused melee at Sidi Resegh, was also in the nature of a bit of a lark; in spite of the fact that we came out of it much embittered at the comparative inadequacy of our tank weapons. But Alamein was a back-against-the-wall fight. We had to win. And before we could even place our backs against this wall, this defensive line, we had had to meet Rommel head-on, fight him, delay him, kick him in the neck and then run for it back to Alamein like a little boy who has thrown pepper in the eyes of a mad dog and then retreated to the garden gate.

Perhaps it is true to say that few of us realised just how serious our battle for Egypt was; perhaps it is even true to say that many did not even realise that it was a battle for Egypt and what lay beyond: but we did at least realise it was a living Hell of a battle. All of us were on edge; we were tired. For three weeks

we fought all day and ran all night, back to our desert lairs. Could we call these retreats of ours, hollowed out of the living rock and burning dust, real refuge? No, for every Stuka and Dornier knew just where to find us and every Axis gun had us spotted on the map.

And even when the position did stabilize and we settled down to static warfare with a few more troops and guns and tanks, even when Allied aircraft roared overhead all day and we counted our own formations instead of taking cover in our slit trenches, even then our breasts seethed with emotion and our hearts at times turned to water. It was not that we doubted the ultimate issue or that we would win. I think more than anything we wondered why it was that we should have to put our backs against the wall. We wondered who had blundered. And when English-made guns shelled us (and, incidentally, blew up my own gun several times) we were mad with rage that Tobruck had fallen and yielded to Rommel a host of weapons and tanks and trucks.

It was in such an atmosphere, then, that my first book was born. Which once again brings me to the point. Why choose as a library or study (or whatever one calls those quiet studious rooms in which one writes books) a rocky slope on which flies bred in overpowering millions in the dead of No Mans Land, where a man was afraid to sleep by day lest he wake to the sound of screaming bombs or shells, and where there was as the only diversion the frequent alerts for the infantry, take-posts for the gunners, and dawn stand-to's for all?

My answer is that writing what I felt was an emotional outlet. It calmed the nerves; it took from the mind the ever-present possibility that you, you, would be the next. And yet I could not for the life of me write home. For three solid months I only wrote one short note and took resort in weekly cables. And no one will ever know what that one note cost me: in the middle of it a salvo of shells landed all around us and I saw one of my friends die in the act of maintaining his wireless set. Pen and ink went in all directions. And yet the scraggy manuscript grew and grew. Never, while I totally abandoned letter writing, did I entertain any thought of postponing my first act of authorship for a more peaceful environment.

Crouching in a half built-up hole, covered from sun and partially protected from the swarming flies by a bivouac tent which was anchored upon the walls of this poor hole, I steered myself and my friends through the cities of the mystic East, through the olive groves of Greece, discussed cool pastures and running streams while the dust of the Ruweisat ridge and Qatara depression blew in my nostrils, described magnificent temples in Athens and pagan remains in Syria whilst the only edifice within seventy miles was the cinema-lot resemblance of a castle (for the filming of *Beau Geste*) at Berg el Arab.

A strangely wrought literary fragment was this first book, but it took a great deal off my soul.

CHAPTER II

UNCOMMON BUSINESS

Cairo is a hard school for the inexperienced. For those who do not understand that every loyal son of Mohammed is in duty bound to take you down in business, it becomes a nightmare. The age-old city of contrast, as travellers have dubbed it, nurtures within its dark alleys, in its magnificent offices, and on every side-walk, many generations of sharks. They are all of one variety, but they are big and small according to his or her opportunities. When a visitor first steps off the train he is beseiged by a host of boot-blacks, a legion of taxi and *gharri* drivers and a buzzing swarm of hawkers. But these are only the lesser sharks. The man on the street is an honest man, comparatively speaking, because he will in the long run admit that he has deceived you about the price and is almost sure to accept half the amount with a wide grin of pleasure. He accepts, too, defeat with as good a grace as the last-man-out at Lords!

It is a delightful city. In no other city is the custom of haggling about a price more pronounced. The Cairene is truly disappointed if you are not prepared to barter and argue for some hours. He is hurt deep down within his soul if you will not play at his ancient game. Once purchased, the article ceases to be any responsibility of the vendor and the fact that it may fall to bits is of little moment.

But there is honour amongst them, as I was to find.

In my first day I saw many people. There was the Public Relations office who promised to see to censorship for me; clerks with whom I arranged for typing. Then I turned my thoughts towards the extreme probability that no one would publish it.

I went to a man who is the biggest publisher in the Middle East. My prime object was to have copies ready on the spot for the men themselves, hence publication overseas was of no use to me: shipping difficulties would preclude export. Books were what I wanted, so books we must get. My man was polite, but very reserved. He outlined his policy with authors: ten per cent royalties, if his reading committee recommended publication. I went away quite optimistic.

It took me three weeks to complete the typing. Meanwhile I was very concerned at the passage of time. I took a copy to the publisher and a copy to the censors, who resided in Cairo under the name of Military Press Censors. Reports from the publisher were good: he would accept the manuscript. I waited until the censors had finished before finalising any arrangement with him. Meanwhile more time slipped by! Another two weeks had elapsed before the censors had finished with the blue pencils and razor blades. A total of five weeks gone and not a word printed. I was uneasy.

Then followed blow after blow. The first shock came when I finally visited the censors office in reply to a telephone call, expectant and vibrant with excitement. At last I was free to go ahead with business. I ran up the stairs and opened the door. A captain

handed me the large sheaf of typed papers, numbering some two hundred odd, which comprised the final manuscript.

"There are," he said, "some parts which we deemed advisable from a security point of view to erase".

I was somewhat taken aback at this, for by now the battles were history, and few statistics, at any rate, had found their way into my more personal chronology. I opened the folio, turned over the pages and nearly wept. Never have I seen paper more lacerated.

"You have cut all the gems out of it," I stated somewhat wildly. It was then explained that not all of this had been their own doing. True, they had confined their blue pencil marks to military matters, but in other places the Egyptain Publicity people had had a go at it. My reference to the squalor of Egypt had been erased, in fact every criticism levelled at Egypt was ruthlessly destroyed.

For a day I worked on it, heartbroken; and for four more days I fought the censors—who, of course, knew their job better than I. After the sixth week had elapsed I retired from the fray foolishly embittered against British censorship, fuming with indignation against the lie that free speech is a plank of the democratic platform. But I tucked my bundle under my arm and ran as fast as I could down the stairs, as if in fear that the censor might stick his head outside his door and suggest "erasing" any more of my prose. I felt like a bird freed from a cage.

But this feeling of relief was short-lived. It lasted, to be exact, for the five minutes it took me to walk to the

publisher's office. This gentleman hit me with a right to the solar plexus while I was still out of breath. It was his quote, handed to me while he spoke in fluent French to some business colleague over the 'phone.

His terms, in brief, were that I should put up half the money for the initial cost of a first edition; that I would receive ten per cent of the selling price on each book sold; that I should get orders for the edition from the Division; that it would take three months to print; and that I must check all proofs myself.

While he completed his conversation with much vehemence and hand-waving, I cooled my temper. By the time he looked up from his note-pad, whereon he had made some notes, and said, "Good afternoon", I was ready for him.

"What price do you wish to sell this book for?", I asked quietly.

"Sixty *piastres,*" he said just as quietly. This is the equivalent of twelve shillings sterling, or about fifteen shillings at New Zealand rates of exchange.

"What part do you play in this transaction?" I asked. "I share the risk, yet there is no risk, for you want me also to obtain cash orders. I distribute the books, I check all proofs".

He was not amused. "I print it and take the risk until you get the orders," he said unabashed.

"At sixty *piastres,*" I murmured. "You want too much, Sir, I'm sorry". So saying I grabbed my book from his huge desk, where fortunately, perhaps, it had reposed when I was first shown to the room, and made

a dignified exit with trumpets blaring in my ears. I even managed two "gooddays" in Arabic and one in French to the clerks who slaved outside as I marched out.

For three days I walked the streets of Cairo. At length I heard that there was a bookshop in Cairo which published text books, run by an Egyptain Christian. Next morning I was in his doorway when he opened up. I talked for half an hour. He seemed honoured and must have had supreme faith in someone (perhaps it was the Almighty) for he was filled with enthusiasm. And then his face fell. "I have no paper," he said glumly.

"Then you have until 7 o'clock tonight to find paper," said the author magnificently, "or I shall sell to X".

At seven that evening, after filling in a miserable day at the cinema, I was back at the bookshop. The Christian dark gentleman met me with a happy smile.

"I have it," he said. I asked to see a sample sheet. He showed me newsprint, and poor newsprint at that. I shuddered. "What's this for? To wrap them in?"

He shrugged. "It was all I could get, X has a monopoly on all the paper".

After some discussion he admitted to having bought an option on this paper on the Black Market at fifteen times the pre-war price. He also told me in whispers that if he did not accept the paper immediately he would either get none or have to pay an even more exorbitant price. For the second time that day I shuddered, then closed my eyes and said, "Secure your

option; we will talk terms and prices to-morrow." I went back to the camp feeling as if I had bought a pig farm and didn't know what to do with it.

Next day I saw my honest Egyptain again. I was walking around from the New Zealand Forces Club after a fortifying cup of morning tea, when I caught sight of a spectacle not uncommon in all cities of the Middle East, a pair of heavily-laden donkeys. It is usual to see these poor animals almost submerged under loads too large for an eight hundredweight truck, so I paid little attention. As I progressed across Sharia Kasr el Nil, skilfully dodging the loudly honking taxis and a mad scramble of two-horse *gharris,* I became increasingly aware that the donkeys were stopping outside my gallant Egyptian's bookshop. There further dawned upon my consciousness the fact that the load which bowed them down so low was one of paper.

Paper! Something clicked in my brain and I hurried towards the animals. Suddenly one of the loads slipped. The donkey displayed unusual sagacity and made a determined effort to rid himself altogether of the stuff. He bucked, ran sideways and almost half a ton of paper rolled off into the accumulated filth in the gutter. I smiled, somewhat hesitatingly, not quite sure whether perhaps the joke was on me.

It was. When I entered the shop, Sobhy (for that was my friend's name) was quite excited and confided to me that our paper was being sent over. Upon which I pointed dramatically towards where, in the teeming street, newsprint paper by the hundred-yard was wallowing in the dirt and blowing about in the hot

khamseen breeze. My publisher rushed outside and "had words" whose meaning was apparent even to one with such a limited Arabic vocabulary as mine.

Such things were humiliating. Somehow they deprived of its glamour even my gallant exit from the other (Mr. X) publisher's office.

But there was still worse to come. It came, too, quite quickly: for Sobhy lost no time—I did not let him! Just over six weeks had flown by and nothing accomplished. If my colonel came down and asked for results what could I show him? There was not even any paper left in the gutters outside the shop—the beggars had taken it all!

With one finger I had painstakingly typed out an agreement between the two of us, which provided for certain financial arrangements and which stipulated a time for completion and delivery. In this latter proviso Sobhy was somewhat tied down by his colleague, the printer, who, by the way, rejoiced in the name of Abdul. Abdul will one day be a rich man; he takes no chances and, above all, is careful not to be on the debit side of the ledger. In this instance he quoted a cost of printing which somewhat staggered me, knowing a little of the scale of wages he would be likely to pay his compositors, and further rocked me by adding on two shillings per book for binding in cheap cloth!

However, I survived these financial preliminaries. Nothing could quite knock me flat now, for I had had a fair drubbing in my first encounters with the Middle Eastern publishing fraternity. Even when I realised

after poring over the figures that the poor newsprint in each book would cost us four shillings (without the printing) and that the thin cloth covers and binding were to cost us another two shillings per book, I was not dismayed. What mattered was that all effort was not wasted; the books were to be ready within six weeks and to be sold at nine shillings each. This included about twenty illustrations printed on a cheap sort of super-calendar paper which passed for art paper, and a jacket of the same material. Work commenced immediately.

Two days later I called to read the first proofs. It was here that my spirits sank to their lowest ebb. Rather than try and describe the inaccuracy of the printing I found on the filthy scraps of paper handed to me, it would be easier to give cause than effect. The main cause of such disorderliness was that those workmen setting the type (for the print was of the hand-set variety; not a linotype machine) were unable to read, write or speak the English language. The result was catastrophic!

There were even errors on the title page; which, as readers may know, is bare except for the title of the book and the author's name. The pages averaged forty-two errors each—I once counted them to satisfy my own curiosity. This would not have been so bad if the errors, when once corrected by me in indelible pencil, had been attended to. But more often than not new mistakes crept in, often a whole word dropped out, and I had to insist on having proof after proof of each page. As I was to correct sixteen pages a day, that being their almost unbelievable rate of setting (in view

of the fact that the men were unable to read English, but recognised the characters from their shapes), and, as I had to see at least four proofs of each page until they were perfect, I had my hands full. At the end of four weeks I was so heartily sick of my own literature that I swore I would never write again. But there was an end to it, and at the expiration of a full month even the illustration blocks were completed and after trial and error the correct inscriptions were appended.

It was all a curious experience. Every day I used to hitch-hike a ride the eight miles from Maadi camp to Cairo city; some times in civilian cars from Maadi township, or better still in a truck from our own artillery corner. After morning tea at nine o'clock to put courage into me, I walked down to Sharia Ibrahim Pasha and along it until I reached some darker alleyways at the back of the Royal Palace. For such is Egypt that royal splendour exists amid squalor; it is essentially a city of contrast. This thrice-daily pilgrimage to the ill-lit office of my Abdul was, however, fraught with interest, for it brought quite close to me the heart of Cairo. Here in the poorer quarters, not the primitive mud-hut areas, but the dirty houses of the Eastern middle class and struggling workers, can be found the real Cairene. And curiously enough, he is an honest enough individual. He possesses none of the uncouthness of the street hawker, nor the bestiality of the beggars; he displays none of the lordly nature of the desert Arab or Bedouin, nor the insatiable curiosity of the *fallaheen*, the men of the fields. He has a swift sureness about him, displays quite an alert mind. You can teach him anything. Imagine now the feat of these uneducated printers. Their written language is in a

series of symbols reminiscent of the ramblings over paper of an ink-sodden fly, yet the compositors learnt to recognise our characters from the typed sheets of my manuscript and pick the letters out of their bins.

At the end of five weeks we had books in the presses to harden their bindings, jackets were slung around them and piles of the finished articles grew on the floor. I sent an advance copy to the *Egyptian Gazette,* and one night, seated in the camp cinema, I was surprised to read a half-column about it.

Meanwhile events had happened quickly in North Africa. Montgomery had been as good as his word and "booted the Afrika Corps for six right out of Africa." For the Division the last act of the see-saw desert conflict took place when their famous adversary, the "90th Light" Division, surrendered to them in the Tunisian peninsula. Anti-climax was felt, and all men were prey to exhaustion. When the "cease-fire" was given in North Africa no man could believe his senses, and the uncanny silence tended to pall upon him.

They were not long in this position, however, for the order was given for return to base. For a week the units streamed back along the well-known road to the east and passed with quiet reminiscent smiles the grim relics of the desert war. It was now all left behind them. Not one man escaped a certain nostalgia: it had been our home, this limitless expanse of barren earth and rock and dust. The sight of Maaten Baggush raised even the occasional cheer.

Here I come to the final phase of this story of mine on publishing in the mystic East. The regiments

arrived and took their appointed areas in Maadi camp. The camp bulged, burst and spread all over the desert. It reached over to the escarpment in the distance.

My books were ready. I had sent out invitations for orders, and these poured in—about 500 to 700 in each artillery unit. I took a three-ton truck to Cairo; loaded up 3,000 books; went to each unit, handed over to orderly-rooms the quantities ordered. In the afternoon I borrowed the padre's small truck and called again on orderly-rooms; there I received large sums of money, two or three hundred pounds from some of the units. By four o'clock I had collected it all and was in Cairo with the proceeds.

Sobhy nearly wept when he saw it. To this day and for all my days, I will remember the look of incredulity which suffused his face. I think he nearly turned Mahommedan again and thought I was Mahomet. It is certain he believed it was a miracle. He took me to his home for dinner, a magnificent dinner of innumerable courses. His printer, Abdul, was paid and he was so surprised that he, too, threw a dinner for me. His dinner differed, however, in that he thought I would be embarrassed in his poorer home: so he invited me for a final visit to his office. There he brought in a huge tray and I dined, at the desk whereon I had shed so many tears, on fish *entree* (a huge plate of it), roast chicken and potatoes and salad, followed by two incredible tins of Libby's Fruit Cocktail! Nor could I refuse any of it! Furthermore, I knew enough of Eastern manners not to omit anything, and when uncomfortably replete leant back with a happy look.

To have to eat to that extent on my own was perhaps the cruelest torture I endured in that room.

Yet, to complete this story of good luck which dogged my every move, I must add one more wonderful event. No sooner had I settled up this first edition and signed up for a second, than I was told with 6,600 others that I was going home on three months' furlough. Needless to say, this breath of heaven gave us all untold joy. Everything was forgotten in the excitement. It seemed as if the last words of my book had been prophetic, " . . . walking down the garden path at home, there to be received by a joyous clamour from terrier and spaniel, there again to be received by arms I have not known these long, long years."

◆

CHAPTER III

AFTERMATH OF WAR

I come now to the return home; in this we preserve the chronological sequence of events. But I am diverting all thought, from the more obvious subject of the joy and happiness of reunion, to a lesser discussed topic: this, a psychological aspect. It will not be a learned treatise on the mind, but a simple, human one. I am going to speak for a while on the state of a soldier's mind upon his being transported out of a regimented existence, out of a dangerous environment, out of the sameness of army life, into the peace, quiet and heavenly security of a home.

This is a topic which many hundreds of psychiatrists and psychologists the world over have been discussing for the last five years and which, no doubt, they had as much cause to discuss during the last Great War. But I think it is much more than an abstract subject, to be studied only by those qualified to do so. I believe that it is a thing to which every person should give some thought—every person, that is, who has a man away at the war. For these men are coming home, as I did, and they will not be the same as when you last saw them.

I am going to speak about a friend of mine who went away to the war imagining, after one of those mercurial romances which blossom so easily under the

influence of war and khaki uniforms, that he was in love. He was away three and a half years. He saw Greece, and ran from the German dive-bombers; he shot at tanks and Jerries in the confusion which was Sidi Resegh; he watched the cream of the Afrika Korps surround his Division in the desperate delaying action south of Mersa Matruh, and was one of several thousand who hacked their way out late that same night; he counted the Stukas which circled and dived all day over Stuka Wadi at Alamein; he joined in part of the chase which began so magnificently on the 23rd October, 1942. During all this time he wrote regularly. When, in June, 1943 he boarded the boat for New Zealand he still imagined he was in love. This feeling persisted as the trip lengthened into weeks and beloved coasts came ever nearer.

Plans were laid in his head; plans for an early marriage. He often told me about them. They were engaged, these two. Forgotten were the gripping moments of fear that lay behind him; forgotten were the wonderful friendships that are cemented by mutual help under fire, the evenings in smoky dug-outs beguiled with beer and song and rough laughter. All this lay behind—what lay ahead was all that mattered.

And during the long train journey it was the same. The closer to his girl, the greater was his eagerness. The mounting joy and anticipation reached a climax as the long, loaded train roared past familiar stretches of sea and into a delirious, cheering station. Hooters roared and boat-whistles blew, the fog-horns of the great ocean liners filled the universe with noise, while the puny cheers of the crowd floated over to them.

OFFICIAL WAR PHOTOGRAPH

THE FABRIANO PASS

". . . that great cleft through the Apennines devised by the hand of man."

AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

THE PESA VALLEY NEAR FLORENCE

The sunroom in Count Piatti's castle, used by the Germans as an O.P., and shot up by 26th Battery, N.Z.A.

They were in the station. The crowd strained at the ropes and was quite still for a moment. Perhaps they all had exactly the same thought in their minds, "Where is he?" And then again like a ripple of sound from the Tower of Babel the voices broke out again. Names were shouted and shrieked as kin saw kin.

But his thoughts! All the plans were gone. The girl was forgotten. "Mum and Dad. Where are they?"

"There they are!" Out of the train, lurching like a bear under two great bags of gear, and on to the station platform. A girl, wild-eyed, flings herself under the ropes and on to his chest.

"It's me . . . it's me," she cries.

A weak smile, a kiss . . . "Where are they? Where are Mum and Dad?" And he is led to them, standing quiet and happy, tears in the woman's eyes.

Yes, his first thought was for his parents. Some will say that this is natural, for blood is the thickest tie of all. Well, listen to the rest of the story, as he told it to me over a glass of beer.

That night, after a late tea, they sat, four of them, before the fire. Conversation was desultory. Each was busy with his or her thoughts. It was strange that stories and reminiscences, questions and answers, flowed ceaselessly in the days to follow; but that night they were quiet—a little awestruck.

But man and girl were more than quiet; they were strangers. She peeped at him a hundred times. He looked older. Small wonder that! But why the grim

lines about his mouth? Occasionally that mouth hardened like a trap, one eyebrow lifted and the face was inscrutable. The girl was afraid.

It was true: they had drifted apart. For four weeks they dashed around like a pair of mad things, trying to convince themselves that they were happy. And, like the Hedonists of old, by the pursuit of happiness for the sake of pleasure, they lost what they sought. At the end of five weeks he was wondering what to do with the solitaire ring in his pocket.

I am not by this example trying to justify or prove the proposition that lovers will drift apart after years of war and separation. But it is a very severe test. And those who pass the test and win out will find great happiness. What I am trying to do is to show that this girl did not understand.

This man was hardened. He was restless. In the first place their affair had had little basis on solid ground. Rather had it been born of the rush and glamour of final leave. He had been among the first to answer his country's call: soldiers in their stiff formal serge uniforms had been conspicuous. They were pointed at, admired by some and laughed at by others. What had begun as an evening at the cinema had soon ripened into a romance, and she was there at the station to see him leave.

Friends remarked, "That was quick work." I myself was one of the many who agreed upon this point and I looked at him with something of pride. Indeed, it was quick work! But it is not unusual these days. Affairs are precipitated by briefness of final leaves, and

by the general feeling of, "He might not come back." Oh, how precious these days can be to young people flung together in such a fashion and so cruelly torn apart.

I myself now know it well.

The salient features, then, were that the man went away quite young, having led a sheltered life and full of fine illusions. He returned, having been through the hardest years of the war wherein we all batted for the weakest and most ill-prepared team. And to make it more impossible, they had had but brief acquaintance with each other on which to base years of separation. This was an engagement, and, as such, easily dissolved. But what if it had been a marriage?

We must face these things. Many will say, "What a cynical outlook". But I will answer that I am not decrying war marriages or romances, I am only advocating more careful thought about the subject. It is true to say that I saw a great majority of the men of my own original troop lose their girl friends or fiancees one after the other during the first few years of war: but there were some who did not. True, we did have a Wipe-Off Club for those who had received back their rings: but there were some who did not have to join it and drown their sorrows. But then there were others who, after being home a short while, would have gladly joined the Wipe-Off Club: my friend was one of these.

About those who lost their fiancees while they were still away, we can do little. They are a case in themselves. It is caused, of course, by the inadequacy of mail, by loneliness which palls upon a girl, by her desire

after a while for some pleasure which leads in the end to dances and meeting new men.

Many a man, a romantic handsome soul at sight, is a fool, wordless and matter-of-fact on paper. Surprisingly few men write good letters which will warm a girl's heart and make her really feel that she is wanted and beloved. Furthermore, a careless, tactless word looks terrible on paper: an argument which finds its unwelcome way into a letter bears so much a hallmark of permanence that it is exaggerated. The spoken argument or lover's row is soon forgotten, but on paper it seems to be engraved upon the stone of time. Either party is liable to open the letter again and again, read those biting, possibly sarcastic, possibly bitter or impassioned words, and the sore festers until all love is dead. The ironical part about it is that the paragraph which hurts such a lot might have been written two or three months before, since forgotten by the writer: and when four months or five months later he receives an answer, he is hurt and mystified.

But we can do little for them. We can but hope they will be patient and not hot-headed in their letters. We can only pray for longer acquaintance, better understanding, than that derived from a few war-crazy days of fun and companionship.

The man returning from the war to his wife or bride is, however, sometimes a problem. For these men have changed a little in character or in outlook. The travel involved in years of active service is alone sufficient to take one's mind out of that narrow field of existence and thought which is one's civilian life. But

when you add to that the bare fact that you are lucky to be still alive, a fact that has often come to me after a particularly close call, the outlook broadens still more.

The companionship of men, too, is a great disturbing factor. One of a soldier's fondest recollections will be the nights spent in murky dugouts, crowded around a smoky lamp or fire, drinking beer (in the case of the desert campaigners) or wine (in Italy) and singing songs. Here in these crude dwellings they achieve by united mutual effort a surprising degree of comfort. And here is their home. Here they will talk over old times. They will recall when Bill went on leave and got lost in the out-of-bounds labyrinths of Cairo. Or they will laugh about some of their escapes from death under bombing or shellfire. Men who are gone forever are remembered, then, and only good is spoken of them. These are moving times: the heart is stirred as memories pass by in review order, while men talk of men. No man who has not known this splendid comradeship can quite appreciate its depth, or its tender drag upon the inclination. To put it briefly, men who have seen service overseas miss their friends, the fun and the rough brotherliness. Missing these things they often become morose in the company of their women. And if their women do not understand and tend to "pick" a little, then do relations become strained, chafed or even severed.

It will be hard for many people to accept the above psychological observations. Some there will be, who may feel I have exaggerated. But personally I feel that the subject is one upon which more learned minds than my own could profitably be devoted. How any

study of the matter can help the situation I do not know—but this I do know, that, if lectures on war psychology were widely given to all concerned, greater understanding and less unhappiness would be achieved.

Some things I would like to tell of, I may not: I would be censored. For instance, that final hour of furlough (when the precious days had fled like chaff in the wind) when every man had to decide for himself whether he would go away again to that living hell, or stay and risk the humiliation. It seemed at first that the people of New Zealand did not want us to go back —most of them during the first three months used to say, "You are not going back, are you?" But when after three months our furlough was extended week by week for lack of transport, the question gradually and almost imperceptibly changed in tone to, "When do you have to go back?" Near Christmas it became fashionable to express surprise and say, "Why, haven't you gone yet?" By that I do not mean to say that everyone wished us gone: far from it. But the odd person was getting restless, lest perchance we stay and sit by the fire, whilst they be forced to fight. This restless feeling had infectiously spread. The public is a fickle hing and, except for the love and loyalty of those near to us, the country sighed a visible sigh of relief when 600 of us faithfully and rather quixotically boarded the ship.

Until the last minute the new reinforcements stood by in Trentham Camp, fully packed up, waiting for a body of us to make up our minds as to whether we would, or would not, depart overseas a second time. When at last we stood in two groups (surely the strangest fiasco Trentham has ever seen), two groups,

those who would and those who would not; when for the tenth time a final count of those who would go was made; then and then only were the reinforcements, who were waiting patiently and eagerly on the parade ground, detailed for active service overseas.

I stood and watched it with a deep-seated feeling of unreality. It was grotesque. It was unheard-of. With the knowledge that this was actually only a play, and that soon I would applaud the players, I heard Walter Batty (artillery sergeant-major, ex All Black) count us and report to the senior officer present. And with that quiet anticipation that one awaits the final curtain I watched Jimmy Gilbert (ex Regimental Sergeant Major of 7th N.Z. Anti-tank Regiment) march across the asphalt and with brisk counting and crisp orders, detail the lads who were to be the eleventh reinforcements. We numbered about 600, the eleventh then detailed almost numbered 3000! A strange chapter of history! As I walked out of camp to the embarkation train I realised grimly that, after all, I was an actor on that stage and not amongst the audience.

But perhaps the strangest thing about the whole affair was that there were no ill feelings between the men who stayed behind and those few who went away again. The principal issue had lain in the fact that we all felt that it was time some of our men who had done over three years active service were allowed to take a nice, well-paid industry job. That was the issue; some stuck to their guns and refused to leave the country; some 600 of us did, in effect, volunteer again—but there were no hard feelings. It was for each man to decide for himself.

The upshot of the whole affair, almost a year later, was the replacement scheme. It was exactly what we had asked for! But in the meantime some great men, real veterans, have passed over the Great Divide. Whilst a handful like myself finished out their five and a half years' active service.

We left Wellington wharf on the 12th January, 1944, exactly six months after we landed from the Middle East, and almost exactly four years after we had first sailed away from New Zealand to the Middle East.

◆

CHAPTER IV

RETURN TO ALL THAT

The port of Taranto, sheltered high in the instep of Italy's foot, came slowly into view on the morning of March 28th through sleet, snow and rain. This was sunny Italy!

But actually it was Spring, a time of the year which produces a variety of days and weathers: so we could have expected little more. I recalled our arrival in Greece almost exactly three years before: then the weather had been cold and clear.

The crossing from Egypt to Italy had had its moments: gliding out of Alexandria on the ebb of a sparkling blue Mediterranean, a light breeze ruffling the waters until they reflected back every gleam of the sun, the white buildings standing high and clear in the azure sky; storm at sea during the dog-watch of the 25th, while I was on gun watch, being in charge of the forward 12-pounder; the convoy manoeuvring masterfully at blasts of whistles; some of the seven escorts dropping depth charges to our starboard rear while action stations were called; a muster parade while they searched the ship for a spy; a cruiser coming alongside, throwing aboard a line with a secret message about the spy; passing the active volcano Mount Etna at dawn of the 27th.; a merchant convoy of 36 ships on our other beam. Those are the memories

of yet another trip by sea under the care of the ever-watchful Navy.

This war has given to me 162 blue days at sea: and they are amongst my most vivid memories. But always the thought uppermost in my mind was that the lean grey shapes out there in the trough were guarding us. Guarding us ceaselessly from attack. Often the trips were uneventful; but we recall the grim, dark days of Greece and Crete, during which the Navy paid a heavy price for our liberty.

Italy! Sad shades of empire. Roman you were once and great dominions ruled! But now poor Italy lies trampled in the mud and blood and rubble of the war she was so unwisely led to enter.

We saw it first of all from the ship as we entered Taranto. The harbour was choked with two kinds of shipping; that which floated serenely above the water and that which had sunk into the mud beneath. These latter hulks rose obscenely from the placid pond: bows up, bottoms up, sterns up, rearing toylike yet grotesque amid the living emblems of Britain's sea power.

Here we saw the relics of that brilliant blow against the Italian Navy in November 1940, when Taranto had been for fifteen minutes a bowl of flame under the impact of attack from 'planes off the *Illustrious;* in those ten minutes Italy lost nearly a third of her strength in Mare Nostrum.

By five that afternoon we were ashore, staggering up the long oil jetty under all our gear. We boarded trucks and were whisked off to Advanced Base amongst the olive groves and fruit orchards thirty miles from Bari.

Here, according to my diary, we arrived after dark: "Had good meal, found 3 cables, 5 airgraphs and a letter in the mess—cold as charity —snowed to-day."

The eight days spent in Southern Italy I really enjoyed: it was quite new and vastly different from the desolate wastes of Libya, the facilities of modern Cairo and the splendour of great cities we had seen and were yet to see. The life of the poor peasants was essentially simple. Mussolini had done a great deal of good in Italy, we found; Rome was his show place and for miles around the capital, and northward too, his work had been felt: but the good done by this ambitious fellow had not spread to the Southern states. Here we found the peasants always poor: their homes were insanitary and dirty and their appearance unkempt. We saw groups of conical, bee-hive shaped, huts built of stone, called *trulli*; in these yet a lower class of toiler dwelt. All gleaned their living somehow from the rocky soil.

There existed, too, a system which might well have come out of an English history book—feudal tenure of land. We learned that one Italian Count owned a strip of land which stretched from where we were in the countryside outside Bari to the Sangro River. On it peasants toiled all day . . . for him!

In our walks along the stone-fenced roads which wind amongst the fields, we saw all manner of growth that might well have been our own New Zealand countryside . . . or England. Amid the grass was growing in profusion a mass of marigolds; here and there fields red with poppies — I thought irresistibly of Flanders, of Greece, of Libya. There were jonquils which splashed the meadows yellow as they nodded in

the keen spring air. Sprawling near the stone walls of the fields were blackberry thorns, and long rows of haw-thorne trees—for all the world like rural home. Small blocks of bush included olives, pines, oaks, wattle, almonds, peaches, plums, apricots, apples and oranges. The fruit from these trees was being sold down every country lane.

Above this verdant quietude soared skylarks singing gloriously of freedom; whilst below them toiled the men who plant and sow; some free, some serfs.

In amongst the hedgerows and fruit orchards flitted the common sparrow; the brighter chaffinch and greenfinch and goldfinch, their distinctive songs piercing the solitude; and the bright flight of kingfisher and bee-catcher, their vivid plumage searing across the blue sky in a flash of colour. In almost every tree were thrushes and robins, in the long grass there scurried quail, busy looking for a nesting place.

One day I went to see the *Merry Widow* at the opera house in Bari and another day I spent exploring that town and finding rather little of interest. Bari, with the exception of the lovely waterfront drive (I thought of the similar Lungo Mare in Tripoli) and the splendid Cathedral of San Nicola, was very disappointing as a town of Italy. But I was soon to find that, apart from Rome, Naples and Florence, most of the cities had been clean-swept by the war: their shops had nothing to sell that was not tawdry and expensive, whilst art treasures were either buried deep—or stolen.

On the 6th April we left for the north. Mainly we were of the 600 older hands, together with some men

who had relinquished commissions in New Zealand to come overseas. As such we made up a composite draft to the division, which was then resting after the mud and slush and tears of the first Cassino, at a little place called Venafro.

The train journey was unforgettable. Never had I in my wildest dreams imagined that there were so many fruit trees in the world as I saw in that trip. And they were all in glorious white and pink blossom, which stood out vividly against the lush green of the fields.

Perched high in the hills were many picturesque towns, built of grey stone and slate-roofed, surrounded often by castellated walls. These places seemed to be the only part of Italy untouched by war. For the most part they had been passed by, being harmless, unoccupied in a military sense and rather off the beaten track. I visited many of those towns later and I found that most of them had never seen an allied uniform within their gates: to the last they remained unsullied and undefiled by the ghastly hand of war. Within their walls life goes on the same, century after century: the sowing of seed in the fields outside; the making of bread and macaroni; the drawing of water from pellucid wells; the tending of a few animals; the ripening of crops, of the fruit on the hanging vines; the reaping of the grain and the grape-picking and the wine-making.

But to all cities and villages, towns and isolated farmhouses that had stood in the path of the advance, there had come death, disaster, desolation and destruction. Railways were torn up and trains destroyed; telegraph and electric lines were down, poles dangling like bean-

stalks severed by a reaping hook; many buildings just a heap of rubble.

Return to my old regiment and, after a few minutes with the colonel, to my old troop, was the occasion for some jollity. I have confused but pleasant memories of sitting in a quad sheltering from the rain with six fellows and bottles of rum and gin; of meeting my old friends Dick and Chappie and many others; of my cousin finding his way to me through a forest of olives and inviting me over to his party; I recall crawling with my cousin under a low tarpaulin which consistently leaked and helping him and five others consume large quantities of carefully hoarded Canadian beer; and I rather believe that Malcolm, my cousin, showed me home, so that I wouldn't get lost in the woods, and that he on his return was lost in the rain for some time. Several of my friends swear that he turned up at their tents, wet and bedraggled, but happy, far into the early hours of the morning.

For a week we rested. I did not have a job, as all the guns were allotted to their sergeants. I had opportunity, therefore, to see a little more of Italy. At the end of a week the guns moved 35 miles by road to a gun position North-East of bombed Cassino. I stayed, without a job, for yet another week.

The village of Venafro, which sprawled at the foot of a steep hill beside our camp, and which had made a determined effort to ascend the hill with the aid of tortuous lanes, was typical of one of the untouched places of Italy. Here the people accepted us quite warmly. Never did they appear to resent our presence in their

streets. We saw signs of poverty in the poorest of the dwellings, but no starvation. People everywhere were carrying on with their existence as they had ten years before the war. Groups of old men would gather around a stone wall near a great placid spring each evening and talk volubly but quietly amongst themselves. Being Italians they would sit and watch the women drawing the cold clear water from the pool in great stone urns, and offer no assistance. It was woman's work, this lifting of dripping water containers on to their heads, this carrying of the sixty pound jars back to the cottage up the hill!

Almost every evening one of our Patriotic Fund Cinema Units would arrive in their van and set up a cinema screen in the paddock below the camp. This was only about a hundred yards from the village and attracted great crowds of young and old. In the centre would be a solid block of soldiers (English, too, were invited, as we were to their shows), whilst chattering around the edges of the seated crowd were the villagers.

One song will always remind me of Greece. It was a parodied version of *The Woodpecker's Song*. On the clear warm days in the Sphendami valley in Northern Greece I used to lay in browsing solitude and drink in the sound of the piping voices of the boys who sang it. It echoed up and down the vales in sweet clarity. When we had withdrawn from there it had come back mockingly from the valley walls. Now as I look back I wonder what those boys, who had looked after us so well with eggs and bread and milk, had thought as we had hastily wrecked our fortifications and withdrawn.

This song will always clutch my heart strings in a melancholy way. Never can I hear it and not feel that mocking, haunting melody stirring the depths of memory.

The version we had heard was, of course, written by a Greek soldier. He had successfully parodied Mussolini as a fat fool who was "finished."

I was astounded to hear this same refrain in the woods around Venafro. And I heard it later in the music halls of Naples and Rome. I should not have been astonished, because the tune was a universal favourite, and music seems to be the one thing that one nation does not begrudge another. But I had somehow firmly associated Greece with that song, and I always will. To hear it here seemed almost sacrilege. To hear it again from the clear young throats of boys, to be able to lie back on the tiny fallen olive leaves beneath an old tree, was to transport myself into another land.

But there is also a song which belongs to Italy, although no Italian wrote it. It is *Lili Marlene*. I first heard this song in the olive groves beside Venafro. Now it is known throughout the world. It is said to have been written as the marching song of the German Afrika Korps. That may be so. Some say they even heard it sung in Libya . . . that the refrain of it came across the void of night in the evening quietness at Sidi Resegh. If so I did not hear it. All I heard at Sidi Resegh at night was a shell-shocked Italian calling *"Mana mia,"* and the voices of enemy infantry and the clink of their shovels as they dug in the stillness of the night.

For me *Lili Marlene* shall belong to Italy. I heard a tiny girl, a lovely curly-headed kiddie who made me think immediately of Shirley Temple, sing it beneath the olives miles from Cassino. I listened to it from the carmined lips of a music-hall, bar-room entertainer in a club at Naples. In the Quirinale Hotel lounge in Rome I heard a lovely voice, that had once been fourth best operatic in Europe, render it to a hundred New Zealanders. Again and again they had clapped her, they clapped this song more heartily by far than they did her exquisite rendering of *One Fine Day* from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*.

A strange ironical world! The English *Woodpecker's Song* parodied by Greeks to ridicule Mussolini, finally accepted by the people of Mussolini as a national favourite: the German *Lili Marlene* introduced to British and American troops by the Italian people, now sweeping the world as a popular hit of all nations!

One day I spent in Naples, and included a very hurried tour of the excavations at Pompeii. I felt that Pompeii was unique, quite different from anything else in the world. For there one finds a city, complete with its public buildings, temples, arena, shops and dwellings, resurrected in almost as good condition as it was in 79 A.D., when it was buried beneath eight feet of pumice stone and thick deposits of ashes and water from the great eruption of Mount Vesuvius. This eruption probably trapped about two thousand of Pompeii's twenty thousand population; so most of them must have had time to flee. But what is so amazing is the state of preservation of the buildings,

of the paved streets, of the ovens, and paintings on the walls and mosaics inside the buildings. When once they had been cleared of the thick protective layers of pumice and ash, the whole lay-out of the 1900-year-old town was found preserved in its entirety. It is not the beauty of the place which staggers you. Far from it, for it was a heathen town, judging by the pictures on the walls. Rather it is remarkable that so commonplace a city should have endured down the ages while so many great and glorious monuments of art and culture should have perished in the dust of time.

Of Naples I really saw little. I saw the Bay, the famed bay by virtue of which Naples disputes with Constantinople the claim of occupying the most beautiful locality in Europe. Perhaps that is so when viewed from the sea. From the shore, with memories of Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee, the pearl-like bays one finds on the desert shores of Libya, and the white shores near Athens, I failed quite to see its full beauty. It looked dingy and oppressive—due no doubt to the wrecks that littered the blue waters. The bay is wide and sweeps round in a graceful curve. On the northern shore, at the base of a range of volcanic hills which rise up from the water's edge like an amphitheatre, is the city of Naples. On the eastern shore is Mount Vesuvius, tall, misty, sombre, forbidding and, when the sun is shining on the clouds which crown its smoking summit, ethereally lovely.

◆

CHAPTER V

THE QUIET CAMPAIGN

At 5 p.m. on the 21st April I left our waggon-line area (as it was now) at Venafro and made the journey to the gun line. I was to take over each gun in turn so as to relieve the sergeants for a week at a time.

The road wound through Cassele to Aquafondata, where we had to wait until dark to pass over eight miles of exposed road.

There beside the small village on the hill, which is watered by an active spring, as the name implies, we halted, together with hundreds of trucks from other units. It was quite eerie in the half-light of dusk. Ahead of us were some trucks which were first "in the queue." Behind us stretched long lines of supply vehicles, gun-towers, some with guns and some without, and trucks taking forward reliefs for the Cassino line. Around the corner of the road we could hear the occasional crump of a shell as the Hun put one over. He calls it harassing fire, I expect: we do exactly the same thing to him, so it is all in the game. The only difference was that here for eight miles he could see us; any movement therefore would have brought down upon us everything he had. Normally harassing fire is brought to bear on some bridge, supply route or cross-roads which we cannot see, but which is shot at from the map.

When it was dark a Military Policeman gave the "start-up" signal and engines down the line purred and roared into life. The leading vehicles poked around the corner and, feeling like actors on a rather badly lit but nevertheless imposing stage, we were away.

The view of the battlefield at night was stupendous yet uncanny. The impression from the high hill road looking down into the bowl of the Cassino plain was of vastness. Here were pools of darkness. There a blaze of light which mushroomed out, as a shell burst. Away at the back was Mount Cairo. From the base of this conical hill appeared pin-points of light as enemy guns fired at us, and I realised with something of a shock that we were looking down their muzzles, although from a respectable distance.

Occasionally across the dark void would appear a tiny distant curve of tracer bullets, which looked like little fireworks in the huge black bowl. Far away in the night we saw toy-like flares hanging in the sky; then a sudden group of mushroom lights as bombs fell from our aircraft. More harrassing; by us this time.

It was quiet, eerie and unreal. I felt detached from it all. I felt I was looking down upon the whole world out there in the darkness, the whole mad, blood-drunk world. There in the void, down there on the poppy-decked, blood-stained fields of Cassino, was represented the futility of all conflict amongst men for all time. The little town, visited by tourists because it was on the main line from Naples to Rome, and because of the Benedictine monastery built in 539 A.D. on the hill above the ancient Cassinum, was now but a heap of rubble and rotting human flesh. This place, famous in

antiquity, also by reason of the fact that Mark Anthony used to stay at the villa of Marcus Terentius Varro, a leading citizen, is now forever immortalized in history. And here we had expended many human lives. Above me God was looking down upon it, too, and I wondered how He would judge it all.

But the goal was there. We had to wipe out this freedom-destroying Thing which stalked the fields of Europe. True, we were yet a long way from Berlin, in fact quite a way from Rome; but we had to carry on. Was this what brought me back, I thought, a little bitterly? Cassino? A lot had been done since . . . since France . . . since Greece . . . since Alamein. North Africa was ours, and Sicily, and this slice of poor foolish Italy. But the final hour of victory, and Berlin, seemed a long way off then. A long way home, too . . . a terribly long way home.

What if there were a hundred Cassinos? Or a thousand Cassinos? It would take us five hundred years! "Oh, Hell," I said, "enough of this." It does not do to think. A soldier must laugh and carry on.

After bumping along for miles, after negotiating safely about twelve hairpin bends, which had to be taken by the three-ton trucks by careful backing and nosing forward again on full lock, we arrived in a little side lane all our own. It wound around the foot of a high saucer-like hill—a more cup-like hill, perhaps, so steep was it. Here we dismounted and spoke to men of our own troop who materialised out of the night. They told us that the guns were up there in the cup, or the saucer.

I could scarcely believe it. That men and machines (and I found out that it had been the men, not the machines, for no truck could tow a gun into such a place) could accomplish such a thing!

With long, double drag ropes, twenty men on each, they had dragged these guns up 45-degree slopes, and worse, into the best gun position I have ever seen. The guns were inside the lip of the cup of the hill, whilst the enemy was away and below. It was unique. Nothing but a bomb could hit the guns; and nothing ever did.

We staggered up the slopes with bed-rolls and all our gear. For ages it seemed, I blundered about the goat tracks amongst the guns and the olive trees, falling into half-finished dugouts and over felled trees. The whole cliff face was littered with things to fall over. At length Harold Mouat found me in the embrace of a fallen olive and he led me to a dugout. That night I slept soundly, interrupted by the normal two-hour gun picquet, during which time one sits down by the Tannoy loud speaker near the gun, ready, if called to "take post," to rouse a few men and fire a few shells at some ordered line and range. Sometimes you are up all night doing this, especially if the infantry are attacked and need support, but occasionally you get a quiet night. Such is war.

I found next morning that we were situated in rather a busy spot. There was yet a great deal of work to be done. The hollow face of the hill in which we were cupped was thickly planted with olive trees. As these prevented us shooting with safety on the lower

ranges necessary to protect our own infantry from close attack, we had to cut them down. This is called gaining lower "crest clearance"; it can easily be imagined that the effect of not getting one's shells quite over the hill would be nothing if not disconcerting. For one thing our infantry would lose just that amount of fire-power they ask for; for another, our own folk living around the trees that obstructed our shells would receive a nasty packet of shrapnel from the tree tops.

Hence the reason for the remarks appearing in my diary on Sunday 23rd April: "Finished gun pit, filled and laid sand-bags, carried ammunition into pit and ammunition recess, felled five more olive trees, shifted two guns with drag ropes: otherwise a day of rest!!"

I have never quite seen guns in a more peculiar position than on this St. Elia hill-top. Our gun position on Mount Olympus in Greece was tame compared with this, although it was much higher (4,500 feet). Here it was not so much height, as seeming inaccessibility. The guns of F troop and two of the guns of D Troop roosted in precarious nests on a 45 degree slope, like kingfishers' nests on the sea cliff. My own gun (the one I was soon appointed to permanently), at anything under about three thousand yards range, pointed straight at the trousers of the gunners on this slope: here again I would point out the desirability of our checking "crest clearance." Occasionally Peter Cardno, who was in charge of F 1 gun, would stroll over while my gun was sending shells screeching three feet over their heads and politely ask whether, "I had checked crest clearance lately"—it was here a matter of some importance.

One night we "took post" at some dim, cold hour of the morning to fire a task in support of the infantry. Two or three of us stumbled out and put the gun on the required line and put on a range which we knew from our task sheets was the actual range required. We then awaited the correction which is known as the "meteor"—a correction of a hundred or so yards to allow for the atmospheric conditions reported in the divisional artillery meteorological report.

The air was still, clear and sharp .

Over the tannoy came, "Meteor, drop 200." Ranges were adjusted. Then something clicked in my head and I recalled that this particular task brought our muzzle very low over the mounds ahead. A drop of 200 was dangerous. I peeped through the barrel at the stars and saw none.

"Are you laid?" I asked the man who lays the gun by means of his sights.

"You're not loaded," he replied. "Yes, I'm close to it."

So we didn't load that time. We went back to bed after reporting lack of crest clearance. Peter Cardno never knew how lucky he was!

After the hard work was over the life on the hill-top became idyllic. April ripened into May, spring became summer. The air was warm and languid. Men everywhere divested themselves of shirts and long trousers and basked in the sun on dugout roofs. The only noise of war was our occasional hundred rounds a day, or less; the drum and throb of 'planes, always

our 'planes, in the sky above; and sometimes the whine of shells overhead as the Hun tried to find the *Inferno Track. All day long the rattle of cicadas and locusts, the song of birds. We drowsed and slept and dreamt and fired guns; we wrote letters in the sun and dimly wondered how long the war would last.

A hundred Cassinos! Five hundred Cassinos before we reached Berlin, before peace? Oh God, how long do we have to serve before we have served enough? Four and a half years of this, we'd had, and still we browsed and sat and waited . . . for what?

It came at last. It soon became apparent what was broiling in the cauldron that was Cassino. It came to us gradually, as if the sun had dimmed our wits. One day two lads went walking over the crest to our right. They came back excited. Guns! Guns! Everywhere they had been were guns. In the little valleys around the hills of Cassino whole regiments were placed where there was room for only troops. In a depression near the Inferno where our own troop of four guns had been for four days were twenty-four medium guns! Supplies were pouring down the Inferno into Hove Dump. At nights they came mostly, long lines of whining trucks; by day jeeps plied the dusty track, lively and agile as goats on the rocky slopes. The Dump grew and grew. It overflowed the valley floor and flooded down the roadside.

And still the days were hot and perfect. White fleecy clouds hung like billowing sails in the sky. The ceiling

*This was a supply route from behind us, through a gorge in the hills, to the Hove Dump. It was so called because it was an arid cleft in the rock and because the German guns made it an inferno.

was always blue, sometimes cobalt: disturbed only by the drone of planes and still more planes. The now dusty openings of gun pits were the only scars upon the placid scene—we covered these with branches from the fallen trees. We retired to the shade beside our guns for meals, eating beneath the kind old olives. These trees had sheltered us in Greece from death that stalked us from the skies; now they merely saved us from the midday sun! Were these small things the shades of Victory? Was it that we were given the signs of Peace and failed to see them?

Life is very strange! I had written the bulk of *Kiwi Saga* whilst in Alamein: describing scenes in the then far-off Greece and other more pleasant days on the inhospitable desert. And here on the hilltop I began to write again—not a saga, but a novel. I sat for hours in the sun, or in the cool of an earthy dugout, and penned a romance. I took hero and heroine through Hellenic isles, told of blood and sudden death, but mostly of love and the spirit of the Greeks. It was happy work. For material I had personal experiences in that land, the experiences of those who were left behind and escaped years later, some forty official bulletins of the Hellenic Information Service, and a good drag upon the imagination. For atmosphere I had the steep hill slopes, the green freshness of the grass and trees, the security of the olives and their age-old kindness and serenity. I had the feel of the good clay and the damp earth, the sigh of the breeze in the boughs above, bright flight of goldfinch and sparrow. I felt the reality of life here on the hill above the blooded fields of Cassino. Reality is what we lose sight of in these days of radio and screen. You

need it to write. How can one write of fear who has not known it? How can one write of sacrifice and death who has not seen the blood of brothers mingle with the dirt?

It was again an outlet. The soul is full of thought and feeling and it must come out. Some of us get drunk, most soldiers do a little; some suffer inwardly. Best, I thought, to write. It would not matter if the manuscript was refused by publisher, destroyed by shell, or lost in the rush of war. It was good to pour the mind out on to the good clean paper for the maddened world to look at. The maddened world that at times seemed to have forgotten beauty.

Our gun position afforded, as I have said, natural cover and protection. The enemy could not see us and it was unlikely that he could hit us. For it is difficult to land a shell on the steep inside slope of a cup. German shells occasionally hit the ridges which hid us, and often whined overhead into the valley far below, but never did they succeed in skating a shell over the top and on to our guns.

But during the first week in May it became apparent that the wily German had spotted (doubtless from some high-flying reconnaisance plane) the dump on the Inferno Track. The Inferno became one in truth. Every day now shells were lobbing over our hill and searching for the dump. Our 46 Battery were in that area and found it very uncomfortable, as did the Regimental First Aid Post. 46 Battery stuck it, but the R.A.P. was forced to move a few hundred yards.

Of this we had a grand-stand view. Each shell, landing six hundred yards below us in the vortex of the Inferno Track, was watched and commented upon. This shelling continued all night of the 6th and started again at noon of the 7th May. Within an hour or two they were successful. A fire started on the edge of Hove Dump. It soon spread into a great conflagration. Jeeps caught fire, burning furiously until long after dark; great stores of petrol went up in vivid gushes of flame and clouds of black smoke; mingled with this was the white smoke from cannisters. Then the fire spread to the ammunition. Ton upon ton of light, medium and heavy shells, charges, cartridges, and boxes upon boxes of small arms and tracer bullets went up. Tremendous explosions rent the air. Whole boxes of shells could clearly be seen, hurtled into the air amid flame and smoke and sparks. Pieces of shells and even whole shells must have soared two thousand feet into the air, for many of these fragments fell amongst the trees we were standing under.

The men guarding the dump were pinned down for about six hours. We watched the tiny figures as they crouched and ran for better cover. Fortunately most of them found shelter in the very deep, dried-up river bed in which they had pitched their bivouac tents. Some I saw digging out a little cave in the side of the river bank, where at least they were safe from the fragments and boxes and whole shells which descended upon them like hail from the sky.

The German must have been happy at his work, for after a few shells to see the fire safely on its way, he desisted from further participation. It would not be

hard to imagine his glee at the bright glow in the heavens that night.

It was a big fire. It had caused great loss of ammunition and fuel. But the Hove Dump was but a drop in the ocean compared to the build-up which had continued night and day for weeks in the hills around Cassino. The guns in our sector simply had to be rationed and serviced from further back. It meant more work for the lorries of the Service Corps.

It was impossible to disregard the build-up any longer about the 7th and 8th May. That a show of immense scale was going on, was obvious to us. We were told to accommodate a thousand rounds per gun on the position. Holes were dug for the shells and cartridges. Recesses in the gun-pits made larger. Long lines of trucks and tired drivers brought the ammunition to us. There was a lot of back-breaking work. On the 10th it was completed. Ammunition surrounded the guns like sawdust round a saw. Gun crews were brought up to eight men each. The number of planes in the air was colossal. The tempo of artillery exchanges increased. Rumours and stories and the promise of Churchill made the second front in Europe seem like a certainty. Here, there was something big in the air. We thought of a co-ordinated attack from the West, from the Russians in the East and from our own front. But we dismissed this idea as too huge for the mind to grasp.

Now it seemed to me that there might, after all, be only one Cassino. Berlin felt somehow nearer than before.

CHAPTER VI

THE NUT IS CRACKED

About mid-afternoon of the 11th May we all trooped down the goat tracks from our guns to the command post. Lieutenant Don Wyatt, one of the finest soldiers I have ever met, was there awaiting us. He was our Gun Position Officer. Maps were set up on boards beside him—I noticed a map of Europe and Asia there too.

As we seated ourselves on a steep bank beside the small hut which acted as command post, I felt as if I was about to hear a prologue to an epic play. It was an epic play . . . taking the world issue broadly, and including the second front, the success of which depended not a little upon our show in Italy, it was the greatest epic play of all time.

It was warm and still on the grassy bank. I nodded pleasantly in the balmy air and felt sleepy. The grand old olives stirred a little, and the silvery underside of their leaves gave forth a shimmer of light as a warm breeze stole down the mountainside. Three slender poppies, that seemed to have strayed from their fellows down there on the dreadful plain, waved a little. Why are poppies always side by side with bloodshed? They grew in France and Flanders—they were found this war in the fields of Greece and Crete, in Libyan Derna and cultural Tripolitania and Tunisia, in Syria, in Sicily, in Italy. They even seem to draw their colour

from the bloody earth. Red poppies . . . the poppies of Cassino.

I started suddenly and was wide awake. Don Wyatt scratched his head in that manner of men who are men and who have something real to say to men.

"This is the day we have all been waiting for," he said.

There it was! It was said to us in a few straight words.

At 2300 hours that eleventh day of May two thousand guns would speak in our sector to the west coast. An attack by eleven divisions was to commence that night. The broad plan was to by-pass Cassino, gain the main Rome highway and join up with the Anzio bridgehead. A few hours before, the Russians had attacked in the East with 160 divisions. The second front would come within hours of the fall of Rome, depending upon two things—the success and the extent of our diversion here in Italy, and the weather over the Channel.

There it was! So simple. So gigantic. So stupendous in size, and simple in plan. A huge diversion in the South, an attack in the East . . . and waiting, poised and ready, the accumulated forces of the British Empire and America on the coasts of Britain.

May I remind you here that this book is not a history, but a miscellany of memoirs, of memories. So do not look for too complete a picture. But the few minutes in which Don Wyatt, tall, powerful, brown and healthy, told us the broad outline of the plan, will live forever in my memory. There was my picture.

AUTHOR'S PHOTOGRAPH

NEAR FLORENCE

". . . we passed the now quiet remains of the grotesque Tiger."

OFFICIAL WAR PHOTOGRAPH

RIMINI AND THE GREEKS

". . . the Greeks arrived hot-foot half an hour later."

History was there beside us. History, at the pressing of a button at 11 p.m. that night, would unroll two or three new, heavy volumes. The next few weeks would be the crucial period of the war . . . critical, decisive hours and days and weeks of bloodshed for the freedom of mankind. As I walked slowly back up the goat track through the olives to the gun, I plucked one poppy and tore it petal by petal from its slender stalk. The red was on my hands and then only the black centre remained like a big bumble bee, or tarantula spider. I wiped the red off my hands and savagely put my heel on the black heart. Symbolic flower! Dread destiny!

That evening before dark we were busy uncapping hundreds of shells and stacking them inside the recess of the gun pit.

Our task was easy here in Italy. We sat up there and hurled high explosives at the foe. I could not help thinking of others not so fortunate, and of moments in the desert when we had not been so fortunate ourselves. This did not seem like war. Often I wrote home and said "it isn't war, it is a picnic". But the mood of battle all depends on how you are placed. It depends on what comes back, on where you are. Here it was superb. Nothing ever came back. They could not hit us inside this fortress.

That momentous night I made two trips to the lip of the cup—one trip before eleven, and one at midnight. On that first trip it was as quiet as a tomb. I almost went on tip-toe to the top, so quiet was it. And from the high lip I looked down upon the still bowl of night that was Cassino at that hour. Not a light,

not a sound, disturbed the deep black pool. The stars hung like jewels in the void above.

For five minutes I sat up there and watched. Beside me was the stark, bare stump of an olive that someone had cut down to give us crest clearance. I remembered then that the muzzle of our gun, on the first target we were to shoot at that night, pointed just three feet above the jagged spike. I looked again at the stump in reverence. So it was through that portion of the clean sweet air that angry shells would scream. Shells ordered by me, loaded by Joe, rammed home by Jimmy, and laid true by Keith called Pinky. Strange introspective thought!

The second time I went up that hill . . . oh God, what Bedlam! Two thousand guns were booming, roaring, shaking the earth. From our own guns, and guns further back, the shells whistled over, very close. One big shell hit, a 7.2 inch shell, but not while I was there!

The hills and crags and valleys were livid and incarnate from the flashes of the guns. There was light, weird, eerie light, like the flickering shadows from a fire in a giant, rugged cave—light everywhere. Noise filled the universe. Below in the bowl, thousands of small mushroom lights were coming and going, as our shells burst, and as the Hun fired back. The whole battle field was criss-crossed with tracer bullets. Flares were going up from the German lines. The Hun hates the dark, fears the danger of it, and pours bright lights into the skies so that he can see what's going on.

We fired practically all night, and off and on during the following day. Scattered reports came in: some of

success, some of failure. The 4th Division, Eighth Army, was across the Rapido River with three squadrons of tanks in support. The Poles had been pushed back to their start line. The latter had had bad luck, for they had attacked Phantom Ridge, the enemy-held objective of the first night, just as the Hun was relieving one battalion by another fresh one. The result was that there were two battalions where there should have been only one.

The air was full of our planes for days following the initial attack. I have a note in my diary which speaks volumes, "Air activity is comparable to Alamein." To this I can add the great factor that here we had heavies as well as mediums. Each day great formations of Fortresses, Halifaxes, Lancasters and Liberators drummed over, attacking well back on the busy roadways.

The weekend of the 13th and 14th was quiet. On Saturday I took a day off and wrote letters. The weather was still warm and fine. On Sunday my only diary comment was, "Fired quite a few rounds. Wrote Chapter VI". It seemed ironic, yet in a way quite fitting, that I should be writing a book about the heroic struggle of the Greeks at a time when we were dealing out the final cards to their hated enemies.

By Monday the Gustav Line was broken. On Tuesday the Poles intercepted a German message instructing enemy forces to evacuate Cassino, as they were by-passed. The whole plan had succeeded! It was once again the old lesson, learnt by so many commanders in this war by bitter experience, that a fortress ceases to

be a fortress when attacking forces have passed it, and threaten lines of communication.

Now the French were forging ahead. The Poles went in to intercept the evacuating forces of Cassino in an endeavour to cut them off; whilst we fired air-burst shells over the Huns to keep them down. But most of them slipped away that night. The Polish flag was hoisted above the majestic pile of rubble that was the monastery. The French made a further 14-mile advance and were behind the Hitler line.

And so the days passed. We seemed to be forgotten up here on the hill. News was scarce. More often than not we heard our progress over the B.B.C. news, sometimes intelligence reports came in and we eagerly studied the map.

On Friday the 26th great news! The American Fifth linked up with the Anzio beachhead! This latter force had been through Hell. Their beachhead south of Rome had for weeks and weeks been raked with heavy shells. Into this area they had packed a host of material for the coming push, their object being to attack as soon as our own attack was well under way. This they did. The gallant force bulged two ways: they met the 5th Army on the road to Rome, and they themselves had advanced to within 20 miles of Rome by the 26th.

By then there was nothing more for us to fire at. The entire Cassino valley was cleared. But the front was a horse-shoe shape and we knew that in the central sector south of Rome there were still large enemy forces. The Americans had slipped up the coast, and for the most part the road to Rome was still in enemy hands. Only near Anzio had it been cut.

On Saturday we were told that we were to help chase the enemy up to Rome. This central sector had to be cleared because it endangered the American right flank. To have had the American line of communication cut at this stage would have been almost to reduce the front to the beach-head category once again. So we packed up. Pits were demolished and dugouts wrecked, so that material might be saved. Quads came up that night and we limbered up ready for an early departure.

Just before we went to bed we heard that our 23rd N.Z. Battalion had taken Attina to the north of Cassino and that the enemy was well out of range.

At 7 a.m. we began to grind slowly down the steep track out of the cup. We left this fortress with something of regret. I, myself, could not help feeling that we would see many worse places than this hill-top crow's nest. A tinge of apprehension crept over me as I turned from this pleasant refuge and faced the unknown that lay ahead. But this had happened a hundred times before, I argued, quite rightly. One always feels misgiving when forsaking a good gun position, a lucky gun position, for whatever might come. I had had this feeling so often in the desert that I had forgotten what it was like—this stepping off into the unknown.

I was so preoccupied, apparently, that I forgot to order all brakes on. The result of this was that my quad tractor found the steep descent and the weight of gun and ammunition trailer rather too much for it, and decided to climb the side of the track. Fortunately for all of us the side it decided to take was the one which bit into the cliff face, not the one which faded

away into the ravine below. Don Wyatt and some others whipped a rope over the quad and tied it to a tree, whilst I got another truck to tow us backwards until we were back on the track. From there we proceeded with gun and limber brakes on. Colonel Stewart was there grinning at me, as much as to say, "That will teach you a lesson, Uren."

The narrow winding road which continued on from Aquafondata, Hove Dump and thence through St. Elia down to Cassino town afforded us a magnificent view of the battlefield. As we passed round the front of the hill we had previously occupied and saw the full splendour of the bowl, I was held spell-bound. I sat on the top of my quad and drank in every detail.

There in the distance was Mount Cairo, symmetrical and conical. To the right was Monte Cassino crowned by the famous monastery. At its foot the pitiful ruins of Cassino town. And spreading out into blue infinity the plain, the lush green plain, studded with rubies that were patches of poppies. From up high on the perilous road the scene was tranquil and serene. The morning mist hid the detail, the stark reality, like a decent veil. Only the beauty of it was there, as the valley lay bathed in the early morning sun, draped in a silken robe.

But as we descended, the curtain blew aside. We saw St. Elia village, crushed and desolate. We passed isolated piles of mortar, once clean farm houses. We saw the bodies in the fields; smelt the decay of beasts and humans, friend and foe alike; saw the poppies nodding in the corn. The rich fields were red with them. A foolish refrain jigged through my head:

"Dancing 'mid the poppies and the corn."

But there was no dancing here . . . only death.

We crossed the Rapido River and camped close to it. It was a swift, clear river, rapid as its name implies, cold, stone-bottomed. We swam in it and, although it was a breathless hot day, nearly froze. Then we lay on the grassy banks in the sun and were lost in the warm drowsiness that comes with sun-bathing. It was difficult to bear in mind that this sweet spot had been No Man's Land. The deep growth of the lupin field in which we were bivouaced was almost undisturbed. It was possible to sink back amongst the grass and strongly fragrant lupins and forget the war. Birds flitted and sang in the poplars, the graceful swaying trees that inhabit almost every river bank in Italy. Poplars . . . I was to remember these trees with utmost clarity!

We slept a little on the first day, for we were tired. On the 29th May, the second day in bivouac, we had to polish everything and march off down the dusty road to see Mr. Peter Fraser, our Prime Minister. The cream of the joke was the instruction to take in our pockets a piece of rag with which to give the boots a final polish, to remove the new dust. Of course we were broken off to gather round him, so he never saw our boots.

One day I hitch-hiked to Cassino town. For two hours we climbed over the piles of brick and stone and mortar. The air was pregnant with the smell of death. Each pile was a temporary grave. Cemeteries were

being quickly formed in a clear space near the Hotel des Roses.

We saw this shattered building. From here the New Zealanders had had to withdraw after capturing three-quarters of unconquerable Cassino, stone by stone. After days of magnificent fighting they had penetrated this far. Against the New Zealanders' success, the Americans, who had made a gallant attempt weeks before and failed, were betting twenty to one. But Cassino was honeycombed with old mine shafts. These the wily German had extended and renewed. And when bitter fighting was going on outside the Hotel and within its portals, the enemy had materialised out of the ground behind them. By the mine shafts endless streams of reinforcements had appeared at unexpected places and the New Zealand force had had to withdraw under tank support. The Indian group on Hangman's Hill was attacked for four days and surrounded and, although rationed by parachute from the air, eventually had to give in.

It had been a bitter blow, this second Cassino.

Looking now at the shell, the spectre, of the Hotel des Roses, I recalled the newspaper description of the fight there, "New Zealanders in brawl outside Hotel des Roses." A grim humourist the scribe who wrote it! I suppose these lads had seen a few brawls, but never one in which their foes rose up from the ground like ants.

After expending life there twice, the tide swept past Cassino, leaving it dry, untouchable, like a black rock on the tidal coast. There it lay, a hard nut; now to be

sealed up and abandoned to the pages of history. A hundred Cassinos? Thank God there was only one. No force had ever broken through this gate before. But this force did—by sheer weight of arms, by rolling down-hill and past the fortress, by the generalship of Alexander, by the quality of men.

◆

CHAPTER VII

MURDER VALLEY

At two in the afternoon of the last day of May we made fresh paths through the lupins and went to war again. We left the swift stream chattering over the rounded black stones and the smell of the lupins as they lay bruised in the sun, where our cruel wheels had crushed them. We left these things behind with never a care. The news ahead was good. The Maoris had taken Sora. The German, it was said, was moving out on foot, drawing his guns with stolen oxen, as the R.A.F. had shot up all his transport.

We were to move twenty miles north-eastward up the Rapido Valley through Attina, across the Melfa River and to a *rendezvous* five miles south-east of Sora. The trip was uneventful, slow and peaceful. In Attina we went so slowly that I jumped down off my quad and picked up a chair. We carried this chair for months afterwards and I always had some difficulty in preserving my right to sit in it. Occupation of the chair was usually gained by forceful ejection—Les always claimed he saw it first and I always asserted that it was I who had purloined it. The right of the Italian owner never seemed to come into the argument. But that is often the case in unoccupied districts. I once saw two Maoris quarrelling whole-heartedly over pos-

session of a top-hat and evening suit. It finished with one wearing the hat and tails, the other the trousers.

About 21.30 hours* we moved in closer to Sora and were led off the road into a cornfield. Here the corn stood five feet high, slender and straight, heads heavy with grain. In taking up positions we tried to do as little damage as possible, but it was hard to avoid the flattened paths we made. So dense was the corn that I unsuspectingly led my quad and gun into a ditch three feet wide and very deep. We spent an annoying hour trying to winch our quad (by means of the winches that they all carry) out of the ditch, by hitching the winch rope around a tree. We pulled three great trees out by the roots before I was able to enlist the help of another quad to give us a pull.

However, we had dug a gun-pit and erected camouflage nets by 1 a.m. and gratefully pitched our bivouac tents amid the corn. All around us the fireflies were flitting in amongst the wilderness of stalks; quiet, eerie, remote. No sound from them, just tiny intermittent lights, like mobile glow-worms. I went to sleep with Les trying to tell me that in the Pacific they used to capture about three of these wee creatures, and put them in a matchbox lid covered with celophane: so bright were they that the boys used them as reading lamps!

"What about the blackout?" spoke up Pinky drowsily.

The enemy was quite close to us here on the first day of June. Some of our shooting was at a range of a

*9.30 p.m.

mile. In the afternoon news came through that the Germans were massing for an attack near the village of Campoli. We were warned against attempts to infiltrate our gun position in the night. Double gun picquets were posted. All night silent men stood like Indians in the corn with rifles and Tommy guns loaded. But nothing happened. We could hear an infantry battalion ahead of us move up forward with some tanks, at about three in the morning. Some batteries were firing at Charge I all night—that means they were lobbing shells just over the crest in front. Nothing came back. Bombs were dropped a few hundred yards away.

It was weird to be on guard with the Hun quite close. Trees looked ghost-like in the dim light from the heavens above; each a possible harbinger of trouble. But it was only a trick of the mind. Nothing happened. The German preparation for a counter attack was smashed by a New Zealand Armoured regiment. All day of the 2nd they advanced on the tail of the Huns who retreated up the Liri valley. By 1400 hours our Observation Post tank reported that our armour was 10,000 yards up the valley. We fired that afternoon at about 11,400 to 13,000 yards. It seemed that the enemy was out of range by 11 p.m. The "story" for the morrow was a move forward into the Liri valley past Sora. We slept peacefully that night.

Looking back on it now I always wonder if the men who die ever have any knowledge or premonition of it. Some do, perhaps. Yet some who say, "They will never get me," go amongst the first. The bravest, the best, often seem to be the ones we lose. Our best and finest

men . . . there is no equity in death. And it comes when we least expect it. One moment you are surging forward, sweeping all obstacles aside; the next moment you are shattered upon the blasted earth.

I thought of the next day's operations as I dozed off that night. I thought of the description of our next gun position, as told to us by Don Wyatt, who had reconnoitred the place that midday.

"A bend in the Liri River . . . in a field . . . good digging . . . ditch beside the guns . . . no cover, only flash cover from the poplars . . .".

Poplars . . . poplars. I slept and saw the waving poplars in a dream.

At ten o'clock we pulled out of the cornfield and passed through Sora. We crossed over yet another Bailey bridge, that masterpiece of British engineering, like a huge Meccano set of girders and sides and sections all bolted together with huge oiled bolts, which has done so much towards winning our war and peace. We saw the Liri which finds its source from a spring at the place of a lovely name, Fontana Liri. This river was wider, deeper, not quite so swift as the Rapido; but cold and clear.

We turned right, once over the river, and followed a road which led up the valley. The scene was tranquil. Fields lay breathing, ripening in the sunshine. Trees were quiet and brooding in the summer air. On our right, the line of poplars between us and the deep river seemed to beckon, holding out to us cool shade.

Bill McKeegan waved us off the road at the entrance to a field; pointed out my flag. I was nearest gun to

the river, very close to the poplars. We turned in at the entrance. Nearby Lieutenant Wyatt's truck had pulled up alongside a poor thatched hut. Dimly, I took note of the tall bamboo ridge-pole of the hut. The command post men were starting to unload. I led my quad and gun over the soft, powdery loam, fresh ploughed for some unplanted crop—or possibly lying fallow for a season.

We dropped our gun into action, laid on a zero line, unpacked the quad, ordered it away. I looked across the river, saw great, frowning hills towering up there to the east of us, and for some unaccountable reason pointed out the obvious—a ditch two yards in front of our gun muzzle.

At that moment, Fritz, up there a mile away on the forbidding cliffs, must have been ordering line and range.

As three of us were digging, as four of us were hoisting the camouflage net over the seven-foot poles and taut wires, Fritz ordered "Fire." The *pung* from the cliffs and the shrill whistle came together. Fast light shells grazed our heads and exploded in our paddock. We flung ourselves to ground, then raced to the sweet, dear ditch.

Those guns were about a mile away. Twenty-four hours before the hills had been reported clear, but this artillery rearguard had daringly crept back (or lay hidden—we will never know). They sat up there on the arid rocks and watched the guns of the New Zealand regiments wheel in off the road. Then, taking their time, they had fired. It must have taken that five

pounds worth of high explosive about three and a half seconds to go the distance! That five ghastly pounds worth of explosive killed five and wounded seven in our small field in those few seconds. And there was more to follow.

What fantastic, deadly shooting! No ranging rounds to find the distance, to bracket the target! Almost simultaneously, for neither party was warned by the tragedy of the other, the crew of No. 2 gun was a casualty, and the command post staff was mortally hit. One shell, the first by a split second, had landed in the hole they were digging at No. 2, the next gun to my own; had hit poor Alan, whose body saved the lives of the rest of them. The other shell hit that trivial bamboo ridge-pole by the Command Post truck; spattered steel down upon six or seven of the men working below.

Tall, handsome, stalwart Don Wyatt lay there dead. Beside him Benny Benson, Dick Shaw, and Hori Andrews. The best . . . it is always the best.

To us down by the river, hugging the ditch like life itself, news of this came almost half an hour later. This shows how isolated is each man, how alone, when death is raining from the sky. That shells were continually landing within thirty yards or so, we knew. That someone was wounded on the next gun we knew only when we saw men carrying another across that shell-swept field. Toby and I were kneeling in the ditch, clearing it out a little with shovels, flattening upon the shovels as each salvo clipped the tops of the poplars. Then, as the position eased, we returned to

the hole of the gun-pit, and continued digging to ease our thumping hearts.

It was then that we were told. George MacGeehan, section commander, came down and waved us out of the pit.

"Come out of that", he called.

"What's the matter?" I said.

"We are to lie low, no firing except in emergency".

He told us more.

That we would never see these men amongst us again, I could scarce believe. Dazed I wandered down the ditch with Toby to the poplars. We put on a billy of tea. Other men from other guns, and George MacGeehan, Captain Leo Robinson and Ray Cranch, came down and had half a mug each of blessed tea. Three times we filled the billy and emptied it.

Jimmy and I walked up to the wreck of the command post to see if there was anything we could do. We saw them there, still and peaceful in their passing. None of them had had a moment's pain.

The wounded had been evacuated. Amongst these was Harold Mouat—this was the fourth time he had been hit, twice at Alamein. A few minutes before someone had said that Harold "was sinking fast". But I said to myself, "old soldiers never die", and, when a while later Harold was carried carefully away on a stretcher, he had a strong hold on life. Last week I read that he was best man at the wedding of one of our chaps, so he must be back with his plants and trees in full health again. He holds a science degree and

specialises in disease of trees. It seems a long call from such a blood-stained field as this, to the peaceful orchards of home. Harold is one of the many who have earned it.

That night we performed two tasks. Under cover of the merciful darkness we dug gun-pits, and by about one o'clock had them all completed (we were, of course, short of men). And we prowled the river bank in twos with loaded Tommy guns, lest the German should infiltrate. Amid the dim poplars we stalked, peering across the cold, silent river. There was a thin ribbon of a track rather conveniently placed ten feet from the river's bank; this we divided into sectors. Each troop of each battery was responsible for prowling their own sector, and every half hour men would meet and whisper "O.K." in the eerie gloom.

My watch came at eleven and lasted until one o'clock. At times we walked slowly up the track, avoiding noise; other times we sat on our haunches like Indians and listened. We peered across the whispering river at the far bank and wished it wider. I felt the water: it was a bone-freezing cold. There was not a sound in the still hush, except that of the river sliding by.

Then out of heaven came the sweet ghostly trill of a nightingale. From out of the top of the highest poplar its song descended upon us, to fill the world. Full and melodious, the sound eclipsed all other memories. It pierced with its sheer clarity and softness the bitter shell around my soul. That night I worshipped beauty, as I had that day hated the world. Breathless I searched the tops of the trees, but I could not locate the source

of such utter loveliness. The sound was ethereal and came from the stars themselves, from above the stars, from all eternity.

The dawn came upon us, harsh and real once more. More shelling, all very close. Each shell grazed the tree tops and, to this day, I cannot understand why the German did not send a few shells into the trees. They would have exterminated the lot of us. They would have burst down upon us in the ditch.

But he did not do so and the ditch remained our salvation. We slept in it; prepared our tea on its banks; and only left it once to bathe in the river, four times to go to hot meals from our splendid cooks, and twice to help blast the enemy off the cliffs above.

All regiments were being mauled. There were heavy casualties in the artillery. We suffered two further losses. On this second day it became apparent that he had redisposed his guns. Some of them or more of them, I do not know which, were ahead of us along the valley; whilst a few at least must have stayed till the last on the hills to the east. We fired some rounds twice during the afternoon on a line "Zero 118 degrees." Our zero line was a bearing of 340 degrees, thus this target must have been on a compass bearing of 98 degrees. That means eight degrees south of due east—somewhat behind us! We could not do it from our platforms in the gun pits, as the pits were built to take only about 100 degree arc of fire. So we had to juggle the gun so that its muzzle was pointing over one of the back corners of the gun pit; this meant new angles and some delay. But it was worth it: to fire back at the German up there was really good.

Then, later in the day, Captain Alan Mackay, of Auckland, sent back for a divisional artillery concentration. He had found their guns, the ones ahead of us. For two days he had been out of touch, lying up among the rocks, trying to get communication, watching. He got through. At dusk seventy guns put round after round into the enemy position. By the careful shooting of his own troop on to each gun in turn, and by the "stonk" at dusk, about nine or ten guns were destroyed.

Thanks to Captain Mackay and my friend Brown, who was his assistant, the deaths in the ranks of our divisional artillery were avenged. He has recently received the Military Cross.

There came to us, as evening fell upon the shell-swept Liri valley, two more pieces of heartening news. Rome had fallen. I sat in the ditch and wrote two brief letters by the failing light, exhilarated. Then came Ray Cranch to say we were pulling out and returning to our previous position in the corn-fields. It was over. Those thirty-six hours, like days not hours, had ended.

We packed recklessly and with abandon. The quads came up; we flung our gear aboard. Guns were hooked in and mounted the deep walls of the pits like birds. For a while we had to wait in the shelter of the poplars for the word to move. All the other batteries were firing still. We seemed to be the favoured ones. Perhaps because we had lost eighteen out of thirty-two on the position—I do not know. But I do know that we were grateful when Ray said, "Independent method back to last position." We flew.

My diary says, "We moved at great speed back through Sora."

We bedded down among the corn again and slept until nine or ten next morning.

Then we heard the final chapter heading of the war: the second front had opened with 4,000 ships, 11,000 planes and three paratroop divisions!

The joy, the relief; the loss, and the gain, were unutterable.

◆

CHAPTER VIII

CLAUDE AMICO

Claude was eleven or twelve years of age, I was never quite sure. He was a clean, nice-looking boy who frequently loved to bathe in the river. Of French extraction, his father had been impressed by the Germans to work for them. He was somewhere in Alsace-Lorraine. His mother had remained in Sora with little Claude, and had watched the scene change.

From their window in the town last Christmas they had seen long lines of prisoners being marched through the mud and snow and sleet. Marching northwards, destined probably for Germany.

"Who are those men, mother? Are they English?" asked Claude.

"New Zealanders, boy. See their titles."

"They don't look very sad, mother. They look tired, though. You once told me that in Tripoli the Germans called the New Zealanders 'cannibals' and told our settlers to run away from them. Is that true, mother? They look big and strong, but not cruel."

"Yes lad, that is true. All the people of Azizia left their homes and orchards. They even left ten homeless babies which the nuns found in the town."*

"What happened to the babies?"

---

*The substance and subject matter of this conversation are true. The incidents and references to Tripoli are true (see "Kiwi Saga"), as is the incident at Sora, now related.

"The New Zealanders gave milk to the nuns, who fed them."

"Then these men are good men, mother."

But one did not know what to believe, if one was an Italian, as was Maria. Henri would have known, but Henri was gone . . . possibly dead . . . working somewhere in southern Germany. Maria's neighbours were all Fascists. She had to appear to be a Fascist too. Sora was a Mussolini town—almost a German town.

"Look, they're throwing stones at them." Claude clenched his fists until his long nails drew blood from his palms. His face was white and tense. For out there in the snow the townsfolk were deriding, spitting and throwing stones at the prisoners from Cassino. The men themselves scarcely seemed to notice. One man turned his tired face to the crowd, only his blazing eyes showing his contempt. A stone hit him in the head and he fell. No one touched him. Maria did not dare.

On the 14th June Claude followed the dictates of his heart and came to us. From the same window he and his mother had seen the passing cavalcade of retreat and victory. Just over two weeks before he had seen the Germans drawing up the valley, blowing the bridges over the Liri, planting hundreds and thousands of mines, stealing all the oxen to help haul their heavy guns. Trucks and tanks had rumbled past . . . back, back northwards.

Then the night of the 30th May when the Maoris had entered Sora in the dark at the bayonet point. He had been frightened at first, but soon he liked the

Maoris, they always laughed in their big, deep voices and they were afraid of nothing. Then had come the guns. They came just as soon as the engineers had put the Bailey across the river. And for two days Claude had heard the crash of guns and the crunch of shells up the valley.

Now, however, we were out . . . resting. We had left the hot cornfield on the slope and camped with the whole division beside the Liri, where it flows swiftly through the oaks and poplars and corn below Fontana Liri. There we bathed and rested, cleaned our guns and equipment; and trained each morning.

There it was that Claude left his mother and came to us. He was not sure of his mother, but he had made up his mind about us on that dreary day in December. It was Ross, my driver, who first made friends with the lad. These two were inseparable.

He came to us first ragged and unkempt. So Ross cut his hair and then took him for a swim. We often saw his thin little figure beside us in the water after that day—he used to join any one of the eight of us who was going to the river.

We cut down a bush shirt to fit him. Les found some shorts too small for himself. Ross gave him an old type field service cap. Pinky presented a towel. We made him a bed under a tarpaulin upon camouflage nets. Someone lent an extra blanket.

All day long Claude was happy. He sang *Lili Marlene* and *Marseillaise*. The latter he sung with pride, for it was plain to us that he was prouder of his claim to being French than of his Italian blood. It was

ironical and a little sad that the *Marseillaise* should have been written by Rouget de L'Isle for the encouragement of the Strasburg conscripts, whereas the father of the boy who sang it now was such a one as these—a conscript, and possibly not far from Strasburg.

All day the lad worked for us in little ways. He put on the water for our tea; learning after a while, after almost setting himself on fire, to pour out the petrol into a tin, place the burner over it, and gingerly drop a match down the funnel.* He washed our mess tins and eating utensils. He washed his own meagre wardrobe every few days. And more than that, he washed himself, as often as we did! This can scarcely be said of other little boys around the district, so we must have set him a good example.

One night he and Ross went off to the mobile cinema together. The picture was a comedy. Ross took with him a bottle of wine in case of thirst. When he arrived back it was apparent that he had been thirsty. It also appeared that the picture had much amused the pair of them: every minute or so there was a subdued chuckle and Ross would say to Claude, "Cinema multi ha-ha, eh Claude?" To this the boy would affirm, "Si Si", and both would laugh again.

We had not far to look to find that the people of Sora were received with kindness on all hands. That can, of course, be said for our treatment of Italians at

*This type of water heater we called a "Benghasi Burner"—it is sometimes advertised commercially as a 'Thermet'. The fire burns in the funnel, the water being on the outside of the funnel. Water boils in two minutes.

all times. But here it seemed quixotic. For here it was that our own kith and kin were stoned some months before.

One day one of the lads went to the town on a 'binge'. During the course of the day he exuberantly hopped aboard a bicycle and, when last seen, was careering erratically down the main street pursued by half a dozen angry Italians. This man was away all night. Where he spent the night he never said, possibly never knew; but he was possessed of the biggest black eye I have ever seen. He had been unmercifully kicked and beaten. Still we turned the other cheek!

On every side we saw that our men were being stalwart ambassadors. They shared their food in return for laundry and mending done; gave them music from wireless, or possibly from an Italian gramophone looted from another town. One family used to visit a certain tent every afternoon, there to sit enthralled at gramophone recordings of their own golden-voiced Gigli.

It was announced over the radio one day that twelve and a half million pounds were to be raised to help the people of this country . . . raised from the shattered homes and lives of the people of London! I could scarce believe it. Surely we British are a courteous race, a gallant, foolish, quixotic people! To the people who followed the dictates of Mussolini and tried to stab us in the back just three years previously, there is already succour coming! Succour from the homeless to the homeless! To the folk who gladly would have shared a piece of Britain if they could, we turn the other cheek, we pick up their fallen graces and tell them, "Go ahead . . . build your lives again". It is superb; it is reckless

chivalry: yet it is Christian. It may well be that it is such a heart as this which pulled Britain through her darkest fog of hate and danger.

We spent a few sunlit, peaceful days down near the source of the cold, rapid river. We had work to be done on our gun, so I was able to take down to the workshops three of my men who were camped in Fontana Liri.

The Liri wells out happily from under black rocks in a dozen places. So pure and sweet are the waters of the spring that there is a small sanitorium erected over their very source which bears a marble slab inscribed to the effect that Plinius the Elder had blessed the waters with properties of giving health. Each day, even now when the tide of war had scarcely ebbed away from their lovely countryside, people came down and filled bottles and stone urns with the clear, cold fluid.

Ice-cold mineral water! There is nothing sweeter to the tongue on a hot Italian day. It was summer and each day we repaired to the spring and buried our faces in the bubbling freshness of it. Lower down we bathed in the river at the place where a dozen springs join forces in a racing flood. In amidst these springs there is one of sulphur, and the water here has quite different properties. I was amazed at the wealth of nature, at the health of nature. I thought that there was nothing more pure and life-giving in the world to-day than the springs blessed by the Roman Plinius. My mind went back to the source of another river, the Orontes in Syrian Lebanon. Here, too, I had bathed . . . breathless at the coldness of the water, thrilled with its liveliness. I felt that things are always sweeter at

their source; that later, defiled by man, they lose sweet purity and flow sadly, attempting to beautify, through the fields of death and destruction.

In war, a man from the city is brought much closer to the real clay, the good clean earth. He opens his eyes for the first time upon the reality of life. He sees water not from taps, but flowing with a sigh of utter contentment over rounded stones, sweeping poplar leaves into the eddies and the rills, trailing willow branches in the shadows of the bank. He looks upon the trees as friends, to shelter him and hide him. In Greece, far-off now, I had seen these things and loved them. I had blessed the arms of the olives which spread their impenetrable green cloak over our heads, as we hid. As I had cut saplings from the river banks to roof our dugout, and bathed in the snow water off the hills, I had really lived.

Young Claude continued to serve us. And we could see what was in his mind. He, brave lad, wanted to go to war with us. Each day, as he sewed on our buttons, or put sergeant's stripes on a new shirt, or washed up, he tried hard to ensure his passage north. He was a quick youth and had no illusions as to our future movements. It was apparent, too, that he had made up his mind that he must win my heart, as I was in charge of the truck and gun, if he were to accomplish his desires.

One day I hopped aboard a truck for Rome with a day leave pass in my pocket. On that day Claude really thought he had lost the means of his conveyance. But, of course, I came back and the lad was full of hope again. He was working on me hard by now. We used

to sit and talk in French, my halting schoolboy French against his mother tongue. Or sometimes in Italian. He always called us, "Amico" (friend), at first, then he learnt our names. He sometimes called me "Martino amico"—but latterly, when he was thinking out his plans of coming with us when we moved north again, it was "Sergente". I was to learn the reason for this, for I heard Claude whispering to Ross about it all. He asked whether he could stay with us always and I saw Ross answer, "Pregare sergente" (ask the sergeant).

But it was impossible.

On the eleventh July we packed up for battle once again. Claude's mother sensed the move, probably all Sora saw the preparations, and came looking for him. And so it was that Claude had to let go of that which had made him happy, and returned sad-eyed to the uncertainty of his home. Strange words! Yet here they are true, for the mother was an uncertain quantity, too afraid to decide which side was right, her husband's or her neighbour's, and too scared to fight for either belief. We knew that Claude would not be happy: but could do nothing. We could not take him to possible death, a boy scarcely twelve years of age.

He gravely shook hands with each of us, saying *"Arrivederci, amico"* (Good-bye, my friend).

There were tears in his eyes as he made his solitary way through the golden corn, back to the old life. He left his dreams behind him. Brave dreams.

◆

CHAPTER IX

AREZZO—A BITTER PILL

At midnight of the 11th—12th July we pulled out on to the road, passed through the sleeping town of Arce and passed thence to the road to Rome. We had ahead of us a long trek northwards. By now the advance had sped far past Rome, taken Perugia and the Lake Trasamene district up as far as Castiglione Fiorentino, and settled there for a brief respite, as the rest of the line straightened itself out. We now had to catch up and join in the attack on the walled city of Arezzo, the next step forward.

We reached the *via* Roma at 1 a.m. The moon was high and almost full; the air warm and scented. I sat all night on the roof of my quad as we sped towards the Eternal City along the flat Campagna, which surrounds Rome like a carpet. The tree-lined *super-strada** looked like a silver ribbon in the white light, blotched regularly with the dark shadows of trees. On each side I caught glimpses of orange groves, and olives; castles tucked away amid the wooded slopes of hills.

It was interesting to contemplate just how many times, by how many races, this same trek had been made. This route had been in use only as a lesser road;

*Originally, in about 1925, there was only one *super-strada*, main road built for car traffic, but under Mussolini these began to find their way everywhere. They are bitumenised, wide, and usually follow the routes of the old Roman roads, and are for that reason straight. For example, the *via* Emelia, from Rimini to south of Milan.

but running parallel to it, from Rome down to Capua and then to Brindisi, is the Appian Way. This two-thousand-year-old road has carried some of the greatest pilgrims of all time, has seen empires rise and fall. About 1945 years ago St. Peter met the apparition of Christ on this road and pronounced that immortal phrase, *quo vadis?*

There is so much time packed into these places that the mind can scarcely grasp their significance. As we entered the slowly awakening Rome at dawn, 5 o'clock, I felt the majesty of Time. I felt it rather more than I did on my helter-skelter one-day's visit a week previously. Sitting up there in the morning dew, I felt I could drink in its history as from a cup. I felt its eternal age. Alone on the roof of my truck I thought back along a great vista of almost a million such dawnings upon the fair city on the Tiber. Almost a million times the sun had risen in a like manner; finding Rome the Eternal being built upon the site where the she-wolf had suckled Romulus and Remus; seeing the Forum rise amid the busy markets; and the Colosseum where "the buzz of eager nations ran in murmured pity, or loud roared applause, as man was slaughtered by his fellow man" (Byron). The sun had risen to see the municipality of Rome being installed upon the summit of the Capitol, and art treasures preserved there against the ravages of time in the buildings prepared by the matchless hands of Michelangelo. It had seen the fall of Rome; the almost-destruction of the city in the time of Nero. It had constantly looked down upon the mellowing stones which lay there neglected in the Middle Ages. And then had come the new Rome built upon the old, when, on 20th September, 1870, the troops of

OFFICIAL WAR PHOTOGRAPH

OUR ENEMY . . . WINTER!

". . . we progressed from mud pool to mud pool."

OFFICIAL WAR PHOTOGRAPH

VISERBA

". . . ice-cream shops that were not ice-cream shops."

the King of Italy, marching from Florence, had fought their way into the grand old city by the Porta Pia and constituted her the capital of the new Italy. The sun had risen, too, upon the good Mussolini, the man who restored splendour and good living, and upon the bad Mussolini, the man who wanted power and thought himself a new Caesar.

At eight that morning we bedded down in a rock-girt field and tried to sleep. But this is not easy in the day time, when the sun is hot, and we departed at 1 a.m. that same night little rested.

On that second night we followed the Tiber valley to Passo-Corese, then climbed into the gorge-like valley of the Aja torrent. The road now led over the Sabini Mountains, beloved of Horace, and led, a winding, steeply-graded track, past some of the most picturesque mountain towns I have ever seen. Perched on the crags were fine old battlemented villages, and through some of these the road passes, entering and departing by means of great stone or brick arches.

At Terni the road drops, then climbs again to the heights of Somma (2170 feet), descends steeply again to the gorges of the Tessino rapids. Just to the East of Terni, on the Rieti road, are the beautiful falls of Cascate delle Marmore, where the waters of the Velino river fall over a precipice some 650 feet high into the river Nera. It is said that one Curius Dentatus in 271 B.C. cut the first channel that causes the water of the two rivers to meet in such a picturesque manner.

At 10 a.m. we had completed the second stage of our journey. We were on the south-eastern shores of Lake Trasamene. The great lake stretched away to the north

of us, grey and placid, brooding as upon a past evil. Indeed this very spot has a bloody past. For here it was that Hannibal lured the Romans out of their fortress of Arezzo, on 21st June, in B.C. 217, took them into ambush and after three hours of fighting utterly destroyed their army and killed the Roman consul-general Flaminius.

We had a short rest here, but no sleep. Instead we prepared the guns for action. The final move was again that night. At 11 p.m. we were to move round to the western shore of Trasamene and follow *Super-strada* Number 71 as far as Castiglione Fiorentino.

We again traversed a winding track through the oak trees, which were the southern setting for the huge grey lake, and followed the leader round to the north-bound road. Here, by reason of a jeep with blazing headlights, which dazzled both my driver and myself, we lost the convoy. The result was rather amusing. Steering a course through half a dozen lanes by means of the North Star, we turned north at a juncture which, I felt, should take us round the corner of the Lake and on to the Route 71. It did! An hour ahead of the regiment! We cruised up the lake-side road, with the Pole Star ahead of us, quite happily, occasionally checking our position by peering at names of towns and villages. As we neared Castiglione Fiorentino, we stopped a stray officer going the other way, who pointed out our turn-off to the gun position. One vehicle was not as cautious as ourselves that night, and was stopped by our infantry, just in time to prevent it charging the Arezzo fortress single-handed with two ammunition limbers.

The trip was quiet and, had we not been so tired, of great interest. We passed the picturesque Castiglione del Lago, a tiny town perched on a great rock on the eastern shore of Trasamene. All castellated towns take names such as Castiglione, Castello or Castellina, and append to them some other name which differentiates them. This was Castiglione del Lago (of the Lake), and probably people looked down from its battlements in horror, on that day in June, 2,162 years ago, upon the disaster which befel the Roman legions. They must have shook in terror at the mighty charge of Hannibal's armoured elephants.

This country is the oldest in Italian history. Older much than Rome. Here Cortona, sitting aloof upon the hill ten miles north of Trasamene, tucks within its simple heart almost the entire human memory of Italy. "She lies on a hillside with a vast background of mountains, that seem to overwhelm and threaten her. She crouches there like a white dove, crowning the top of an incredible eyrie and lifting to heaven 'her diadem of towers.'" Thus speaks Edward Hutton of Cortona. And that great traveller's hero, Dennis, "Here is a city, compared to which Rome is but of yesterday—to which most cities of ancient renown are fresh and green. Ere the days of Hector and Achilles, ere Troy itself arose—Cortona was." Here once dwelt Dardanus, before he left Italy to found the Trojan race. Here, it seems, history was born—centuries before Rome which, in turn, was founded 753 years before Christ.

Time stands still? No, it is Cortona which stands still and Time which passes by. For the same old maze of narrow precipitous streets passes between the sombre

palaces, founded on the naked rock that a hundred generations have been powerless to wear away.

It is interesting now to compare the words of Edward Hutton with the situation before us at the time. Concerning Castiglione Fiorentino he wrote, in 1910, the following significant words. "It is the strongest place on this side of the Chiana Valley, an outpost of Arezzo, and, while that city held the hills behind it, impregnable."

Hutton was, of course, thinking of attack from the north; for that was the direction from which attack always had come in the past: from the forces of Hannibal, later from the Florentines, from Caesar. In the battle of Campaldino in 1262 both Castiglione and Arezzo were laid low and taken by the people of Florence.

But the task before our infantry was, if different from that of the army of the Florentines, almost as difficult. Arezzo was a stronghold long before the Roman Empire was conceived and it takes its nature from the ground on which it stands, high, barren, and proud. Its position geographically makes it a key town in a military, as well as commercial, sense. For Arezzo stands at the junction of three great valleys, of the Arno, the Casentino, and the Chiana. And through these valleys run the roads to Florence, to Pisa and the west coast, to the Romagna and the Adriatic, to Rome. Through the ages Arezzo was destined to hold the keys of central Italy and to endure, therefore, the ravages and attacks of these and other peoples.

Our gun position on the meadow below the Castiglione hill was ideal. It was pastoral Italy at its loveliest.

The soil had been tilled, probably three thousand times. I suppose no soil in all Italy had been tilled so often. Here, amidst the piled up sheaves of corn, we dug our gun pits. On all sides were green, rolling meadows; in front the frowning hills, behind them again the grey masses of the Apennines.

Our gun pits were completed by dawn and, as the sun rose upon the meadows, the guns were concealed by nets brown in colour, which simulated the closely cropped field. The farmer appeared, worried about his sheaves; so we pointed out where the gun blast would go, and helped him move the crop. His family appeared too, black-eyed and friendly; took our washing; brought us wine.

Here in the peaceful basin, cupped by the country of wild hills and rocky slopes, so Umbrian in character, which surrounds Cortona, and by the foothills of the Apennines, upon which stand Castiglione Fiorentino and Arezzo, life was going on in the same peaceful vein: whilst, crouched and concealed in holes in the fields of reaped corn, were many engines of war and bloodshed which that night were to shake the very walls of history.

We were very tired that day. We had had three long night treks, broken only by short naps by daylight. This day, Friday the 14th July, we spent preparing for the barrage that night. We had arrived at 3 a.m., completed our gun-pit by 5 a.m., had tea and breakfast, two hours sleep and begun work again.

At 1 a.m. that night the infantry began to attack the hills which dominated the whole area around Arezzo, almost 2500 feet high—a solid, formidable task. At

that hour we began a programme of 155 rounds per gun, relatively small. Beside our men up there in the ravines were the men of the 4th Indian Division, that splendid machine which had fought so long and so well in the desert days. It was like old times to us to know that such fine fighters were on the right flank.

On Saturday the report was sent around that "all objectives were taken." Also that the Indians had cut the road (Route 73) to the east of Arezzo. We rejoiced and rested. Mail came in and all was quiet and peaceful.

Then at night the bottom fell out of everything. My feelings are best expressed in the intense bitterness of this brief entry in my diary:

"150 rounds again. The situation report yesterday was a fake put over to boost morale of 'this ball of fire,' and the real facts were that we were badly knocked. Attack to-night met no opposition. Our shells fell on empty ground."

Forty words in my diary! But words so seething with emotion they should have been written in acid that they might have burned the paper.

Let me consider the entry in its parts.

"The 150 rounds": that was nothing. An hour's work. But the fury of that second sentence! I had, like many others, revered my own association with the division which Winston Churchill had referred to as "that ball of fire." We, as New Zealanders, had been proud of our tradition, short but rather fine. When Alexander Clifford, amongst the three most war-experienced correspondents of our time, said of the New Zealand

Division, "If I had been asked to write down the best division in the armies of the British Empire, I should have put this one unhesitatingly first. Rommel had already done so . . . ," my heart had been glad and, if the dead can hear me, let them be glad too.

But this! This insult! As I helped to uncap shells that evening I wondered, "exactly at what stage of our history had we ceased to be capable of receiving news of a defeat?" The answer never came.

And as irony, look at my last sentences: one of five, the last of six, simple words. "No opposition. Empty ground." The German had felt the impact of steel, and held just long enough, retiring quietly when his fight was won, knowing that the following night there would be no victory.

Next day a thousand or so men of the 4th reinforcements were told they were going home on furlough (as the main-body men had before them).

And herein, I am afraid, lies a story. It is a story which explains rather sadly, the reason for the bogus "morale-building" message of 36 hours previously. For I feel I can say, without fear of contradiction, that the scheme which had brought joy to so many hearts at home, the scheme whereby long-service personnel were sent home on furlough for three months or more, had taken from our force a little of the spirit. Men had, to use an expression dear to the heart of every long-service soldier, "one foot on the boat."

Reader, if you knew that within a week or a month you were going home to that wife you had not seen for four years, and to that son you had never seen,

would you grip your bayonet with the same spirit as before? Would you volunteer for a special raiding party? Blow up a bridge exposed to fire?

Whilst in Southern Italy, when we first landed back with the Division, I had had the intensely humiliating experience of listening to a white-haired, curly-headed youth of a recent reinforcement tell a group of six of us, all men who had been booted out of Greece and Crete, been chased up and down North Africa and come through to final victory, and furlough, that the New Zealand Division had "had it." That this gentleman became an officer over me is of no importance; but what is hard to swallow is that in some small respect, and at the time of speaking, he was right.

But it is also just as true to say that the Division lived it down; got over it. They superbly rose to the occasion and did not fail. The young recruits proved to be as good as the veterans they had replaced. The older men passed on their experience. The fire returned gradually as if fanned by a breeze.

But Arezzo was a pill, bitter to the taste.

That we had greater things ahead, we could not know. What hurt was that it seemed that some of the fire had died.

I felt very tired and went to my small tent unhappy in spirit.

◆

CHAPTER X

ON TO FLORENCE

Arezzo was in our hands and our troops well beyond it. The Division was placed in reserve once more, with the news that we would in all probability be required for the attack on Florence. With this we were content and settled down to rest.

We had rested but one day, when I was told to report to battery H.Q. as quartermaster. This meant another ten and sixpence a week; but, for all that, did not seem too bright a prospect to a man attached to guns as I was. Here was I, a grocery-man and clothing dealer on the field of battle, doing no fighting, whilst still (in most cases) within range of the enemy. I had had this experience in Greece whilst in the orderly room and did not enjoy it. There is a great satisfaction in being able to hit back at the enemy, and cold comfort to have as weapons only a typewriter, or a couple of truck loads of clothing and rations.

However, I made the best of it, together with a completely new staff. Cos, my ration clerk, I call Eb—he called me Zeb. Two country storekeepers! Tom, another old friend, was storeman, and George was driver. In addition I had half a dozen cooks, a cook's truck, a ration truck, a store truck and a water cart to think about. The job is, of course, a sinecure, and one usually well sought after by long-service men.

To me its main advantage was that it entailed a great deal of moving about—perhaps in search of a market for fresh vegetables, or fruit, or contacting and arranging for a laundry. Such jobs are pleasant; they give one freedom, which I had never had before, being always "married" to a gun, and this I welcomed.

Several times I went down the shore of Lake Trasamene, passing the quiet, brooding Cortona on the way. On the lake-side was our mobile laundry, drawing its water from the natural source as it usually does. An elusive unit, this laundry, I seemed to spend a good deal of my four months as quartermaster searching for it. Every time we advanced in an attack, it would lag behind, and then catch up in a great bound, which took it quite often into the firing line. It came to rest usually on a stream or spring or lake; sometimes it tapped a town water supply. Map references of their position would then be sent out by signals and the fun of tracking them down would commence. Once I received a reference which was ten map squares out; twice I finished up on the wrong side of the river, a difficult place from which to transact business!

On Thursday, the 20th July, we were told that we were packing up for a move south of Florence, there to join in a six-division attack in this central sector. Our divisional objective was the Pisa-Florence road just to the west of Florence, whilst the task of taking that city was given to the South Africans.

On the 21st I watched the guns go past, a strange feeling, and tagged on near the end of the column with my six or seven B-echelon vehicles.

To my disappointment we by-passed Arezzo, went west thirty miles, turned north ten miles, by-passing yet another city famous in Italian antiquity, Siena. However, I was to see much of this city at a later date.

Our bivouac that night was amid the oaks six miles north of it. Here there stretched for miles a splendid oak forest and we pitched our bivvies on the mossy turf and lichen-covered stones of a low rolling hill. At our back in a perfect emerald setting was the pearl-like city, throughout the ages walled against aggression. Rising from out of the white palaces and buildings I saw the black and white spire of its famous cathedral. Set as it was amid the vineyards and green fields and oaks, closed within high walls, Siena seemed to me one of the most jewel-like cities I had ever seen. My memory ran to these words of Hutton and I reserved for the future the pleasure of a visit to the town that so captures the imagination of the traveller:

"A situation lofty and noble, an aspect splendid yet ethereal, a history brave, impetuous and unfortunate, a people still living yet still unspoiled by strangers . . . caught about by her vineyards as with a kirtle of green, girdled with silver and gold—the silver of her olives mixed with the gold of her corn."

Its architecture, even from this distant hill, seemed to me rather wonderful. Indeed Siena has constantly attracted visitors for the sake of its art and its architecture, for the picturesque nature of its surroundings; and students, too, who come to hear the purest Italian in all Italy. It seems that Siena has shut in and has closely guarded that which is beautiful; that from its long struggle as a powerful republic with its equally power-

ful neighbours Florence and Perugia, it has gained a separate entity, a separate history, a real grandeur and simplicity all its own.

At dusk on Saturday the gun group moved forward ten miles. On Sunday I went forward in a jeep and reconnoitred a position with the Battery Captain less than a mile behind the guns. It was a most unusual position, rather like a crow's nest, and from this eyrie we could clearly see the battle down below us. I saw our infantry take Tavarnelli on the road from Poggibonsi to Florence, saw a tank battle and a smoke screen that I could not understand. Who was who out there was impossible to decipher, there were the smoke and fog of war, the crump of shells, the mushroom billows of dust which are shells bursting on the plain.

I went up to the guns, why I do not know, perhaps I was lonely—and, as if to point out that, after all, life in the waggon lines or B Echelon was perhaps a quieter, safer place, a fast, huge 170 m.m. shell hit the road behind our tail, almost closing the road for all time. On the way back we had to steer a perilous path around its crater.

At 5 that evening, so that these large vehicles might have the cover of dusk in which to occupy the mountain crow's nest, I brought the B Echelon forward 9 miles, and we settled down for the night.

On Monday morning the battle was rolling away in the blue distance of the Florence plain. Progress was good; our infantry being well past Tavarnelli on the road to Florence. By Tuesday it was apparent that the New Zealanders were some miles ahead in a salient

that pointed straight for the objective city. We could hear the Indians on our left rear and the South Africans on our right rear.

The guns by now had moved twice: we were ten miles behind, too far for communication and rations. At 2 p.m. we moved ten miles north to an area past Tavarnelli. Life was one long pack-up-and-move, very much a war of movement. Here the guns one moment were 500 yards ahead of us; next morning seven or ten miles away. It was good. The spirit was good. Florence was giving the New Zealanders something to go for. They had the bit in their teeth. All ranks enjoyed themselves.

There is little doubt that had we been allowed we should have taken Florence many days before it was finally captured. But we were in a salient and such was dangerous. To leave the flanks open was a risk which the army commanders do not wish, nor do they need, to take. Furthermore, what was probably more important, the taking of Florence was ear-marked for the South African division. The ultimate result was, as you will see, that we waited for a week for our flank to catch up; finally got impatient and entered Southern Florence; whereupon the Maoris (who at 3 a.m. were really beginning to enjoy the place) were ordered out and the South Africans invited in.

But I am anticipating events: let us return to the war of movement.

On Wednesday, 26th July, I again visited the guns. Already the battle had rolled away. The infantry were then about 8 miles south of Florence. From a hill that day I watched a dozen dive-bombing Kittyhawks

swoop down upon a concentration of Tiger tanks and guns, then watched a divisional 'stonk' * crash down upon them, which filled the air with clouds of dust and smoke.

Perhaps my dairy entry of 27th July will give some idea of the spirit and fast movement of these splendid few days.

"Guns moved another 7 miles forward, now rather to the south-west of Florence. Went to guns in a jeep They seem to be right up on the tail of the infantry (they were, a thousand yards behind them). The attack last night was a successful one. All the villages around us now were in German hands until this morning. Shelling on the road as I went up; I missed the Battery Captain, went back in spite of shellfire, missed B.C. again, B. Echelon moved new area, caught them up 4 p.m., brewed tea. Moved battery on to Route Two so as to support 4th Armoured Brigade's attack on Florence along Route Two."

It is indeed a busy war that necessitates moving B Echelon three times in the one day! It took me all day to find them and I caught them finally at 4 p.m. moving in accordance with this new plan.

Beside the road to Florence winds the Pesa, a pretty tree-skirted river which flows softly over rounded pebbles. On its either bank are corn-fields and meadows ripe with golden wheat, hastily vacated by their Fas-

* This term herein used is one coined by Brigadier "Steve" Weir (now Major-General of 46th Division), one of the greatest artillery commanders of the war. It came into being first at Alamein, where we learnt to concentrate every gun we had upon one important target, however small.

cist lords. We stopped for days in a wheat field such as this. Our wheels crushed down the heavy-headed stalks, as we came in off the bitumen road, and I am afraid that the best use the yellow crop was put to that season was to provide us with soft beds on which to sleep. A few yards ahead of us was the blown bridge where Route Two crosses the Pesa, before that river turns northwards to follow the road which crossed it. This bridge was already being replaced by a Bailey. Even as we dallied in the field (the guns had crossed the river, which was easily fordable) engineers bolted together the huge Meccano set and the road was open.

Ahead of us stretched a line of hills, undulating and fertile, crowned by villas and farm houses. The nearest of these hills had, nestling on its summit, a grand old house belonging to a Fascist, Count Piatti by name. The position commanded a splendid view of the Pesa valley and, on clear days, it was even possible to see the dome of the magnificent Cathedral of Florence.

One day Doug and I went up there in a jeep. The house is surrounded by stately cypress trees which stand like furled umbrellas, timeless guardians of the mansion. Inside was furniture such as I had never seen before. Carved oak chairs and tables, tapestries, great carved wardrobes, littered the *casa* in profusion: all that had been of value and small enough to carry away had been plainly looted. We went up two flights of stairs and ascended into a sun room on the roof-top. This has an interesting story. It had been the observation post of a German artillery officer. One of our observation posts had spotted the German and ranged the battery on to the sun room. The result can be

seen from the photographic plate taken by me from the southern window, looking northwards. From these shattered windows we enjoyed a magnificent view: we could well imagine the targets our forces presented to the German as they advanced from the south along Route Two.

The guns were in a fruit orchard alongside the Pesa River, living well on ripe peaches, apricots, pears, tomatoes and apples. Italy in summer constantly presented us with an infinite variety of fruit and vegetables. Grapes were now ripe and hung in heavy clusters from the vines. Often had I pitched my bivouac beneath a grapevine and been able to pluck a bunch by reaching out a lazy hand before rising in the morning. For the most part our bivouacs were amid idyllic surroundings. It is impossible in pictures to portray the green freshness of the trees and vines, the brilliant blossoms and the full colour of ripe fruit, but I have included a few photographs in the hope that some little of the beauty may creep into these pages.

My tasks included the procuring of fresh fruit and vegetables, and this afforded me quite a lot of pleasure. Cabbages, potatoes, cauliflowers, tomatoes, pumpkins, carrots and marrows were the easiest vegetables to get; but it depended on the length of time that an area had been occupied as to the ease with which these commodities could be bought. Sometimes an area would be swept clean in a month, or even a week. Often an area was vacated by the residents, due perhaps to the intensity of a battle, and here fruit and vegetables were available for the plucking. This applied also to wine. If the Eighth Army had passed through at a

speed slow enough to permit of occasional indulgence in drinking wine, then the area would undoubtedly be dry, with the exception of that special, private wine supply kept by each householder for his own consumption at meal times. Even this supply was not always safe!!

Now you will see that I am stating the facts, and making no allowances. But it may be said with truth that these things were usually paid for, either in money or in specie. Troops and quartermasters normally paid the poor Italian in anything he asked for, and at a good price. I used anything from money to cigarettes, bread and cheese or bully beef, and if the result was a load of fresh greens to put life and blood into the diet, then I think no one can protest. The money, incidentally, was our own, that is, the regiment's, or in many cases, the battery's money: this comes from a strange fund known as regimental or battery fund and is built up mostly by canteen profits.

By the 29th July, our advance had stopped four miles from Florence from two causes: the failure of our right flank to keep up with the game, and heavy artillery concentrations on the hills to the south of the city. At this juncture one of the fiercest engagements of the campaign was fought at San Michele. A Company of the 24th Battalion under Major K. H. Macdonald (since awarded the Military Cross for the action) captured the village on the night of July 27-28. Next day the company position was subjected to artillery concentrations, comparable to those laid down by our own artillery, and to attacks by infantry and tanks. The chief attack came in the early evening; our anti-

tank defences were knocked out and our tanks forced to withdraw. Macdonald's men hung on grimly, unsupported, fighting tanks with small arms, and forced the enemy to retire.

Here also were fought some of the fiercest battles of the campaign between the huge Tiger tanks of the Germans and the more numerous, but much lighter and smaller, Sherman tanks of our own division.

It is true that our tanks made some "kills", but only after careful scouting and ambushing by three or four Shermans. Usually one tank would make a frontal attack as a "bait" to the Tiger and, while that immense machine was lining up its huge gun turret upon the victim, the real attack would come from the sides. One such tank, stalked by this means, can be seen in the picture. I came across it just out of Florence on the morning that the city was entered, officially by the South Africans.

On Sunday, the 30th, at 10.30 p.m., three of our battalions made an attack under our barrage. This was followed by the 4th Armoured Brigade (N.Z. tanks) at 1 a.m. The battalions had mixed success, the Maoris missing their objective and striking trouble. Next day we were firing to support them. The objectives were finally taken by the 1st August and on this day the guns moved forward to a new position under a hill past Gascione, whilst B Echelon moved up and occupied their old home beside the river. At this stage the tank stalking below on the plain was at its height.

Next day we moved yet again, occupying a position on the top of a hill. We hid our trucks amid some

olives and slept in a fine home. Here we had a party around the piano, whilst below the infantry occupied three more features close to Florence. That night the noise of artillery was terrific, drowned only by our raucous voices raised in song; the infantry and tanks edging ever nearer to the beautiful city of the plains.

From the hill we saw the city's suburbs, spreading like a flock of sheep over the green meadow. We saw, too, our dive-bombing fighter 'planes swooping down like gulls upon the German guns and tanks.

This was the last. On the night of the 3rd our armour and infantry had fought their bitter way across the flat expanse: had dominated the low features to the south-east. At 3 a.m. the Maoris jubilantly entered southern Florence, within four hours they were withdrawn again.

This occupation, however, took effect only as far as the River Arno, which cuts the city in two unequal portions. For days the shrine of art, culture and music knew a reign or terror. The Germans firmly established themselves in buildings on the northern shore and machine-gunned, sniped and mortared down the city streets from across the river.

On that Friday I made an attempt to get into Florence in a truck, but could find no bridge to cross the small river to the south of it. I did, however, inadvertently come across our next gun position, which was situated in a field of deep luscious grass, great red tomatoes, and peach trees heavy with ripe fruit. Here I stayed for long enough to see our guns come in, then retired to our *casa* on the hill. On the road I passed

the still smoking hulk of a Tiger tank, the smell of death pervading the air.

The following day we were withdrawn and Canadians took over our positions in the orchards. For a couple of days we were to rest in the dried-up bed of the Pesa, then to relieve the 8th Indian Division on the left flank of the 8th Army. And so to the shallow expanse of rounded pebbles we withdrew, pitching our bivouac tents in the Pesa's course, hoping that the waters would not be released by some demolition up stream.

From here I did eventually gain admission into Florence. Doug took me in his jeep. We used the same road around the low hills, passing the now quiet remains of the grotesque Tiger, and not far away from it three hulks of Shermans. It was here that I took a photograph.

The beautiful city on the Arno, home of Dante and Michelangelo, came upon us suddenly round the bend of the hill road. We saw the river and its seven bridges, the river that gave Florence its *raison d'etre,* and knew ironically that this was No Man's Land. No Man's Land in the city which has given to the world its greatest art and some wonderful literature! Here in the centre of the 'Athens of Italy' was drawn a deadline, across which none could pass. And even as we entered the town by a new Bailey across the small river at its most southern extremity (where I had failed to cross two days before) we heard machine guns clattering and echoing down the wide streets.

We had hoped to see an art gallery, but, of course, this was impossible. All the treasures painted by the

peerless hands of Giotto, Andrea Orcogna, Ghirlandaio, Botticelli, Leonardi da Vinci, Michelangelo and Machiavelli were hidden well away; and the noisy guns that sprayed the streets barred the way to further exploration. We contented ourselves with poking our jeep through all the streets south of the river and thinking back on what we might have seen. Each street opened out into wide vistas of the beautiful countryside, as if in invitation to those who sought inspiration to come and drink at the pool of learning and culture. Thus speaks Cecil Headlam in reference to the Lily of Tuscany. "From all the surrounding hills, through vineyards and cornfields and olive plantations, flanked by slim cypresses and gardens laden with lilies and irises, you look across a smiling land upon a city beautiful, famous in history, famous in commerce, famous in art and letters and for the adventures of the soul of her great sons."

But now, for a brief few days, blood ran in the gutters. We came to the end of a street and ran into a smoking pile of rubble. A Canadian came out and said, "Just ten feet to your left is a bad spot, Jerry is sniping down the street and he is mighty deadly."

"What happened here?" we asked pointing to the ruin.

"Mortared it an hour ago," was the reply. "The river is a hundred yards past here. Two people killed here to-day."

And blood upon a street corner: a few hundred yards away a saddened, bewildered crowd watched a woman run across a fire-swept intersection; saw her fall at a

burst of machine gun fire; saw a man, who ran to pick her up, fall too; applauded, by hissing in their teeth,* a British armoured car, under command of a ridiculously cool major, which ran into the hail of bullets and fired a Browning at the house that sheltered the Germans, while some Italian Red Cross men rescued the two who were hurt. A strange sight to disturb the serenity of Florence!

The city that produced the peaceful beauty of the writings of Dante, Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Villani was writhing now in misery and torture. For many days, and even weeks, there was no water supply, as the German had tapped the mains. Nor was there food, until we captured all the city by forcing him to evacuate. The position, militarily, was difficult. We could not, or rather would not, fight a battle in such a monument of age and grace. So Florence suffered. Her quiet byways, which concealed artisans in silk and leather, alabaster and ivory, painting and sculpture, were ruffled by the wind of war, and flecked by its blood. But never desecrated: she was saved, it seemed, by the memory of her greatness. Her literature and her art reached out appealing hands, and the lily of the Tuscan plains was spared.

Oh fortunate Italy! Your Rome, your Florence, your Venice, all spared by the ravagers. Whilst look at London, the target of all the evil of the Hun, standing alone in 1940, bruised, battered and bleeding, possessing in abundance only the spirit to win through.

---

*Italian method of applause, used even at operas when asking for an encore of an aria which has been well rendered. This sibilant sound is typical of quiet emotion of the Italians—they rarely shout, even at horse races.

◆

CHAPTER XI

SIENA BIVOUAC AND THE LAKES

There was a sequel to the Florence affair.

On the 7th August, the day following our Florentine adventure, we moved six miles north-west into a holding role on the left flank of the Eighth Army. Here, as promised, we relieved the 8th Indian Division.

The guns moved by dark up the exposed stretch of road that led to the Arno valley, for here the German could clearly see any movement. It was a dusty track and any undue haste by day, that caused a trail of dust, also caused a hail of fire. B Echelon was beckoned in off the road by Jim Morton, our B.S.M., and put to bed amid vines heavy with grapes, and trees laden with fruit, in a field under lea of a hill. Here, once again, I found I could pick grapes or figs at will by raising a lazy arm. The spot was quite lovely; we placed the truck in the shade of a trio of nectarine trees and enjoyed the rest of the cool evening, amid surroundings so beloved of Shelley, so ignored by Byron. Pastoral Italy is beyond the reach of words: no pen can describe the clucking hens, the cooing doves, the sheep, cattle and great-horned bullocks browsing in the fields; the hum of bees, the flight of birds, the friendly, blessed solitude of green arbours, far removed in atmosphere, yet close, in reality, to war.

How close, I was to find. Shells were landing many hundreds of yards away and caused little comment and

no alarm; but on the second night I was writing my novel in the truck, electric light switched on and the canopy blacked out, when a shriek of a 170 m.m. shell brought me sharply back to earth. The ground quivered, as with an earthquake, where it landed. I closed my manuscript and went to bed.

Such an atmosphere, I felt, was not conducive to the chapter I was writing (page 385, my diary tells me); a love scene cast on the pretty bays of Greece was far removed from the shriek, shudder and crump of heavy shells.

On the second day in this position I went to the guns. From the front seat of the truck I looked out over a wide valley and knew that a German was looking back at me. It was a weird sensation; to be in sight, to be followed keenly by one you cannot see, seems a little unfair. You feel that the German is cheating and that you really ought to be allowed to go scot-free. This time we did. But others were not so fortunate.

Cos, whom I called Eb, was up the road that same morning—an hour after I was there. He had parked his truck, loaded with the day's rations, beside the cooks. They were sitting peeling potatoes. The burners* were going in a shed behind them. Beside them, too, were the water cart men, their truck full of water, and an Italian woman washing in a tub. The scene was domestic and essentially peaceful.

Suddenly it was shattered. Two or three shells landed

*High-power primus burners, which use kerosene fuel, are pumped up by foot-pumps, and give heat enough to boil four large containers at one time.

in amongst them in quick succession. The water cart leaked, the woman screamed and fell; one man, Red Hunt, dropped, wounded. They rescued the woman, who was badly hit in the leg, while Red limped off to the Aid Post.

I felt sorry, in particular, for the cooks. They were not hit, but they might have been; and they would never have known what hit them. The burners drown all noise, any warning whine or shriek of a shell would be lost to them. Of course, that is war. It is just one of the ever-present risks we must all take. It might just as easily have happened had the cooks been with B Echelon as they often are. However, I felt that they might feel better if I shifted them back, and asked permission to do so. This was granted and they settled down to the work of preparing hot meals once again with an easier mind, although, even now, trying to listen for the whistle of shells above the sound of their pressure burners.

This part of the campaign was a complete anti-climax. Every man felt the same. The race to Florence had been good. But this . . . this was stale and nerve-racking. Two of the most well-loved men in F Troop were killed by a stray shell. There was shelling almost every time a truck raised a cloud of dust. There was shelling amongst the trees not very far from us, too, large stuff, probably 170 m.m. We were all a little tired of the atmosphere.

Then suddenly it came to an end. The Americans came. The roads were filled with jeeps on reconnaissance. At night on the 14th August the American Sherman tanks rumbled past in scores, and our New Zea-

land Shermans squeaked back the other way. That night our guns packed up and joined us in the orchard. We moved out at dawn, back to the peace of the oak forests north of Siena, leaving behind the whirr and crash of Nebelwerfers* as they laid down a concentration, disturbed, no doubt, by the change-over.

The abiding quietude of the great oaks, the happy song of birds and the vision of Siena, crouched serenely on three hills, brought rest to the soul. To lie down at night upon the moss, and sleep without that small, nagging fear, was Heaven.

Perhaps I appear to stress this always. Perhaps the reader is tiring of this "peace after the storm," which I always mention. But I must say this in defence: this is a true book, and no true picture of war can be given without emphasising the relief, the utter lifting of the soul from under its weight of uncertainty, upon coming out of action.

Italy largely was a picnic for us. Long, long weeks of action, but not as tough and fast and gruelling as were the desert days. There each day was a week. Here many days passed by unnoticed. Many days brought not one single happening of note. Whereas in the desert a man narrowly escaped death as often as six or seven times a day; in Italy I can recall being close to death only three or four times in a year.

But even so, to paint a true picture, I must tell of the content of mind which follows the disturbance. Very often we were never aware of the disturbance, of the

*Huge eight-barrelled German mortars which produce a noise like a hundred boomerangs, followed by a stream of mortar bombs.

unease; the awaredness of it came after the cause of it was gone. Take a man out of action and he suddenly realises that he was, after all, uneasy—not afraid, fear comes suddenly and leaves you breathless and with swiftly beating heart—but rather as if a little burden had been resting on the soul. And the cause of it is that ever-present possibility that you, you who had been so fortunate so often, might be the next. I repeat, it is not an emotion of which one is always aware; but, with the peace which follows, comes also truth.

I went one day to Siena for fruit; found none and came back with only my impressions of a mediaeval city, and a pipe. Siena, amongst other industries (for, since the Middle Ages whence she sprang, she has been a strong industrialist), makes perhaps the best pipes in all Italy. Real briars, fashioned and polished without the aid of putty.

Situated in the heart of Tuscany upon a triple hill-top, the last spur of the Chianti range (the hills which produce the grapes of Bacchus and one of the best-known wines in the world), Siena carries with it still a thirteenth century atmosphere. True it has a few dozen modern shops; but, take these away, and you are living amid the walls and streets and buildings of six hundred years ago. Young, compared to Cortona, but memorable always for her mystic and intense love of things beautiful, for the preservation of the atmosphere of the years that gave birth to these monuments.

I headed for the Piazza del Campo, the magnificently tinted, tiled and shell-shaped square, the centre

of her public life. We passed along a cobbled street where the stone houses seemed to press in upon you, as if to shut out the new and guard the old. Here were little old-world taverns, artisans in their stalls and the palaces of the princes. Here we stopped at an inn and had a cup of bitter coffee; whilst outside an American truck rushed past, its roaring engine echoing back from the aged stones, awakening the dead. An old man, secure in his recollection of Siena as a city of quiet and security, was wheeling a hand cart over the cobbles. The truck touched its wheel; the cart flipped over and threw the poor old man ten feet; he landed on his head and wept. I nearly wept myself. The peace cloistered within the mighty walls of Siena had been shattered by the march of time, and its victim was an old man. How oddly sad! The new, incongruous as coal on a Persian rug, had entered and bruised the sheltered, aged heart. So ashamed was I, that we hurried on, out of the gloom of the beautiful old street and into the sunlit, open square.

Here soars to Heaven the glorious Duomo, striped with marble and carpeted with mosaics, proclaiming for many centuries yet to come her gift of expression, her quality of joy, of passion, of sheer loveliness. This city lay in the path of one of the most bitterly-fought advances in Italy. Yet the tide swept past it and did not touch it. Except for the intrusion of rude trucks and jeeps, such as my own and the American's, she remained, as Edward Hutton said forty years ago, "a fortress dismantled, in the hands of invincible peace, where every tower has become a dwelling-house, every bastion a garden, every bulwark a shady walk, where

the gates are open wide that the children may run in and out."

I left Siena feeling I should apologise for intruding, feeling that I should lock the gate behind me and leave it undisturbed. But there is no gate! The city opens its arms to all, and the world swirls and eddies all around it in mad conflict, leaving her the same, unchanged, smiling and serene.

The hill slope on which we were bivouaced looked southwards past Siena over a huge stretch of barren country and undulating clay hills, a wilderness which reaches to the distant cone of an extinct volcano, Monte Amiata. Here in this sombre desert lie many oases, three magic lakes, and one of the most unspoilt places I have ever seen.

I was sent there on the 18th August. The guns of our division had to be calibrated;* our regiment was to be first on the range, which was situated on the fertile plain near Lake Montepulciano. I was to go down as acting regimental quartermaster.

We set off in the jeep, Captain Leo Robinson, Captain Monty Black, the driver and myself. Behind trundled the heavily-laden "Cooks" and the water truck, as inseparable as David and Jonathan. We made such slow progress, owing to the steep gradients of the bitumen road as it wound over the barren clay hills south of Siena, that both the Captains decided they would have

*Comparative shooting on the same "range" by all guns, so that the muzzle velocities can be determined. This is important for good target work, and all range-scale indicators are altered to the required muzzle velocity.

to return without seeing the firing area, so as to lead up the guns. I was given a map reference and left to carry on with "Cooks" and "Water."

Our way was the *via* Francigena, a magnificent *super-strada* which leads southwards into the heart of the lake district. Hutton calls it "magic country." Indeed, it is: barren, rolling, rugged like crude brass and studded with emeralds that are the Lakes Trasamene, Montepulciano and Chiusi, with sapphires that are Castiglione del Lago and Montepulciano.

We passed through Buonconvento, once the capital of all this region, entering by an arched gateway, leaving by another. This town, the first post out of Siena on the road to Rome, once the camping-place of an Emperor, has fallen on evil days. It was shaken badly in 1905 by an earthquake and seems to have known only tragedy. A saddened town, at the end of the Middle Ages period it witnessed the end of Imperial power in Italy when Henry VII, Dante's Emperor, died within its walls.

We saw, too, San Quirico d'Orcia, nestling amid the barren heaths of the valley d'Orcia, desolate beyond description, dwarfed by the rugged grandeur of Mount Amiata, the greatest mountain in Tuscany. And then Pienza, where the founder of the line of present Popes was born, Pius, son of a nobleman exiled from Siena. Pius was christened Enea Silvio, after Aeneas the hero of Troy; while the town that stands there now was then but a straggling village called by another name. But Enea was elected Pope after much good fortune and he took upon himself the name Pius, out of the vanity of Aeneas. Henceforth the dirty little village

grew into Pienza, named after him. But Pienza was not only given a name by Pius, but a heart too, and a cathedral and fine buildings. Like the fairy tale of Cinderella!

The road from Pienza to Montepulciano, a distance of eight miles, is one of the most beautiful in Italy. On all sides great vistas open out before you, and you are awed by the grandeur of the world, the exquisite beauty of its valleys. These valleys are set amid the frowning hills and buttresses of Amiata, amid the clay barren rocks, and for that reason gain by comparison a measure of utter loveliness.

Rain came. It came in bucketfuls. We saw the town of Montepulciano, perched high within four walls, aloof and peaceful, through great gusts of moisture. The roads were streaked with the yellow clay of the banks; the smell of lupins and wet grass came back to us with the wind. Here I felt the non-militant forces of Italy; felt the buffetting of wind and rain without the smell of death: and loved it. These wet stone walls, these towns untouched and undefiled, were so apart from all that I had seen, so separated from the misery of the ravaged north, that I felt complete joy and contentment.

We swung around the walls of Montepulciano and passed it; took a right fork of the road; passed through Aquaviva, a collection of shops and houses on the roadside, and stopped not far past there. My map reference seemed very close to where we were. It was raining hard. We went into a farm house to shelter and I asked the farmer where was Lake Montepulciano. He told us that it was less than half a kilometer distant. Then

he asked us if we were seeking for "the shooting-place for the guns." I said we were, and within five minutes we were talking to the English major in charge of the sound-ranging troop, had been allocated a dry house for the cooks and shown the regimental area. The guns arrived in time for their hot meal.*

The following three days were fine, and will ever live in my memory as amongst the most pleasant I spent in Italy.

The farmers opened their doors, and the towns their gates to us.

I went several times to Montepulciano and came back with good loads of plums and peaches. If we believe tradition, this town of a lovely name is among the most noble of Italian towns: founded by Lars Porsena and already of account when there were kings in Rome. But much of this is lost and we know nothing of Montepulciano until the year 715 A.D. From that day it seems to have been continually torn between surrender to Florence, then Siena, in turn. The town stands on a route which links Umbria and Tuscany and was constantly the cause of war between the powerful communes, both of whom claimed the fortress town as their own, like dogs over a bone.

But Montepulciano ceased her suffering in the sixteenth century. Now no sign remains. "Now she is one of the most delightful of the smaller cities of Tuscany and she sits there on her hill-top today above her lawns and vineyards and woods like a queen sure of her court and her own beauty."

*I frequently refer to "the guns" as animate objects. This is due to the artillery habit of referring to them as a group—the Gun Group. So when I say "the guns moved" or "the guns had dinner" I include, obviously, the gunners.

OFFICIAL WAR PHOTOGRAPH

FAENZA

". . . where the houses on the river-bank had stood were piles of rubble."

OFFICIAL WAR PHOTOGRAPH

CROSSING THE LAMONE RIVER NEAR FAENZA

I entered by the Porta del Prato, splendid arched gateway; passed churches decorated by the Renaissance sculptor Michelozzo, and entered a wide cobbled street, climbing steeply to the beautiful church of S. Maria. Here in this sunlit, smiling street I saw real happiness—a rare thing in war-torn Italy. Little boys ran out in friendliness and sat on the bonnet of our jeep; they took us buying fruit. Presently an old man came down with a hand cart and from him we purchased a hundredweight of plums, making arrangements to visit his orchard next day to obtain more plums and peaches. We bought post-cards in the shops, and wine. We talked with dozens of men and women and boys, all laughing happily, pleased that we had visited them. I left Montepulciano feeling that here there remained a great and happy heart, quite unspoilt, like an orchid hidden in the cleft of a rock.

Twice we went to Lake Trasamene and swam in its body-heat waters. Always quite tepid in temperature, grey and limpid in atmosphere, the great, brooding lake lies in an aura of evil. It is often said to be the most beautiful lake in the world; but not to one who has seen Galilee! The lovely quiet of the Sea of Galilee, its azure blue, the lapping of its waters on black rocks, seem to me to put Trasamene in a moody, mystic shade. There is much one cannot fathom about the Lago; whilst the Sea which laps Tiberias openly proclaims its soul, its sapphire loveliness.

We explored Castiglione del Lago, a dozen of us, and I took a photo of them sitting on the wall that drops sheer into the lake. Behind them the quiet waters reflected the hills of Sanguinetto, so named because of

the bloodshed caused by the ambush, the massacre and the charge of Hannibal's armoured elephants. The town is quiet and sad; its streets narrow, cobbled, gloomy. But the situation! Never did I want a villa in Italy so much as when I saw the cliffs of Castiglione. Far away upon all sides stretch splendid scenic views; below the placid grey waters, sometimes dull, sometimes, when the sun shines down upon them, silvery like a mirror's face. I wanted to be able to see the sun rise upon the distant hills, to see the red shafts suffuse the sky and flood the waters with reflections. But these are dreams as yet!

We left the land of the central lakes with real regret. Here we had known three happy days and seen more that is beautiful than in the rest of Italy.

◆

CHAPTER XII

THE ADRIATIC

We stayed resting in the oaks for four days after our calibration shoot. A sudden scheme was put in motion whereby half the regiment at a time went down to the beaches on the Ligurian Sea. Here for three days they sported in the crystal-clear water at a part of the coast not many miles from where Shelley's boat was wrecked. I thought of it at the time: Byron and his friend Trelawney finding the body preserved in quicklime, exhuming it and burning it on a great funeral pyre on the rocky shore. Byron and Shelley, such opposite types, yet such friends in a tolerant way—the Lord Byron at first despising, writing always of past glories; the tender Shelley, seeing always beauty in the present, seeing poetry in trees and flowers and rivers.

Suddenly this scheme was dropped; men were recalled; we packed up. The east coast was the story—the Gothic Line again. It had been thought that this heavily-fortified line would go at the centre, near Florence. But it hadn't. A big attack was to go in on the Polish front beside the Adriatic, so as to drive a wedge past the Gothic Line and flood the plains of Lombardy with tanks and mobile units. The Poles had just taken the Metauro River, and even as we went to help them, captured Pesaro.

Meanwhile, in Europe proper, the scene was changing daily. Our forces flooded all France like a great

wave and were about to cross into Belgium. Poor Belgium! Was ever a country more trodden on? Has ever a country borne a greater cross and borne it more bravely?

This, then, was the scene as we sped down through Siena on Saturday, 26th August, 1944, wound along Route Two to the Montepulciano turn-off, thence to Castiglione del Lago, up the western bank of Lake Trasamene, round its northern shore, and through Perugia to Foligno.

We left at 8 p.m. as it was growing dark, having just sufficient daylight to negotiate the narrow track out to the Siena road.

The trip took us thirteen hours. We covered 135 miles. Not fast, and quite tiring: up all night peering into the beams of our headlights; watching precipitous slopes shelve away far below the bitumen road; a blocked petrol feed; away again; watching the great lake shimmering under the starlight; then the steep grades near Perugia and the deep well of the night out to our right, south of us.

I wish it had been light when we saw Perugia. Even apart from seeing Perugia I wanted to look out over the valleys and hills far below, to Mount Amiata, beneath whose battlements we had played a week ago, to the snow-capped Apennines ahead, to the towns of Assisi, Spello, Foligno (our first staging area)—all places old in the days wherein Caesar conquered Britain.

Perugia sat still and isolated on her hill-top as we passed. Dawn was about to break. The stars were pal-

ing in the sky. In the quarter light and earthy hush she seemed to wait expectant for the day as she had waited, alone and aloof, for well over two thousand years. Of Etruscan origin, being one of the main cities of that strange, unknown people, we know nothing of Perugia until she submitted herself to Rome in 309 B.C. We know that she, like all the fortresses of central Italy, of Tuscany and Umbria, knew for centuries only strife. We know that Augustus rebuilt the city in 38 B.C. after it had been destroyed, ironically enough, to preserve it from capture by himself. Here Constantine had his headquarters. Once in the sixth century Perugia withstood a seven years' siege by the Goths. The city was besieged in 744 by King Rachis of Lombardy until to the King came Pope Zacharias to plead, the King being so impressed that he became a monk and retired from the fray to the solitude of the Benedictine monastery of Monte Cassino!

Strange destinies! Famous names!

In 800 Perugia came under the Pope, a gift from Charlemagne. But for centuries the wars between she and her neighbours swayed this way and that. There was always strife: first Siena, then Arezzo, Foligno, Spoleto. Wearisome to describe, bewildering to understand.

The city on the hill was but a brief dream in the dim half-light of dawn. But I can see her yet . . . now quiet, and resting after two thousand years of bloodshed; while the forces of to-day speed past her.

The Assisi of St. Francis, one of the most hallowed spots in all Italy, I hardly noticed. It is on the hillside

as you come from Perugia down into the valley which nurtures Foligno. Rebuilt by St. Benedict, rebuilt again by St. Francis, it is even yet only a shrunken village. But it must contain a mighty heart; or ageless memories of the Saint who transfigured it by his legend, so like that of Christ.

The sun was well above the roof-tops when we passed through the town of Foligno. Rafael immortalised this town by making it the background for his picture, *Madonna di Foligno*; its few spires hover gracefully in the background, quiet and not detracting from the central figure. For such is Foligno, quiet and unassuming.

My diary says: "Very tired; had breakfast and went to sleep." In such a manner did I dispose of Sunday, the 27th.

We left the field in which we had drowsed all day, just after midnight again, and crossed the giant Apennines, the great backbone of Italy.

This was the most picturesque of all the hundreds of nights I have spent in motion on four wheels. I can recall the nights we ran from the Germans down the passes of Mount Olympus in Greece; I have seen the Arab towns of Beni Ulid and Azizia in Tripolitania under a great, round moon; Rome in the hush of dawn, Athens in the Spring, Bethlehem against the barren hills of Jericho and Moab, Jerusalem against the Mount of Olives, Cairo from the air: but never can these sights bring quite the breathless grandeur, the dizzy heights of that ride through the Apennines.

Great pits of blackness into which the starlight does not penetrate; glimpses of steep cliffs caught in the

headlights; swinging perilously around corners in the top-heavy truck and seeing fathomless nothing on the one side of you, almost under your wheel; rocky gorges, through which rush mountain torrents fed by snow; small towns on hill-tops; the heights of the town spelt out in metres on the notice-boards; fine views at dawn.

Dawn once again on the move. Oh, the grandeur of that dawn! Splendid vistas through the light, filmy mists which swirled about the hills. We were now almost through the Fabriano Pass, that great cleft devised by the hand of man. Before us was the plain of Umbria, that portion of it which is left on the seaward side of the Apennines, a slice of green-iced cake on the outside of the knife-cut. Far in the distance we felt we could see the Adriatic, but were not sure that it was not a mirage caused by the morning mist.

We stopped for a brief brew of tea on the road as it winds down to the plain. The stop was not planned, but caused by some blockage ahead. The sun shot up and dispersed the mists. All the east came to us, as if some giant hand had adjusted field glasses to our eyes. Fields and farm houses stretched up to the distant sea. Vineyards and orchards, fields fallow and fields yellow with ungathered grain, left, no doubt, in haste at a time when the crops should have been reaped.

By 9.30 we had passed just beyond the pretty town of Jesi and turned off the bitumen to a clay track. This led us to our rendezvous area and trucks were soon dispersed amid the grape vines and fruit trees. We chose a spot under a great olive tree, beside a grape

vine heavy with ripe clusters; pitched our bivouacs; made sausages, chips, tomatoes and onions (the vegetables fresh from the fields) for breakfast; drank cups of hot tea; washed from our bodies the dust of Umbria and Tuscany; and slept until noon.

Next morning I went to Jesi. We headed straight for the *mercarto* (market) to look for fruit and vegetables. Instead of fruit or vegetables I got a photo, taken from the roof of the truck, of the madding crowd. I had not the heart to purchase their precious food, and was, in fact, asked not to do so by an Amgot official. So we went out into the *campagna* with a guide and, at length, tracked down a field of cabbages and a farmer willing to sell them. Threshing was in progress. A giant machine, which roared and quivered, was taking in the cut crop at the top, fed to it by girls with pitchforks, and disgorging golden grain into sacks at one end, and hay or straw (I never knew which) at another. Here we weighed our purchase on the scales placed there for weighing the various grain-owners' produce; had some wine; handed out cigarettes all round, and were gone, with all hands waving and smiling us good-bye.

The movements of the next few days were as annoying as they were futile; and very puzzling to boot!

On the 30th August we moved forward 48 miles to the Pesaro Line to help in an attack by 3rd Corps. This sounded straightforward enough and, although it was a very dusty trip, rather reminiscent of the desert days, all hands were in good spirits. Then, however, the "duck-shoving" commenced. It soon become apparent that the artillery had come up here to lend a little

extra weight; but we were not needed, we were not expected, and I go so far as to say we were not wanted. For days we poked our noses around dusty by-ways looking for places in which to put our trails on the ground and shoot. But nowhere was there room. Every area seemed to belong to someone else. At one stage the 24 guns and 100 vehicles of our regiment were crammed into an acre paddock, already occupied by Indian engineers and parts of a Bailey bridge.

On the 31st we moved down towards the Metauro River, then off Route Three (the main route inland and down to Rome—whence all roads ultimately lead), to a rest area. Again very cramped. Here again were grapes in huge purple clusters; below a field of tall dry corn stalks and shady trees, amidst which were parked the guns.

The news came through that our patrols found the German in the act of withdrawing; put in a full-scale attack and crossed the river, which comes out near Cattolica, in five places.

There followed another puzzling move back to our former area; a thunder-shower of heavy rain; and news that there was a break-through of 20 miles in the Gothic Line. Tanks were pouring through!

But this was not the first time we had heard these tidings. Nor was it the last. Always we seemed to break the German line, only to find that the real line was a little further on. It had been so in the central sector, Arezzo had been an outpost of the Gothic Line, Florence the pivot of it; but still the line was ahead of us. After some days of trying, we did at length manage

to shoot five rounds at the enemy, and after this magnificent contribution to the breach of the Gothic Line we pulled out to a divisional rest area. Rest! The only thing I was tired of was moving!

We bivvied on a gently-sloping hill, half a mile from the blue sea, and a little south of Fano. Here we swam in the scintillating waters of the Adriatic; lay basking on the white sands; went for trips in jeeps. Here, too, my diary says, I wrote Chapter XXV.

Here, too, I was asked if I would like to write the history of the Divisional Artillery. Fortunately, I decided it was too monumental a job to undertake at this stage of the war. Otherwise I would still have been working at it! Jobs are strange things. It seemed to me a little hard to understand why, when the Official Archivist to the 2nd N.Z.E.F. was good enough to ask me to assist him in writing history, and did actually apply for my transfer to Army H.Q. in Wellington, when I was home on furlough, the application was refused on the grounds that I was fit and well (my four years' service notwithstanding): whereas now I was offered a lesser job while in the field! Of course, the policy then was that any man who was fit had to fight. It was not politic that a healthy man should write history! Strange, I thought, for I had seen hundreds of men, who could eat me without getting indigestion, holding beautiful base jobs and playing lovely rough games of Rugby football! However, football is undoubtedly more important than history. I had to admit it was peculiar.

But I have also had to admit often to myself that being free to write one's own books, instead of doing

it for posterity on a sergeant's pay, is a far better thing. True, these books are not history; but they do, perhaps, give you a little of the smell of the trees and fields, a little of the colour of our life, some of the romance and associations of the places we saw, some small part of the spirit of that for which we fought. If I have done that, then I am glad that I have not poured myself out over the pages of history.

◆

CHAPTER XIII

RIMINI AND THE GREEKS

Route Sixteen, called in the Roman *via* Adriatica, for obvious reasons, passes by some of the loveliest beaches in all Europe. It hugs the Adriatic Sea for over two hundred miles, from Termoli in the south to just below Ravenna.

Our rest area for a brief few days was almost on this arterial highway, and I declare that in those days it was a busy road. Loads of material for the build-up were passing through day and night. Ahead lay Rimini, the last bastion, we were told, of the Gothic Line—the gateway to the plains of Lombardy, to Bologna, to Venice, to Vienna we hoped. The preparations for a final onslaught were going ahead at a rapid pace. On this hot bitumen were lines of trucks, nose to tail, destined to supply British, Indian, Canadian, Greek, Polish and New Zealand troops. For here was an Eighth Army with international blood in its veins . . . a Greek brigade and two Polish divisions were under command.

I spent a good many hours on Route Sixteen. Twice I visited Pesaro and Fano. Both these cities were badly shattered, for they had felt the full force of the tide of war. Here waves of Polish and British troops had shuddered and smashed against the walls, had thrown great shells into the towns' streets, had pushed over their buildings.

Both—Pesaro in particular—were desolate. This was caused chiefly by German action in having removed from the coastal area all the citizens and householders. The German had expected a sea-borne invasion here—that was plain—for the wide, gloriously white beaches were heavily mined, wired and trapped. The rollers, that rushed gurgling-white up the sand, receded every few moments to reveal great dragons' teeth of ferro-concrete, cunningly concealed at surface depth so as to rip open the bottoms of boats that tried to land.

Concrete gun emplacements and machine-gun nests were evident among the dwellings on the shore. Further up we were to find dwellings that were not dwellings, and ice-cream shops that were not ice-cream shops—but in reality fortresses of concrete concealing great coastal guns of very old pattern. It was plain how much the German feared a sea-outflanking movement, and it is very probable that it was only our excellent intelligence reports of the dangers in this area that prevented such a move. Had we landed it would have been a costly venture: there was not a yard of the wide sloping beaches that was not covered by the hundreds of gun-slits moulded into concrete houses and pill-boxes, looking like eyes in a host of cardboard masks.

The residential quarters of these towns were almost untouched. I saw many fashionable villas on the sea-side; many mansions standing in quiet dignity amid cypress trees and tamarisk, pine and grape-vine. In the front gardens of these villas stood great massive Churchill tanks, Sherman tanks, tank-busters (high-powered three-inch guns on General Grant tank

chassis), and mobile guns on tank bodies. Strange flotsam on the sea shore!

At 5 p.m. on the 10th September we moved forward 22 miles, the guns to a gun position west of the seaside town of Cattolica, B Echelon to a position slightly south of Cattolica. For the first night the guns bivouacked with B Echelon, then moved to their position next day.

Towering high above us on the west side was the 12th century castle of Gradara. It was untouched by this present conflict, as it bore the "international protection of antiquities" emblem in white upon its great stone walls. It is a relic of the Middle Ages strife which caused Central Italy to vomit all her independents out to seek their own refuge as best they could. Those who were weak were lost for ever. Those who built strong walls and waxed strong within them, like the people of Gradara, have handed down their castles to this very day, splendid in their solid dignity.

I went up there one day in a jeep, after making a false start on the wrong side of the great conical hill and finding myself on an almost unclimbable goat-track. There I was amazed at the view, at the height and strength of the battlements. I saw the great studded gates and the place where the beseiged poured molten lead down upon the heads of their attackers. I looked out over the blue Adriatic, peacefully washing the sands of Italy. I saw Riccione, beautiful maritime resort of the fashionable people of Florence and Rimini. I saw Rimini beyond it in the distance, the junction of two of the oldest and most famous Roman roads in Italy, the *via* Emelia and the *via* Flaminia,

now indistinct in the fog of war; while to the north-west, the craggy town, built by the stone mason Marinus on the slopes of Mount Titano, known as San Marino, one of the oldest states in the world and the world's smallest independent republic. San Marino has her own army, her own government, treasury, monetary system and her own art—she is again the splendid result of the Middle Ages fratricide, for, although founded in the 4th century, she fully realised her independence only when she saw the powerful combines fall all about her.

The battle for Rimini was not intended primarily to be a New Zealand show. The Division was to be passed through once it fell . . . and on to Venice. But it did not quite happen that way. The German fought bitterly for every inch of Italy. He had fought for Cassino as tenaciously as an octopus; for Arezzo, for Florence, like a she-wolf mad with wounds. This Gothic Line (wherever it was, for we never seemed to come to it) meant Europe, for he could not detain us long at the River Po, his next natural defence line. For that reason he had fortified the Apennines and called it Gothic. As it bulged and stretched he still said he was withdrawing upon his Gothic Line. Here on the coastal plain, a narrow belt not ten miles wide, he was as savage as a tiger, because he knew that a break-through meant utter defeat in Italy.

The attack was in eight phases. For these the artillery of the Division was to be the only branch of New Zealand arms employed; but this plan fell down, too, and when Rimini finally fell after a terribly bitter

fight for the aerodrome, it was our 22nd Battalion and our tanks who showed the Greeks the way.

Our areas near Rimini were all restless ones. Sleep seemed hard to come by. Up at the guns, shells blew bivvies down, landed within a few feet of the gunners' holes. Back at B Echelon the nights were illuminated with brilliant anti-aircraft displays, as stray planes drummed over. And later on we were to be really disturbed, as I will testify. A bitter place, this Rimini. And never had the Hun fought better.

On the 13th, when the attack was under way, I climbed in a jeep to the pretty little village of Castello del Mezzo, which, as its name explains, is a castellated town perched on a cliff. Below it the hill dropped sheer into the blue sea. From its tiny table top I looked far up the coast to Rimini. We saw two light cruisers out at sea shelling the town; with binoculars saw the minute puffs of smoke and dust which were their shells bursting among the shore installations. I noticed, too, a weird straggling white line—our smoke screen south of Rimini. Under cover of this, Greek soldiers and their English comrades were advancing.

That same day I reconnoitred the beach beside Cattolica for a bathing-place. I found the huge, white sandy stretch quite cleared of mines, and saw that already Indians, Kiwis, Greeks and Poles were bathing in the freshening water. So I went up to the guns and led two truck-loads of the gunners down for a swim, and left them to it.

Reports from the front were good, although progress was not fast. On the first night all high features

were taken. On the second day phase two was achieved and 1,200 prisoners taken. The guns moved twice, always forward, hard behind the infantry. I went back to the laundry, now 32 miles behind us!

On Saturday B Echelon was so far behind, too, that we did a rapid gallop into a sandy meadow beside the sand-dunes of Riccione. A rowdy place, my diary says. Beside us reconnaisance planes were landing and taking off all day—the eyes of the artillery in this flat country. All around us were medium guns. At night planes were dropping flares and bombs, and ahead of us in a curve of bay Rimini was a veritable fireworks display.

Here I thankfully wrote Chapter XXVI, the final act of my Greek drama; while ahead of me the Greeks were not living up to expectations. But I feel I should explain that these were not the true Greeks. This Greek brigade was largely the sweepings of Alexandria and Cairo — conscripted fish-mongers, sponge-divers and restaurant-waiters who, for some private reason (or possibly a public reason) had had to leave Greece. The true Greek would stop for no German. The brigade ahead did make progress: but it had a lot of help from our infantry; and, when they moved far, it was usually because the Canadians in the foothills to the left flank had shifted the hard-bitten German or because one of our battalions had taken a hand.

But perhaps I am being unfair. I know I am expressing the opinion of most of our men who, when asked about the Greeks, would reply, "Oh, they are only

bloody wogs."* But perhaps we are all unfair, because I feel that they were not quite up to standard merely because of the failure of a few, or the failure of a certain percentage. That this unfortunate percentage was high, and that some of them were inter-bred with Egyptians and therefore lost their national spirit, is undoubtedly true. When we call them "wogs" we are quite close to the truth in a percentage of cases. But, please let us say this, that there are among the rank and file and among the officers of the brigade some fine fighting men, some great killers of Germans. For these are the men who have escaped from occupied Greece, and joined the standard of free Greece. They fight with an insatiable appetite for revenge. Like the Poles (who are true-blue fighters, who have lost none of their splendid nationality by inter-breeding), they have lost homes and families, and all they seek is a German throat, a German heart for their reeking bayonets.

And, another thing, these Greeks were in Italy. Now, no people in this world treated the Greeks more cruelly than did the Italians (unless it was perhaps the Bulgarians). The Italians were given the task of occupying turbulent Greece in 1941 and had vainly endeavoured to subdue them ever since, by such atrocities as are unbelievable. They wiped out whole towns, killed the men and took the fighting, biting women. What hatred was in the hearts of the Greeks! And here they were in Italy!

The result was looting and destruction of everything that looked as though it might be Fascist, and a lot

*An epithet applied to the poorer type of Arab and Egyptian, derived from the initial letters of "Worthy Oriental Gentlemen"—the result of a political joke before the war.

which even looked innocuous. An attack was therefore spent, when it should have been a success, by the complete enrapture of the Greeks in looting.

Thus we have this result. Those who were not true Greeks had not their heart in the fight: those who were, thought, too, of revenge. It was a revenge, unfortunately for us, which was split two ways—hatred for the German and hatred for the Italian. Often the Italian was the easier way out, and they took it!

By the week-end of the 16th-17th September, and during the three days following, the fight for the aerodrome was in progress. It was a bitter man-to-man conflict: the storming of each battered building in turn; the ejection and bayonetting of occupants; counter-attack and parry.

Beside Route Sixteen, just in from the sand-dunes of Riccione's foreshore, there rises a splendid Greek cemetery. It is filled with the losses of those few bitter days. Here they fought reasonably well. No loot, no distractions, no Italians; only the hated Hun contesting each inch of the ground. But even here our infantry had to help them along, back them up, encourage them. The clearing of the aerodrome and the ridge to the south-west of it took them much longer than it should have done, and the battle for Rimini dragged out to ten days.

One of the great contributing factors in final success was an artillery "stonk" upon the side of a hill south-west of Rimini and almost in the Canadian sector. Here the Germans were firmly entrenched. An attack finally caused them to get out of their holes and, in

this act, they were caught in a murderous concentration of shell-fire which cut them off from their trenches. The hill for days was littered with the dead.

I saw part of the final battle from a high hill on the shore, which seems to be a pedestal for the village of Gabicce. From this lofty village we saw once again the two warships pounding away steadily, the smoke trails on the ground below and the puffs of bursting shells.

At this time we changed our trousers! The whole Army changed their trousers! This may sound strange at such a moment, when the gateway to the plains might be tottering. But it was a wise precaution. Ahead of us lay one of the worst malaria-ridden countries in the world, the marshes and swamps and low-lying plains south of the Po, and north of the Marecchia. So they gave us long drill slacks, and in the evenings we had to roll down our sleeves, rub anti-mosquito cream into our faces and erect mosquito nets under which to sleep. Sentries wore face nets, rather like the anti-fly nets at Alamein, and long gloves. The malaria-carrying mosquito didn't have a chance. And in case he did bite us, we took a vile yellow attabrin tablet each night with our tea.

On the night of Wednesday, the 20th, the guns moved forward once again, almost into the infantry lines, one mile from Rimini. That same night the Hun left the town, as empty as a husk. At dawn on the 21st our 22nd Motorised Battalion stood back for a few minutes, as requested by the Greek Commander, and waited; got impatient and entered Rimini's littered streets with a squadron of New Zealand Shermans in

support. The Greeks arrived hot foot half an hour later and looted the shops and houses for the sheer fun of it.

Pat Deere, brother to Wing-Commander Deere, drove our Troop Commander, Captain Leo Robinson, into Rimini, third tank to enter the town, and procured for me, incidentally, a splendid set of photographs. Rimini must have been a lovely place. It stands on the river Marecchia, formerly widened into a busy waterway filled with little cargo boats, now broken and littered with their hulks. It is the ancient Ariminum, taken by the Romans in 268 B.C. as the northern outpost of their Empire. Both Julius Caesar and Augustus took an interest in the town, recognising the value of its port. Augustus built over the softly-flowing Marecchia a five-arched bridge, one of the loveliest things I have ever seen. It stands untouched, the essence of solidity, the perfection of grace, as it has stood for 2,000 years.* Here in Rimini, too, we find the archway built for Augustus in 27 B.C., which marks the junction of the longest and straightest Roman road in Italy, the *via* Emelia, with the *via* Flaminia.

In connection with the conquest of this town we recall that Caesar, first deliberating on the miseries he was to bring upon mankind, crossed the Rubicon.

Here we, too, were following in the steps of Caesar.

---

*It says a lot for the Germans that they respected its antiquity and did not destroy it. To have done so would certainly have delayed us.

◆

CHAPTER XIV

IN THE STEPS OF CAESAR

By now, late September, winter was settling in. It began, just a foretaste of what was coming, on the night of the fall of Rimini.

My diary says, succinctly, "Raining like Hell tonight; windy and boisterous, a lot colder, wearing slacks and jerseys."

And the 22nd September, "Passed through the shattered skeleton of what had clearly been a beauty spot—Rimini—shelled by the Navy and 1,000 guns for 19 days!"

With these brief entries I dismissed two important events of military history: the change in weather and season; and Rimini.

Of these two I am inclined to think that the weather was quite as important as was the fall of Rimini. For in the fall of Rimini we saw the opening to the plains of Lombardy, to Bologna and Venice; but in the change of weather, due to waste of time and change of season, we see the reason why the opening of the door was of no avail. The reason, as I might pithily put it if I were writing it in my diary, was that we got stuck in the mud.

By this I do not mean that we passed Rimini and fell into a sea of mud; but that every time we stopped and fought, won, and advanced with tanks to exploit

the victory, it rained. Our tanks, of which we had hundreds in the Eighth Army, waddled into a couple of feet of mud and sank, belly deep. Anything more futile than a tank sitting on its belly in the mud I have yet to see. A Sherman weighs 30 tons, and a Churchill considerably more. There is only one thing that will get them out, and that is a recovery gang with their tremendous truck equipped with crane. And this will succeed only where the truck manages to avoid getting stuck itself.

Our own lot, in the artillery, was better. We had, when fully laden, a total of about eleven tons to pull with our powerful quads. Put chains on these short, high-axled quads, and let them on their own and they will pull themselves out of anything, out of mud, however deep. If a quad towing gun and limber became stuck when coming into a position, it dropped gun and limber, and, more often than not, managed to get itself out. If it was down too deep and could not get a proper grip, the driver would hitch the winch-rope to a tree, a building, or another truck, and pull his truck out, still using his own horse-power. Or, if this failed and, as often happens, all trees and buildings fell down under the strain of the pull, another quad is called up to help with its winch. Once out of the deep mud rut, the gun quad hitches winch to limber and gun and pulls them over without much trouble.

We used to do the same thing if caught in a sand-drift in the desert. I once had to cover three miles of soft country in this manner: dropping and winching, dropping and winching, ninety feet at a time.

The Chevrolet people who made our quads have in them a lasting monument to their engineering efficiency. I wish they made a small car, with a winch. I would buy one and go tiger hunting!

Our move was not a long one: the German was still fighting. Our guns went just past Rimini; B Echelon into the outskirts of the town. For us it was a restless, unhappy spot. We had not been there two hours before the huge 170-m.m. (eight-inch) shells began to whistle in. One came in a few yards away just before tea: landed under a captain's pile of gear and neatly pushed it up on a great mound of shattered earth.

The gun had apparently been shelling this field the night previously, for there were great cavities in the blackened earth large enough to hide a jeep. And all that night the German kept it up: 300-pound shells travelling three times as fast as sound. They whistle two seconds after they have landed, so long does the sound take to catch up with them. No warning, just a violent quake of the ground, and, if the shell was not a dud, a great crash like thunder.

Often they were duds and only rocked us out of bed. Then we murmured, "Good old Czechoslovakia," and waited for the next one. I think perhaps we owe a lot to the sabotage of the munition workers.

There was no sleep that night. We lay in our blankets in a ditch.

Next day a show went in. Our guns supported, with 400 rounds per gun. It was only partially successful. The German was bitterly hanging on in some concrete

pill-boxes built against sea invasion on the sea-coast of Viserba.

A move forward was called for 8 a.m.; postponed until 4 p.m.; then cancelled. We swore and unpacked, and arranged our blankets in the ditch. This night, Saturday, when I would normally be taking some fair damsel to the pictures, I spent distinguishing between the 170's and the self-propelled 88 which seemed to have joined in. Again no sleep.

On Sunday we unpacked the whole truck, as there was no sign of a move. Another attack went in at 8 p.m., but once again only two battalions reached their objectives, the third failing on the sea-shore. The last stages of the week-end, which five years ago would have seen hundreds of fashionable beach dresses walking down the strands of Viserba, saw a great dog-fight for the concrete coffins on the shore. A lot of the houses in Viserba were fortified too.

The New Zealand infantry won the dog-fight at the bayonet point.

The guns moved forward into the backyards of the houses of Viserba. The infantry pressed on to Bellaria.

We at B Echelon looked at the black thunder clouds and thought to sleep above ground; then we thought of the shelling and decided not to risk it. That night it rained and poured. A torrent of water rushed down the ditch and caught us in our blankets. There followed a rapid scramble for our truck. The three of us curled up and had the only full night's sleep for some few days. The 170-m.m. had apparently decided to move back, and the self-propelled 88-m.m. (the long

88 mounted on to a huge Tiger tank chassis) was captured intact by one of our battalions on Sunday. They caught it hiding behind a house amid the pine trees, blissfully unaware of passing events, and just preparing to make the night hideous with more indiscriminate shelling.

Both the guns and ourselves stayed in our positions during Tuesday, which was gloriously fine. I went up to Viserba with Bill to see the gunners. All the town was out, walking up its only street, looking at the new occupants of their houses.

For now it became a *casa* warfare. We fought, as far as possible, from collection of houses to collection of houses. Winter is, I suppose, one of our deadliest enemies, and she was upon us now. It was not always possible for the infantry to occupy houses, simply because there were none left standing, but for the most part they were at least able to return to a *casa* after a patrol and seek dry clothes. This saved their health.

In the artillery we usually managed to scribble our signs on a couple of houses before someone else bagged them; in fact, dwellings were usually allotted by commanders. Of course, the choice of gun position was the main consideration, for our job was to hurl shells at the foe when called upon and where called upon; but in the case, as often happens, of two or more alternative gun positions being presented, our gunners invariably took the one which offered a house in which to sleep, and in which to build a roaring fire for warmth and drying of clothes. This, too, saved our gunners; who, in turn, were well and able to serve the

infantry with the fire power they wanted at crucial moments.

I doubt whether the fact of the gunners being in a house slowed up our response to a call for fire by as much as five seconds. It simply meant that the signallers placed tannoy speakers* around the house in such a position as to wake those on duty for calls. When "Take post" was given there was a mad scramble for gum boots and trousers, or probably only gum boots: and they were out there waiting. Usually, too, if fire was wanted on a point, four minutes' warning was given to the regiment, and the gunners had plenty of time.

What the people of Viserba thought of this I do not know. If they were in occupation of a house they were usually asked to double-up and thereby clear out rooms for us. I have lived with so many Italian families now that I think nothing of it. They do not interfere—rarely were they Fascists, or, if they were, they were discreet enough to forget their leanings. More often than not they helped us: they kept the rooms clean, drew our water from the wells, mended clothes and washed them. This latter was a boon, for most men detest washing clothes!

On Wednesday the guns moved forward again, the result of the capture of Bellaria, and occupied that town completely. Each gun team had a modern house, each command post a mansion.

---

*Speaker system for broadcasting fire orders to each gun. Especially necessary where guns are a long distance apart or hidden by houses from sight of Gun Position Officers. Gunners acknowledge by pressing a button.

B Echelon moved just past Viserba township and halted amid a host of tall pine trees growing in the sand near the shore. It was raining hard and blowing a gale. Some of us occupied a house. Tom, my storeman, one of the hardest men I know, with a heart of gold, pitched a bivouac tent above ground beneath the whining pine trees.

It was a bad storm off the sea. The roof of the top storey leaked and water formed on the ceiling above my head. The plaster grew heavier and heavier, and, while I was fast asleep, fell down on me with a terrific clap. I thought I was dead, and jumped three feet, yelling for Pinky, who was living with us, and quite certain a 170 had knocked the flimsy *casa* down. Pinky growled at me, and I scraped the roof out of my blankets and returned sulkily to sleep. Two hours later Ding Bell came in calling for me. I jumped out again—it was as cold as charity.

"Tom's been hit," called Ding.

"What with?" I muttered.

"A tree fell on him."

Ding and I pulled the tree off poor old Tom. It was a solid pine log which had fallen thirty feet, landed athwart his tiny tent and hit him in the stomach. He groaned a little and said, "It's all right, Martyn, I'll be all right."

We woke the B.S.M. and procured a truck; borrowed the stretcher, on which Jim, the B.S.M., was sleeping; lifted Tom carefully on to it and took him to hospital. A week later Tom was back with us. He had got sick of the hospital, crawled out of the white

sheets and hopped shakily aboard a north-bound truck.

In the months we were together on this job I had come to like Tom like a brother, and respect him as a terrier respects a mastiff. He was granite. His face was strong, almost handsome, a jaw of stone. His body was superb, chest and shoulders hard as moulded iron, legs like trees. There were no two men who could touch him in a rough and tumble. One day in a drunken brawl one man hit him on the head with a lump of wood from the fire, while two others kicked him and punished him unmercifully. Tom's face next day was unrecognisable. But he announced to the world that he would take on the men concerned two at a time, drunk or sober. He did. One man was in bed for three days afterwards.

Tom was respected, yet feared. He could not stand unfairness. If a man would not pay a fair bet, Tom would knock him. I saw him do it one night to a man who dared him throw dice for a ten-pound result; Tom took the bet like a shot and did the required throw; the challenger said it was a joke and would not pay. Tom went outside with him; knocked him down with one hand; picked him up with the other arm, as strong as steel, four times: then refused the money.

He carried always a wad of notes totalling anything from £80 to £200. I have seen him lose a hundred as calmly as he won it, mostly on two-up. He never turns a hair at anything: a fight, a gamble, a drink or a shell, it's all the same to Tom. He would lend you anything, give you anything. I have seen him lend £30 to a man

going on leave without as much as a smile. He was the banker of the battery.

Tom would go on a binge for a week, or a fortnight: often up all night drinking; sometimes no sleep for three days and nights. During these periods he did his work, talked eloquently in English or Italian, and was truly delightful. But God help the man who tried to put it across him. He hated unfairness. He could not stand bullying.

I never knew him very well in the desert. I only remember him as a despatch rider who rode a motor cycle magnificently through the roughest, wildest, softest desert. A man with faults and yet great qualities. More than anything, a man.

The town of Bellaria is a few hundred yards inland from its beautiful foreshore. The road leading to it is a wide bitumen flanked by great shady trees that meet overhead in a ceiling of green. Along this pleasant avenue couples strolled in the cool of the evening, years ago; or children ran, helter-skelter, to the sea. Few ventured on it now, however, for war had Bellaria in its deadly grip.

Our battery had occupied the town *in toto*. Just to complete the occupation, the battery captain decided we were getting too wet and cold among the pines of Viserba, and invited B Echelon to stay at his town residence. So we, too, moved up. The town bulged a little, then subsided into polite acquiescence. We installed ourselves in a splendid bungalow and had a bedroom for three of us (Tom was still away) and a sitting-room with open fireplace. One man slept in the

sitting-room, because the women in the room on the other side were very frightened at the desultory enemy shelling aimed at the bridge just behind us. This same chap, I might add, was frequently embarrassed, he tells us, when Juliet (believe it or not) rushed out in terror at a close shave by a 170 shell and sat on the edge of his bed.

The truck was outside in the yard. Beside it was a lumber-room for gear; and on the other side a dry room which I made into a clothing store for the issue of winter clothing that had just come in.

The ammunition group had a house of their own. The petrol truck shared our apartment house.

We put the cooks in the milk bar, which was in the town square, or *piazzo*. Here at meal times the two-hundred odd men of our battery queued up in the square and solemnly filed into the milk bar to receive their excellently cooked meal. I might say at this stage that our cooks were the best army cooks I have met.

George, the boot-repairer, we installed in the boot-maker's shop, also in the square. Here he had a bench and several lasts. The army supplied him with leather soles and nails and tools, while Ding had made him a canvas apron. Now George is rather dark and nice-looking; has a moustache and short sideboards, crinkly well-groomed hair. He is not unlike an Italian—a handsome, powerfully-built Italian.

One day an English lad came in. He looked around, and something like the following conversation (only more picturesque) took place:—

"Buon journo" (good-day), said the Tommy.

"Buon journo," replied George with never a smile, and rolling his "r's." This conversation of banalities went on for some time.

"Come state?" (How are you?)

"Bene, grazie. Voi?" (Well, thank you. And you?)

At length, *"Possible parlare dove commandant questa citta?"* (which is very poor Italian for, "Can you possibly tell me where is the commandant of this town?")

But George was tired of this by now.

"How the ruddy hell would I know," he bellowed.

"Why, ye rotten Kiwi blighter, yer. I thought you were a ruddy Ite, I did." Grinning like a Cheshire cat and still muttering about the Kiwi b—, he went outside and asked an Italian partisan, while George collapsed with laughter on his half-mended boot.

By dusk of our first day in Bellaria we all had wire-wove beds. I kept mine, pillaged from a vacated house, until I left the Division to come home in February of next year. With the cold weather set in I had made a solemn vow not to sleep on the damp earth and cold stones any longer. Afer some years of this, a soldier often contracts fibrositis or some rheumatic pain in his bones. I was glad of my bed.

Life in Bellaria town continued fairly peacefully for two weeks. There was shelling every night; but for some reason not aimed directly at the town. I often wondered if the reason lay in a clue given to me one day by a mad Italian. I was walking up to dinner

along the footpath and just passing the cinema, when he stopped me. He pointed to twenty different houses, the best in Bellaria, totally unharmed, and said, *"Tutti Fascisti"* (all Fascists).

Whatever the reason, I know we were not harmed. One day the Hun burst an air-burst dead over the centre of the square, just as I was strolling over to see Percy, the electrician. Fragments spattered down all around me and I altered my pace to a run; but nothing further happened. The usual aftermath of an air-burst is a concentration of shells on the ground; but it never came. Had the German concentrated ten guns on Bellaria, as he did on one New Zealand battery out in the fields, completely shelling them out and forcing them to move, there is no doubt that dozens of us would not be here to-day.

Each night he tried to hit a huge iron bridge, ironically built by himself and left in his flight, with the demolition charges untouched, which spanned the river 150 yards behind our bungalow. Fast 170's shrieked over our roof and raised the tiles; but they missed both us and the bridge. Often they were duds and we heard them "thuck" into the riverbank mud. We would murmur, "Good old Czechoslovakia," and try to get to sleep again. One night a shell hit the *casa* in which Jimmy's gun crew was sleeping. (Jimmy, now a gun sergeant, had been my bombardier on the gun.) The shell killed the cat. Nothing more! Next day I had six of them changing clothing and boots which were riddled with holes. But not a

scratch; only the cat, sleeping beside them in the fireplace, went to his little cat's heaven.

Bellaria town. A quaint existence here. Pottering around the yard each day; piling the logs on the fire at night, putting the coffee on to simmer, drinking wine, making toast over the embers. Only the occasional shriek of shells at night and the chattering of machine guns on the beach below us, where our boys had some Vickers on set lines. We worked; picked greens from the fields and made salads for lunch; dug potatoes for the cooks; went back past Viserba, across the Marecchia, past Rimini, past Riccione, to the laundry; tried to buy fruit and failed; wrote, yarned, played Bridge and stoked the fire. It was pleasant.

But it was not getting us anywhere. An attack was planned every second day, but always postponed because of the weather. The tanks could not move ten yards.

Then at length we had a cold, dry spell and a frost. Then, inexplicably, the Germans withdrew across the Rubicon river! The Maoris crossed without opposition.

We followed on.

Caesar's shades were all about us. The Rubicon! Here it was that Caesar "wavered much in his mind," as Plutarch says, "when he considered the greatness of the enterprise into which he was throwing himself. This was when his purposes fluctuated most; presently he also discussed the matter with his friends who were about him, computing how many calamities his passing that river would bring upon mankind." With these deliberations he crossed the Rubicon, made all

haste to Ariminum (Rimini) and took that town:* this, according to Plutarch.

Now, two thousand years later, we passed over this ground with no such concern as to the calamities of mankind. Where Caesar's horses trod, we rolled inexorably forward on wheels and crossed the muddy stream, that has meant so much in history, by a Bailey.

*There is doubt, and history conflicts, as to the exact course of the Rubicon. Plutarch says that Caesar took Rimini after his crossing of the river: modern geography says that Rimini came before the river. Either the river altered its course, or there were two Rubicons, the old a little south of the new.

◆

CHAPTER XV

THE HOUSE OF BONCI

A youth was working at a bench in the town of Cesena in Romagna. He was an apprentice to a boot-maker, a poorly lad of poor parents. Born of a struggling comb-maker in 1870, Alexander Bonci had lived in the most miserable poverty, had seen only poverty and dreamt of nothing better. But the youth had charms, and it was Augusto Dell 'Amore, ardent musician, who walked by, as luck would have it, and thus discovered what matured into a tenor voice excelled only by the incomparable Caruso.

The sweet notes that issued from the lowly shed halted the passing musician, who stood for some moments drinking in the beauty of the adagio of the finale of *Sonnambula*. It was rendered with exquisite expression and feeling, the voice had a sweet, velvety quality, and a resonant, silvery timbre. Dell 'Amore was fascinated, being a true judge of a singer: he went to the boy and said:

"Why, Alexander, you will be a great artist some day. You will take the place of the great Masina."

In this he proved prophetic. The youth was persuaded to abandon his last and apron and was enrolled at the Conservatoire of Pesaro under Maestro Pedrotti and Felice Coen. This conservatoire, founded by no less an immortal than Rossini, who left all his fortune

to endow it, put up with Bonci's poverty for four years and taught him all it had to teach of music. During these years Bonci lived in Fano, and each day he trudged nine miles in to Pesaro and nine miles back again—often hungry, always penniless—for his art.

In his second year he won a scholarship, gave a concert, and paid his fees at the conservatoire. On completion of his four years' course, Bonci left Pesaro with his diploma, but still penniless. Nor were his shabby clothes any recommendation to the theatrical agents. But it was not in the theatre that Bonci first became noticed; for, after auditions among forty other candidates, he was unanimously selected to replace Capponi, foremost interpreter of Verdi's Requiem Mass, at the Loreto Chapel. In 1894 about 12,000 people listened in silent ecstasy in the chapel to his superbly natural rendering of Gounod's *Ave Maria.* In the dim light of the vast church erected by Bramante and embellished by Michelangelo and Raphael, the great assemblage was transported and enthralled.

And so it came to be that after three more years of practical training and study, a total of seven years' improvement upon a natural tenor voice, he decided to marry and to try his fortune on the stage. His debut, a small role in Verdi's *Falstaff,* that of Fenton, provided a sensation in the Royal Theatre at Parma. He was immediately engaged for an opera at Milan, and, within ten months of his first appearance, he was singing in the Scala, leading theatre of Italy.

From that moment in January, 1896, Alexander Bonci knew nothing but success. He triumphed in

Milan, thence to Florence, Naples, Palermo and Rome. A foreign tour took in Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Budapest, Bucharest, Berlin, Dresden, Leipzig, Madrid, Lisbon, Paris and London. Later, in 1906, he sang in America and was snapped up by Oscar Hammerstein in New York, whereupon he graduated inevitably to the Metropolitan Opera.

Bonci was a happy man. His marriage was a success, and his wife, daughter of the leading jeweller of Loretto, a charming and gracious woman. Personal triumphs meant nothing to him. He was first an artist and secondly a man devoted to his wife. His chief joys came from a real and lasting love of the great Italian operas, his own natural ability to interpret them with a voice and sympathy of tone that invariably carried away his audiences, and a serene married existence.

He acquired withal a moderate fortune. Few artists are wealthy, being milked of their art by producers, agents and parasites of the profession of stage-craft. In this Alexander Bonci was no exception. However, he did enjoy, from the days of his Metropolitan success, a moderate income. As a result of these later triumphs, too, he was able to settle himself and his growing family comfortably enough in his beloved Italy.

Eventually he purchased a fine *casa* near the Rubicon River in a small town called Gatteo, while in the summer the family used to move to Villa Bonci in Viserba. This latter town is a beautiful seaside resort on the Adriatic shore near Rimini.

In these two dwellings he remained happy, his large family, mostly girls, all musical, around him.

* * * *

We men of the 2nd N.Z.E.F., like Caesar, crossed the Rubicon. And being in the artillery, that branch of the service that continually seems to forget that it can fire 25-pound shells over eight miles distance, I had to cross the Rubicon (under orders) on the heels of the Maoris. Our guns were behind the river; our vehicles and B Echelon well over the river in the pile of rubble that was Gatteo! That night the guns had been machine-gunned from about a mile away—so for that reason we felt that crossing the river was rather more foolhardy than the similar action of Caesar.

We rumbled down the littered streets of the town in an odd assortment of quartermaster store-trucks, water carts, cooks' trucks, 3-ton ammunition lorries and smaller runabouts, including jeeps; we passed through busy groups of hilarious Maoris who were engaged primarily in that absorbing custom of looting the shattered buildings of all that they once held dear; we laughed at the top-hats they wore, at the bicycles they rode; and finally we settled down among some houses on the outskirts of Gatteo.

These *casas* were typical of Italy to-day—the war-torn, devastated Italy. Not one house had remained unhit. Some had been sliced off at a corner as by a great knife, leaving nude to the open world some bedroom—looking somewhat cheap and pitiful; a bed tilting dangerously on a cracked floor; wardrobes and dresses flung about as by a giant hand; dresses, under-

clothes, hats mingled in confusion with sacred pictures, lamp-shades and ornaments.

Someone, either Ken Pattison, our battery captain, or our battery sergeant-major, Jim Morton, had reconnoitred the place and scrawled "26th Battery, B Echelon" on the walls and doors of the buildings. When I arrived with the miscellaneous collection of vehicles Jim met us and showed us our areas. It remained for us but to move in, unpack and carry on our various tasks as usual.

Our home had been a home . . . but the presence of two Tiger tanks at its south-eastern corner had caused somewhat of a battle, and the home was definitely not what it used to be. The upstairs rooms had received a few shells which bared them to the outside world like cross-sections of a doll's house.

Only one room was undamaged — a half-cellar which contained about ten tons of furniture, grain and house fittings. There was one room, however, which had only the corner of the house walls stoved in, so into this room we decided to move. For three hours we toiled, four of us, shovelling the ruins of the room out of the hole, so that we might move in. It struck me as futile, for in two seconds an enemy shell could deposit from above the entire cubic content in stone and mortar of the upstairs rooms on our now virgin floor. But after shovelling, sweeping, cleaning and disinfecting the place we felt much better about it and laid down our beds quite happily.

Then we looked about us. Tom was poking around the cellar room, George upstairs, while Cos and I

unloaded the store truck. Soon Tom appeared with some magnificent raiment and four light but glittering swords. In these we saw immediately the costly glamour of the opera stage. There was theatrical equipment in boxes everywhere we looked. Scarlet tunics, gold and silver braid, brave ribbons and sashes and banners, swords and jewelled pistols. And in a box coloured banners bearing the magic names of the capitals of Europe, the shrines of music and opera.

George came down with a handful of postcards. They were all of the same subject—a modern, graceful villa on the shore-front of Viserba. The postcard was entitled *Villa Bonci, Viserba.*

While all this was going on, a woman knocked and entered. She was a faded, tragic woman. She had a pale, worn face, and anxious eyes which showed within their ethereal depths that her life had seen only beauty. There was in her something of a lovely moth that has been seared by a scorching flame. War had come upon her suddenly and sharply. It had left little but her soul.

This was her house. She, the last remaining daughter of a large family. Her name was Signorina Bonci.

Patiently she explained to us who she was, that the great Alexander Bonci was her father. She pointed to the swords, to the fine raiment, to the banners; they had all been his. They were all that remained, it seemed, of a voice that had been excelled only by that of Enrico Caruso. To these relics of greatness she had clung while all about her the world had gone mad, cities and towns and buildings had fallen about her

ears. She had lived here with her memories in this house and played on her piano with tender and fine appreciation of the masters.

Now the house was a shell, her memories scattered amid the rubble of her home. Her piano had been stolen. We promised to find her another, but moved before we could. At this she was pathetically grateful.

Her story was strange, yet typical of what was happening everywhere in Italy these days. Four days before, the house, with the two Tiger tanks outside, had been the refuge of six wounded Germans and four dead. She had taken cover from our artillery barrage, during which the remainder of the Germans had been either killed and buried, or fled. No trace of them, except great patches of blood on the floor of our room, remained. She had hurried away with the retreating Huns, not knowing what she did, nor caring. She left behind her this shattered home of girlhood dreams, of music, song and laughter. Away across the next river she had gone; stayed there two days. She was left largely upon her own devices, and on the third day some New Zealand soldiers waved her back across the shallow river. She had crossed, been fed, and slowly and sadly returned to the wreck of her life.

There for days she poked and pried. Her friends across the street turned up. They decided to move into their own *casa,* one whose downstairs rooms were occupied by Percy Quayle and Vin Lee—electricians with a full battery-charging motor set up in an empty room. One day while the Italian owners were poking amidst the rubble of an upstairs room, the whole show

collapsed and a ton of plaster, stone and mortar fell down on the charging motor. Two dozen irreplaceable truck batteries were being charged, and all Percy's and Vin's gear was lost. Percy was justifiably annoyed at the Italian, and told him so. I replaced their personal gear lost under the wreckage, while the motor and batteries they managed to dig out and repair.

Gatteo was pathetic. But it was only one of ten thousand towns or more that suffered. Everywhere it was the case; and it will be the case now in Europe. People moving back from their refuges to seek what relic they can from out the smouldering piles.

As war passed over a town, provided that the war was one of movement and not static, something like the following transition took place: First we must imagine the peaceful town—the town of peasant folk, of artisans in their booths and shops, of busy housewives and of streets now rowdy with the rumble of German tanks and guns and lorries moving forward to meet a new Allied thrust. Then our bombers, striking probably thirty miles ahead of the thrust, because this town contains an important cross-road or supply route; they come in their waves, heavies or mediums or fighter-bombers, according to the target. The townsfolk live in terror from that moment. They live again a hundredfold the miseries they inflicted upon the Ethiopians. Many flee, some go underground, some are dead. The Allied line advances, and one day the German tanks and guns and lorries all rumble back again, looking not quite so brave and arrogant. The Fascists of the town will leave with them—it is not good to be caught afterwards by the

British . . . still worse to be caught by Italian partisans. Two or three of the huge Tiger tanks will take up rearguard positions—probably hiding from the aircraft in downstairs rooms of half-demolished buildings, only their great 75-m.m. or 88-m.m. guns poking out of the debris. Then comes the tank battle or artillery "stonk" which razes to the ground almost every stick that still stands. Finally, the survivors of the rearguard barge away into the night, taking with them on their eight-inch-thick, roughcast hulks portions of the buildings which camouflaged them; the Allied infantry sweep in at the bayonet point, scouting through the houses, routing out the odd straggler.

Thus does the town have to accept the German, then the Allied men into its midst. Where before a family had to crowd all into one room to make billets for the Huns, now they have to find one habitable room and move into it to allow the billeting of Allied arms. Retreating Germans took some of their stock for food; the eager victors take their chicken dinners or their pork.

The Italians, some of them, know a little German, but few know English. And it seems that the war moves past them in such fast kaleidoscopic fashion that they are bewildered and do not care. It remained always for us to learn Italian. There were few who did not speak enough to make their wants understood. And as our wants were few . . . "wine, water, fowls" . . . we managed.

Poor Gatteo! Poor typically Italian town! Poor Bonci woman! As we left to edge forward across the muddy battlefield towards another shattered mockery of

civilisation, Signorina Bonci stood at her empty portal (the door had been used for firewood by some vandals —German or New Zealand, I do not know) and waved to us.

From us she had had at least some comfort, some kindness. She had often shared our bread and cheese at midday and, though reluctant and proud, she had accepted gratefully the scraps from breakfast and hot dinner. Now Amgot was beginning to look after her. Two friends had arrived, and between them all and ourselves we had shifted great loads of rubble and ruined furniture and made three rooms habitable.

A silent tear coursed down her pale cheeks as we passed out of their lives.

◆

CHAPTER XVI

THE PEOPLE OF METELLICA

It would be wearisome to describe the sameness of the next few days of October. We slogged, a couple of miles at a time, towards Cesena on the Emilian Way (Route Nine). We possessed *casa* after *casa,* progressed from mud pool to mud pool.

Mud was everywhere. Occupation of a position meant building a duck-board road of branches, or a "bottom" of stones and rubble. Often the "bottom" was submerged, or the duck-boards cut up into little sticks and sawdust by churning wheels, but they sufficed for long enough perhaps to fire a few rounds and press on.

The end, for us, came when the Canadians, still on our left flank, took Cesena. We were due to pull out for a spell.

My chief recollections of these last hours will always be of the intricacy of the roadways. Around this plain there existed a network of roads, reminiscent of a spider web, which touched San Marino to the south of us, Rimini to the south-east, and joined with Route Nine in a dozen places. Our guns found their way into some delightfully inaccessible places, rendered even more inaccessible by the strange habit of the Canadian Military Police of changing the traffic routes every day by putting up "One-way Traffic" signs. So

put off my track was I one day that I was pulled up a hundred yards short of the Savio River by a Canadian infantry sergeant.

"You'll sure get a dose of gun fire if you pass that house," he said, pointing.

We withdrew and accidentally found an officer who was also lost by the same cause, but who had a map.

Within six hours of that occurrence we received word that we moved at dawn . . . back. "Back" is a simple word, but at times it means a lot. To us it meant real rest and, above all things, freedom from the mud and slush. I am speaking in this way less for myself than for the gunners, and more than anything for the infantry, the machine-gunners, the engineers, and the armoured regiments. Men with jobs like mine fell softly: I walked around all day in gum boots (the gunners had them too), sat in a warm room and slept on a bed. But the men who were called out at all hours of the night to fire frozen guns, or to fight a wandering patrol, or to throw a bridge across a river and clear mines; these were the men who needed a rest. I had known that dog-tired feeling in the desert days, and before in Greece, later in Italy, when you are working on the dregs of your strength and the tattered remains of your nerves.

It was at this stage that I took back all the harsh words I had said about the Canadian Military Police. I saw, with the unreasonable clarity of vision that comes to a person who suddenly gets his own way, the sense in their blocking of roads and opening of others. For in a very short space of time they passed the whole New Zealand Division through this net-

work with never a break. Everything worked like clockwork. Every unit, appearing like ghosts from all points of the compass, socially lost to each other during the past months of action, only aware of one another's existence by the mutual support of our varied arms, fitted into the picture like a jig-saw puzzle, and we swept on to the south at twenty miles per hour. At every corner was a smart M.P. waving us on. On every outlet near the edge of the Canadian zone was a sign which read,

FAREWELL TO THE KIWIS.
NICE TO HAVE WORKED BESIDE YOU.

I think that was quite the nicest gesture of brotherliness I have ever known.

Our trip south was fast. We sped down Route Sixteen, the *via* Adriatica, in a 25-mile-per-hour convoy. Waves lashed the shore on our left and swept angrily up the sand. Wind and rain came together. By the time we turned off Route Sixteen to the westbound road that leads through Jesi to the Fabriano Pass, the roads were wet and streaked with clay. The crown was treacherous. We passed six trucks which had side-slipped into the ditch. Every few moments my heavy store truck would slide gracefully, like a crab, and George would pull it round reluctantly.

At Jesi it was deemed inadvisable to go any further. No military operation depended on it. So we whisked off the main road and spent the night trying to sleep in the front of the truck. Morning found the town crammed with New Zealand trucks and their very cold occupants. We put on some tea and made a light

breakfast. The rest of the day we spent covering the thirty-odd miles to our rest area near Fabriano. It was a vile trip, desperately slow.

But it brought to us a very lovely scene. We were climbing the rugged heights of the Fabriano Pass. The Apennines towered magnificently on all sides of us, pressing in, as if to crush us. It had been raining, and a mist, probably a cloud, had enveloped us. Suddenly it cleared away. The sun shone down. Away before us stretched verdant valleys, glistening as the sun illumined the raindrops on the grass. Trees were festooned with coloured, jewel-like spider webs, heavy with raindrops. The sun reflected back from these until every tree shone and scintillated, every valley glistened like Galilee on a perfect day. On both sides the picture was framed by the looming mountains and rock buttresses. Overhead the clouds swayed deliriously, white and flirtatious in the high wind, like muslin curtains.

At length we passed through two wash-outs in the road that takes you through the town of Metellica, where little streams had become raging torrents and swept away the culvert which normally fed them through the road, and turned off again to our own regimental area. There we found a collection of houses on the side of a fertile hill. Here we billeted ourselves upon the Italians and spent a very pleasant month, while the winter gales swept past us.

The Division had spread itself out, directed by splendid staff work, over the entire Fabriano-Metellica residential area. Almost everyone had a dry roof over his head. Quite a number, ironically, lived in the

camp built by the Germans to house us, as prisoners of war! It was built at a time when it was expected that Rommel would take all Egypt and send us over to fill the prisoner-of-war enclosures. We filled them; but not under quite the circumstances he intended!

"Q" and "Petrol" shared a tiled courtyard, while we who worked on those jobs shared a room in the house beside it.

The farmhouse was a solid, well-built one, typical of thousands of middle-class independent farmers' dwellings in Italy. These people were not serfs like the peasants of Southern Italy. They were farmers in their own right. Not hugely successful, not well-off, but happy at least in their freedom. No one disturbed them here on the lower slopes of the Apennines. Here they only smiled when you mentioned Mussolini. Here they had not even heard the war as it rumbled past on either side of the mountains. They lived their simple lives, tilled their fields, sowed their crops, fed their hens, rabbits, doves, cows, pigs and oxen, and reaped their benefits in the summer.

This house was occupied by two families under the patriarchal eye of an old man. One man was called Caesare. He had been a partisan under Tito, and was wounded on the Adriatic. His wife was called Maria, a comely woman of twenty-six. They had a lovely little girl named Norina with a weakness for kissing good-night and chocolate. Norina was seven. The other man's name I have forgotten, but I know that I liked him. This man's war service was vastly different. He had fought in Greece against the Greeks. He was one of the many Italians who turned tail and

fled the battlefield on the night of 9th November, 1940, when the Evzones, Greek alpine troops, made the mountains ring with their battle-cry, *"Aera, Aera!"* "Wind, Wind!" . . . "Wind of Freedom," the wild call meant, from that day.

And yet, much as I despise the Italians as soldiers, and respect the true Greek, I liked him. He was quiet and reserved, and kind to his wife, also named Maria. They had a little daughter, too, although much younger than Norina.

The old man was a real character. He was bent, wizened, and gummy. I could never understand his Italian, although by now I could carry on a reasonable conversation with the others. But we called him Papa, he grinned like a hyena, and mumbled in his whiskers. He loved to watch the fire, day and night, and the two Marias would see always that he had some wood with which to stoke it.

We cut wood, carted wood in trucks, and even fetched some coal from a colliery. They were very grateful. But what they could not understand was our lavishness in building a fire. When we stoked a fire, we put small sticks and then great logs on it. If it went low, we hurled petrol on it, and Papa would jump out of his chair and chuckle at the roaring flames. Their method of building a fire is quite different. They cook over the embers in the open hearth, and thus are quite content if they always have a small pile of glowing embers on the bricks. When ready to boil coffee or heat milk for the baby, they rake a dozen coals over to the middle of the hearth and place a clay or porcelain pot in the midst of them.

To boil up a rabbit stew, broil meat, or cook macaroni, their staple diet, they hang a great pot from a hook set into the chimney. On such occasions they were more than pleased at our successful fires, although often they must have feared that we would scorch the macaroni.

Macaroni is absorbing stuff. It has more hard work put into each yard than a string of sausages. First there is an hour's pummelling and kneading of the white, flowery dough. Such bangings and punishings I have never heard before or since. Then they feed the dough into a giant that looks like a mincer. They turn the handle of this machine and it produces macaroni out of holes in the front which looks like capital O's—the result is perfect, complete with holes in it. After a yard has emerged from each hole and the hollow straws are hanging down, almost touching the floor, the expert Maria will snip them off with a flick of a knife and hang the fifteen or so yard-lengths over a broom handle to dry. An exciting business for the first ten minutes. Twice I turned the handle for Maria for a while, but found that it tired me out quicker than winding up a car.

These folk lacked for quite a few things. We grew to like the family so much that we were happy to be able to help them.

For a while we had the use of one of the battery radios. Caesare quickly found a small table for it, and each night we turned on the news in Italian from the Eighth Army station. To this they eagerly listened and clapped each Allied success. Caesare pointed out to me on the map developments of which I was already aware, and we used to hug ourselves in delight.

Another thing they lacked was real coffee. Their substitute was a preparation from ground burnt wheat, bitter to the taste. We always had plenty of coffee—great tins of it came in each week, and not all the men liked it. Coffee at night became a ritual: two handfuls in the billy, with water and a pinch of salt, brought to the boil and then left to burble fragrantly on the hearth over a dozen glowing coals for the rest of the evening.

During this period we put on our electric light (ex battery power), turned on a B.B.C. musical programme, toyed with a few glasses of wine, and yarned far into the night, both in Italian and English. Then came toast-making over the fire, and honey to spread on it. These independent farmers are a sturdy crowd—it took some considerable persuasion before they would partake of supper with us. But when they did succumb to our demands they really enjoyed it.

A good roaring fire, a strong light, good music, real strong, sweet coffee and milk, and toast and honey! Maria's eyes swam with gratitude. They were happy.

For us, they kept the place as clean as a Plunket nursery. They washed our clothes and asked only for the soap. They gave us plenty of wine. Each evening they would ask us to join them in their scanty meal. As we had just finished a roast dinner with three vegetables, followed probably by pastry tart, we, of course, refused. Often we could not finish our own splendid meal, for rations were good, and we put the surplus on to a plate. This invariably went to the children.

Each night Norina used to clamber up on my knee, fling her arms about my neck and call with a ringing voice, *"Martino mio,"* to which I answered equally passionately, *"Norina mia."* For this she sometimes received chocolate. Nor did she ever forget to say *"Gracie"* (thank you). Then someone would bring walnuts and chestnuts. We popped the chestnuts in the embers, and cracked the walnuts on the hearth, washing the lot down with wine, with that utter contentment that comes from good, simple living.

The joint holding of these folk was about seven acres of rolling meadow, planted with fruit trees and crops and vegetables, whereon was built the house, and a share in a cornfield over the hill. Their work in winter was almost nil, except for a week's solid ploughing with the long-horned white bullocks. The remainder of the winter was spent in routine feeding of animals and bringing in firewood from the hills and vegetables from the garden.

Snow came at last. It covered the giant Apennines in white glory as far as the eye could see. The trees and vines around us were heavy laden and bowed their homage to the God of Winter. Rolling hills were mantled white, exquisite in the sun. Valleys were filled with rifts, broken only by the green outline of a tree, gaunt and brave. The animals retired to the pens beneath the houses, chewed a cud of hay and pumpkins. We retired gratefully to our roaring fire, piled on the logs and thought of home.

Another year almost gone. The score was five. Five years out of a young life—the best years! And yet I would not live them over again.

◆

CHAPTER XVII

ROMAN HOLIDAY

On the 15th November I was on board a fast truck to Rome with a five-days' leave-pass in my hand. No pilgrim ever went more gladly. Since my brief ten hours in Rome in June my appetite had been whetted. Into those hours I had crowded a meteoric glimpse of the greatest living museum of antiquity, and my head had reeled, my breast had been filled at the eternal wonder of it all. Now, instead of ten hours, I had five days, and I went knowing that to see Rome would take five months.

What I am about to write is not a guide to the city, not even a full account of what I saw. Rather is it an attempt to capture my own feelings in contemplation of these great antiquities. I want to tell stories of the atmosphere that surrounds such places as the Colosseum, but I may not, on account of space. For I am going to try to put on paper in a single chapter one-hundredth part of the grandeur that is Rome—a task which ten thousand authors have attempted in ten thousand books. I will fail miserably, that I know, but the spirit of the place moves me to do so.

Rome is above all a city, even a world, of recollections. Time crowds upon time, era upon era, century upon century, and each has left great monuments, imposing aqueducts, glorious churches, fountains, villas and ruins. They crown every one of the seven

hills in glory, and fill the valleys, line the ageless roads. City after city has been built upon the old, but each generation has revered the more beautiful, or, not revering, left it mercifully to the tender hands of Time. Some have been touched, or even stripped, to build others; but in most cases the husk or shell remains, still packed with memories.

Rome is St. Peter's. St. Peter's is Rome. The greatest cathedral in the world towers over Rome like beauty over death. She spreads wide her arms and calls to her Christians from the four corners of the earth. Wherever I went in Rome the dome, upon which Michelangelo lavished the last sixteen years of his creative life, stands forth like a clarion call above the age and wealth of the other buildings.

Let us tell the story of Peter. It seems to me to give so much of the history of those times. Although it is surrounded so much by legend, the Roman historian, Tacitus, gives us a picture of the events.

He tells us of the circus of Nero and Caligula which was situated on the ground where now stands the great Cathedral of St. Peter's. Now hallowed ground; then pagan, around which chariot races, games and orgies of blood were presented to their emperors. In the centre of the race course (near to the present sacristy) Caligula placed a great obelisk which had stood for centuries in the sun temple at Heliopolis, Egypt, and which he had brought to Rome out of sheer exuberance. It is undoubtedly a magnificent fragment of loot. It stood in Caligula's circus during the reign of Nero, and for fifteen centuries, then was placed by the architect who built the great St. Peter's

Square in 1586, under the direction of Pope Sixtus V, in the centre of the square, where it stands to-day. I looked at it and thought that no other stone had seen so much tragedy, so much blood and suffering, so many religious changes, as had this strange unseated relic of the Egyptian King Nuncores.

Nero had chosen the circus for the scene of his tortures of the saints, and here around the fated obelisk Christians were steeped in tar and burned as torches in the great arena.

Tacitus speaks of this strangely feared, strangely powerful sect called Christianity. He says that the death "of their Founder," Christ, checked its growth for a while, but that it revived and spread with renewed vigour under the Apostles Peter and Paul.

It even spread to Rome, "the common sink into which everything infamous and abominable flows like a torrent from all quarters of the world." The words of Tacitus continue, "Nero proceeded with his usual artifice and found a sect of these abandoned wretches . . . a number of Christians who were convicted on account of their sullen hatred of the whole Roman race.* They were put to death with exquisite cruelty, and to their sufferings Nero added mockery and derision. Some were covered with the skins of wild beasts and left to be devoured by dogs; others were nailed to the cross, numbers were burnt alive; and many, covered with inflammable matter, were lit up when the day declined, to serve as torches for the night."

*Nero conceived the plan of building a new Rome, for he was tired of the religious superstition of the old. He had his architects draw plans; approved them; sent for grain to Egypt to be ready for the emergency; then burnt the entire city in 64 A.D. He conveniently blamed the Christians for his incendiarism.

From this Peter fled. He took the Appian Way. According to legend, he met the apparition of the Lord and, struck with astonishment, exclaimed, *"Quo vadis, Domine?"* (Whither goest Thou, Lord?), to which Christ is said to have answered, "I go to Rome to be crucified again." On this spot stands the little chapel of Quo Vadis.

Peter took the apparition of Christ as a reproach for his weakness, and as a warning for him to go back to Rome. He returned to the city and was crucified by Nero in 67 A.D., probably with the other Christians of the circus.

Tacitus says that the remains of these early martyrs (he calls them "wretches") were collected by their friends. It seems, then, that those who loved Peter may have come that night and asked for his body, as did Joseph of Arimathea ask for the body of Jesus. This request would be readily granted, for that was the Roman law.

Peter's body was placed in fine raiment and spices and lowered into a sepulchre hewn from the rock, close by the scene of the crucifixion. Here the bones have lain undisturbed for nearly 1,900 years. For upon this spot, over his sepulchre, arose a small chapel. It was built about 90 A.D. by the third Bishop of Rome. To this flocked pilgrims from many lands. When, in 323 A.D., the Emperor Constantine became Christian, he allowed Pope Sylvester to begin the erection of a great church. The original tomb was not touched, and St. Peter's was built around it in such a manner that the sepulchre lay beneath its altar.

As proof, as it were, that the tomb is almost on the very spot where rampaged the Circus of Nero, we have the fact that Constantine's men used the north wall of the Roman Circus as foundation for the south wall of the basilica. It seems just and right that the old St. Peter's should rise upon the ground that was red with the blood of the martyrs of its Cause, and that its floor should be paved with marble that knew the tread of Nero's cruel feet.

The sepulchre remained undisturbed. It even escaped the ravages of the Saracens in 864, although the basilica was looted and damaged. This damage was repaired by Pope Leo IV, who also raised the fortifications around what is now the Vatican.

In 1450 the plans were laid for a new, vaster and more beautiful cathedral. Over a period of nearly three centuries the greatest artists of the time were invited to embellish the proposed design of Bramante so as to make it the most wonderful temple human imagination could conceive or human labour execute. Bramante and a dozen architects died in doing it. Michelangelo and Raphael put half their lives and all the beauty of their souls into the task. It stands to-day, too magnificent for the human mind to grasp in a day, or in a week.

I saw the Colosseum, so named for no other reason than its size. It looked to me invincible. Neither time nor the ravages of man have much diminished the towering grandeur of the edifice. No amount of mellowing can ever wipe out the awfulness of the arena or the great lordliness of the tiers of seats from which the blood-drunk Romans cheered the victors

and ordained the fate of the vanquished with their thumbs.

Seeing this giant structure, which in places still touches its original height of 150 feet, after clambering over its massive stones which cover six acres of ground, I could but agree with the monk Bede who said, "While stays the Colosseum, Rome shall stand; when falls the Colosseum, Rome shall fall."

Vespasian, famous as the Roman who sacked Jerusalem, began the erection of the amphitheatre in 72 A.D. The site was the one-time garden of the Golden House of Nero.* Of the 97,000 prisoners which the historian Flavius says were taken by Vespasian upon the eventual fall of Jerusalem, the Emperor employed 12,000, tradition has it, to build the Colosseum. It took only eight years to build, which speaks volumes for the amount of cruelty and suffering which went into it. In 80 A.D. Titus held the inauguration of the amphitheatre and named it Flavian, which was later changed to Colosseum.

The inauguration ceremony must surely have been the greatest orgy of slaughter and blood ever seen in those barbaric times. The games lasted one hundred days. According to one historian 9,000 wild animals, according to another only 5,000, perished in the arena, and their blood ran in the gutters. No mention is made of the loss of human life: if half the victims won their unequal combats with the lions, the human lives would balance out with those of the animals. More than that we can only conjecture.

*Gibbon says, "The Golden Palace of Nero had excited a just indignation, but the vast extent of ground, which had been usurped by his selfish luxury, was more nobly filled under succeeding reigns by the Colosseum."

There is an account of the lavish splendour of the later days of the Colosseum, in the reign of Carinus, which I quote from Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire,* that splendid literary monument which took Gibbon twenty years to create: "We are obliged to confess that neither before nor since the time of the Romans, has so much art and expense been lavished for the amusement of the people. A great quantity of large trees, torn up by the roots, were transplanted in the midst of the circus. This spacious forest was filled with a thousand ostriches, a thousand stags, a thousand fallow deer, and a thousand wild boars; and all this wild game was abandoned to the riotous impetuosity of the multitude. The tragedy of the succeeding day consisted in the massacre of a hundred lions, an equal number of lionesses, two hundred leopards, and three hundred bears. . . . Twenty zebras displayed their elegant forms. . . . Ten elks and ten camels, the loftiest and most harmless creatures that wander over the plains of Ethiopia, were contrasted with thirty African hyaenas and ten Indian tigers, the most implacable savages of the torrid zone.

"The hunting and exhibition of wild beasts was conducted with a magnificence suitable to a people who styled themselves the masters of the world; nor was the edifice appropriated to that entertainment less expressive of Roman greatness. Posterity admires, and will long admire, the awful remains of the amphitheatre which so well deserves the title Colosseum." (Reads Colossus.)

One of the greatest draw-cards to the amphitheatre was the gladiatorial combat. Here in the sandy arena

men fought men, sheer strength against strength, skill against skill. Originally the gladiators were slaves, but by about 90 A.D. it had become fashionable and romantic to fight in the arena, schools for the tuition of combat had grown into prominence, and citizens renowned for prowess fought with knights and senators. Even the Emperor Commodus used to descend from his *Pulvinar* (Imperial box) and fight in the bloody sands, much to the disgust of the citizens, and had, according to Gibbon, 735 victories. He called himself the Roman Hercules.

These shows began with the march of the gladiators, a procession of pomp and solemnity during which all saluted the Emperor. Then they were matched according to skill and strength by the *Lanisti* (arena master). They were sworn to fight till death. The struggles were furious and obstinate. When one contestant was wounded the crowd roared *"Hoc Habet"* (which nowadays one might freely translate as "He's had it"). The wounded gladiator would lower his arms and appeal to the crowd for his fate. Thumbs up, he lived; thumbs down, he died.

These games and practices had in all a reign of about 700 years, of which the Colosseum enjoyed 400. It is to be remembered that they had been in full swing some time before the amphitheatre was built, in such places as the Circus Maximus of Caesar, and the Circus of Caligula and Nero, where Peter died. Finally in 404 the Christian monk Telemachus came to Rome to stop it. Being a fearless man, he threw himself into the arena amid the gladiators, tried to entreat with the crowd and separate the contestants.

The crowd was so enraged at this interruption that the monk was stoned to death in the centre of the arena. This self-sacrifice had such an effect upon the Emperor, Honorius, that he abolished for ever the spilling of blood. The red sand dried and blew away; the wooden floor rotted and fell away, exposing the animal pits and underground passages by which victims and gladiators entered in times gone by.

Standing in the midst of this decay and looking up at the huge walls that closed me in, I felt that no other building carried such a heavy weight of awesome memories. The air around me was heavy with human suffering.

I walked through the Roman baths of Caracalla. Upon these and a dozen other magnificent institutions the Emperor lavished the people's taxes. These baths are the only monuments worthy of the expense and, curiously enough, the ones which have remained in preservation to this day. It was a kind of gigantic club which incorporated sport arenas, as well as thermal baths, exhibitions of art and libraries. The baths could accommodate 1,600 bathers at a time. Now its remains tower grotesquely-broken against the sky, birds roost in its stones, and visitors walk about the tiled floor, looking at the mosaics, listening to their footsteps echoing hollowly from the walls.

In order to appreciate the former magnificence of these places it is necessary to remember that they were all splendidly ornamented and inlaid, with no thought as to cost. Graceful statues stood in niches in the walls of the baths, among these still remaining are the *Hercules* by Glycon and the *Flora* by Praxitelis, now in

the Museum of Naples. The Colosseum was encrusted with marble and graced with statues. Both the baths and the Colosseum and, indeed, almost every Roman institution, possessed fountains which continually refreshed the air around the spectators.

We went in trucks to the Gianicolo, the highest hill of Rome, which commands a glorious view. Among the buildings spread below winds the Tiber, which has succoured Rome since it was a village on Capitol hill. Of landmarks there are a thousand, for this is the most splendid, most awe-inspiring urban panorama in the world. But above them all towers the dome of St. Peter's; while gleaming white in the sun is the Victor Emmanuele monument. This latter edifice is with you wherever you go in Rome—it is down every street, it is wherever you raise your eyes. It stands over 200 feet in height, and represents possibly the most expensive thing of beauty in Italy. Two colossal equestrian groups in bronze, the winged charioteer and four horses, crown the extremities of the pillared semi-circle of roof. Columns fifty feet high rise up from the base, below which stretches a great white staircase, at the foot of which again is the tomb of the Unknown Soldier of Italy, gloriously embellished and surrounded by huge figures in marble, two gilded groups, and the equestrian Victor Emmanuele up aloft.

It is too much to describe; there seem to be a hundred figures of beauty and great masses of symbolic white marble, inconceivably immense, immodest, beautiful, yet garish.

I think one of the finest examples of modern art can be found at the Mussolini Forum, or Olympic

Stadium. It was begun in 1931, primarily for sport of all kinds, but also to the glorification of that Fascist gentleman. The stadium of marble is a grand sight, surrounded by sixty large marble statues representing every known form of sport. There is grace and power in every line.

I spent many pleasant hours one day in a street of art shops. The way there was interesting and trod one of the oldest parts of the city, the Spanish Square, which formerly was the centre of life of Papal Rome. Before the new part of the city was built it was the English-American quarter of the city and boasted its best hotels. On one side of the square is the palace of the Spanish Ambassador, on the other a splendid staircase built by the French Ambassador of 1660. At the foot of the stairs is the quaint fountain by Bernini, the marble boat called *Barcaccia*. To the right of the staircase I saw the house which stands now as a memorial to Shelley and Keats, and where the latter poet lived for a short time and died (February, 1821). Admirers of the two poets subscribed and bought the house, filling it with the touching souvenirs of the two men who wrote of Italy.

Truly this square was international ground! As I trod the cobbles I thought that Rome was a city in the heart of which every nation has a share. Perhaps only some little niche, but a place to which attaches a wealth of meaning.

The art shops gave me my most simple pleasure. I wandered through them for hours, and finally purchased a miniature painted by a French artist in the

19th century. It was a pastoral scene with three central figures exquisitely translated into living colour on a thin oval of ivory. One day in the Vatican Art Gallery I wandered into the great hall of Raphael's works, which contain some of the most celebrated pictures in the world. They include the *Madonna of Foligno,* which I mentioned before, and the most living and vital painting of them all, the *Transfiguration,* which seemed to me to be not of this earth. In the midst of this beauty sat a miniaturist at work. I felt that there could be no greater atmosphere for painting anywhere in the world than within these treasured walls. The lady was Bianca Remy de Turicque, the best miniaturist in Rome. She has also an academy in Paris: I have her card in front of me now. I bought one of her creations, too, for I felt that the association of these rooms would forever fill the little picture with that which is most beautiful in art.

My knowledge of art would barely fill a page; but my appreciation of what I saw in Rome would overflow a book. I could have spent a month in the Vatican Art Gallery: I had two hours! I did not even see the National Gallery! But the beauty contained within the high walls of Vatican City will last me a lifetime in memory.

My most vital recollections are of the Sistine (or Sixtene as it is often spelt) Chapel of Michelangelo; Raphael's *Transfiguration,* his *Fire of the Borgo* and *School of Athens*; Botticelli's *Moses.* The murals of the Sistine Chapel were taken out of the Old Testament and made into living reality by Michelangelo, Botticelli, Roselli, Levi and others whose genius and

talent were known far and wide. The ceiling depicts, among other things, Michelangelo's *Creation of Man.* Twenty-two years after painting this, Michelangelo returned and covered the west wall of the chapel with his great *Last Judgment,* a colossal work of over three hundred figures. I was struck with the physical perfection of the men; his models must have been magnificent.

Concerning this, the guide tells a pretty story. It is said that Michelangelo searched Rome for the perfect physical specimen to pose as God for the *Creation.* He found him and the man was pleased. Twenty-two years later Michelangelo was searching for a model to pose as the Devil in his *Last Judgment.* He chose the same man.

"Why, my friend," complained the man. "Twenty years ago I was God; now I am the Devil. What have I lost these twenty years?"

"You still have your body," replied Michelangelo, "and it is your body that I want to paint."

There are tens of thousands of great monuments in Rome; I have mentioned briefly only six. I could discourse for hours on the Mausoleum that towers like a great cylinder beside the graceful bridge of Hadrian; or the Pantheon, the most perfect of the Roman classical buildings which possessed a dome two feet larger than St. Peter's; or the Capitol, the most sacred hill, whereon Rome was born, now crowned by a museum containing the only equestrian statue preserved from the sixty-six which are said to have decorated Imperial Rome, that of Marcus Aurelius,

together with the Statue of Mars, the famous dying Gaul, and fifty other statues and busts of the Emperors; and that historic valley which saw the humble origin and the development of the early Rome, wherein stood the Forum. But if I did so, I would fear to bore the reader. One cannot write adequately of Rome. There are libraries whose books are devoted to no other topic. I calculate that there are in existence over a million pages telling of its history. I have ten thousand of such pages in front of me as I write.

Rome is wealthy in art and treasures and monuments; but more than anything she is rich in memory. She has known some great moments of history, and some cruel and bloody ones. No stones have ever seen more changes: and I here advisedly include the Pyramids of Egypt and the cobbled paths of Jerusalem, for their outlook has been almost constant. In these latter places time only has passed since Christ was born; in Rome empires have risen and fallen, saints have been murdered by the score, emperors have fallen like cornstalks, Popes have lived their peaceful lives, the greatest artists and sculptors have lived and died, poets have uttered delirious verse, kings have been crowned, pilgrims of the world have trod.

Rome is wealthy, too, in music and opera. I spent three nights at the Royal Opera House, and each time my hand shook at the booking office as I paid a mere fifteen shillings for the greatest musical experience of my life. My friend Noel and I had a box. These boxes are in keeping with the magnificence of the Royal Theatre of the capital city of the nation that has given us the bulk of the world's opera. They are lined with

red plush. Each has its fore-front of chairs, and its back alcove with mirror and cloak stand. The boxes rise in tiers, four deep, in a horse-shoe shape from the stage. This has provided an uninterrupted view for the greatest possible number.

The ground floor has its orchestral stalls. The roof is domed and beautifully painted. Chandoliers hang everywhere, bringing to the royal red of the boxes a sparkling radiance of anticipation.

But when the baton of the *direttore* of the orchestra is raised and the cacophony of the tuning instruments ceases, all eyes strain towards the stage and the lights in the theatre are dimmed. There is a breathless hush. Not a programme is rustled. Not a soul dares to breathe. Then the sixty or more pieces crash out under the direction of the maestro in the opening bars of the overture, and the people settle back in their seats with a sigh of utter contentment. They sit rapt, spell-bound, motionless, until the curtain rises. Then there is a stir as people crane their necks to take in every detail of the scenery, which is stupendous in its realism. Suddenly the actors flit on to the stage, or come to life and voice. The theatre again is agog, and they may hiss their favourite singer. But, when the first note peals forth across the footlights, there is once more a deep hush upon the scene.

I saw Verdi's *La Traviata* and Puccini's *Madame Butterfly,* and on the third night a ballet. I sat through-out in a different world, enthralled beyond words. The scenery, especially in *Madame Butterfly,* I would not have thought possible on a stage. The little Japan-ese cottage on the hill, the garden and the trees and

flowers, a bamboo bridge, the harbour beyond, and another shore with little houses nestling against the side of a great hill in the distance. When darkness gradually falls at the end of the second act, it comes in a silent hush, stealthily and barely perceptible. As Butterfly stands, rigid as a statue, waiting for her faithless Pinkerton, the lights go on one after the other in the houses across the shore; one star, the Evening Star of the East, then another, come out; soon the heavens are bright with a thousand stars and the moon comes up behind the tree. Then fireflies flicker and flit about the stage, as weird and eerie as they were amid the corn of Sora Valley. The bridge and the harbour disappear in the gloom, and all you can see are the stars, the moon, the lights across the water, and the little cottage. A cool evening breeze seems to blow up from the water. One lives these moments.

◆

CHAPTER XVIII

WINTER SLOGGING

We left Rome on November 22nd for the Division, which, meanwhile, had gone up to the front again. We had been away only five days, and preparations for departure to the front had been under way when we left. It seemed rather like leaving Arcadia and plunging straight into Hades. Beauty and culture were at our back, now far behind us, and only the mud and snow and slush lay ahead—and that ever-present possibility of war.

We had a pleasant break of the journey with the 7th Anti-tank Regiment. They were acting as hosts in a transit camp for returning leave personnel like ourselves. Left out of battle for a week, they were still at their former rest area near Fabriano. We were there for a day and a half, during which time a certain amount of conviviality took place. One party lasted twenty hours. Walter Batty and I decided we would like to visit our former Italian hosts, so Walter rang up the colonel and asked for a truck. Walter is hard to refuse, and the truck was there in quick time.

He dropped me off at my former "residence" first, and went on to his. As the truck roared up the narrow village road a peal of girlish glee rang out, *"Martino!"* The whole village turned out at Norina's cry. The kiddy came running out and kissed me, much to

Walter's amusement. Maria killed a rabbit and popped it into a pot. Caesare appeared and told me we were going to attack near Forli in the north. The old man showed his gums and stoked the fire. Wine was passed round. My glass was not allowed to get empty.

Walter arrived back again in the middle of the rabbit, had a knuckle and a drink, and off we roared again, with the entire village calling, *"Arrivederci; rivenire presto"* (Good-bye; come back soon).

This family has made me firm in the belief that politics, race and creed are not important. It is the individual that counts. The Italians as a whole I do not have any respect for; yet here I had found simple happiness. I did not have the opportunity to see these folk again, but I am certain of a welcome there one day. It is ironical, but true, that I, Anglican to the core, should have made friends with a charming madonna and her sister, their little daughters, a Roman who fought under Tito and who bears the name of the mighty Caesar, and an Italian who fought against us in Greece.

I arrived back with the Battery just before dinner on the 22nd. I had not been back a quarter of an hour before my dreams of Arcadia were shattered. A 170 shell shrieked low overhead and scattered the mess queue.

We were in Forli. The guns were on the other side of the town. The battle had already begun. That night the guns thundered, and two bridgeheads were put over the Montone River. There was bloody fighting on the stop-banks of the river. Mud oozed everywhere.

Tanks lumbered up the *via* Emelia and we edged forward towards Faenza.

The main plan was to keep the enemy occupied. He had in Italy 26 divisions. It was essential that the pressure should not be lessened. Any slackening would have allowed the German to withdraw some divisions to bolster up his weakening Western and Eastern fronts. The pressure was on him everywhere. Only steady, holding pressure where we were—but it helped considerably. Two divisions, especially experienced divisions of the metal of his Italian Army, might have added weight sufficient to hold the Rhine.

So the progress was not great. Winter had cheated Alexander of the victories he had hoped for. His armies plugged slowly forward in the slush, but with no great tactical plan in view, except the complete occupation and attention of the German Army. To that end the Canadians had slugged their way as far as Ravenna on the coast; we were edging up the road to Bologna (here variously referred to as the *via* Emelia or Route Nine); the Americans were having a miserable time in the mountains south of Bologna. The whole front was occupied to the extent of not being static—scarcely more than that. We were occupying the Germans who were holding us.

The houses in Forli occupied by B Echelon were, without exception, Fascist. The occupants were frigid, rude and thievous by nature. We had to keep a sharp eye on them. We slept upstairs in our *casa*, and at night the house would rock with the occasional "whizz-bang." One landed in the field outside and the shock broke the lavatory window. It made us laugh and eased the tension.

In the week-end the guns moved forward, and we moved forward, 28 of us occupying a house which seemed to float in a sea of mud. All vehicles wore chains. Most of the men wore gum boots. Here there were more "whizz-bangs," and a lot which only whizzed, thanks again to the munition workers who wished us well. The target, we found, was "just Forli" —any good place, no special area, "just Forli." If anything, the preponderance of shells hurtled into the river-bank nearby the long double Bailey bridge. The buildings on the Forli end of the bridge dissolved in time into a pile of rubble, and even the magnificent stone archway into the city began to show signs of sickness.

But life in Forli went on just the same. The shops were open, with little to sell. The bars did a roaring trade for a week and then ran out of wine. Troops occupied all the buildings. Trucks parked in doorways, under verandahs. Tanks sat solidly in the town square, smugly defying all shellfire and the sporadic bombing. At dusk sometimes a pair of daring Messerschmidts might appear out of the rays of the setting sun and drop their "eggs." These were met with a veritable barrage of fire, and, later, by Spitfires. One night a bomb landed by a 40-ton Churchill tank and neatly turned it over. No damage done!

Forli was of no importance in history. Pliny mentions it only for the excellence of its wine. It was the Forum Livii in the days when Roman legions marched the stone-flagged Emelian Way, and its present name is a derivation of the Roman. Its only monument seemed to me to be an old citadel, surrounded by a

moat, now used as dwelling places for the poor. It was built in 1360. The present town is a flourishing one, and gains its vigour and life-blood from the fertile soil which surrounds it.

With this in mind, I looked for vegetables here, but found none. I went further back, to Cesena (once called Caesena), and managed to buy on the open market there. Cesena on the Savio was also famous only for its wines. Pliny, who must have been fond of his drop of the grapes, once again speaks of the town as producing equal to the best in all Italy.

I personally never found it so. I hunted both Forli and Cesena high and low for good wine, but found only the new *bianca* (white) or *rossa* (red).

I had only been back in action a week after my leave in Rome when I received a sudden wireless message to report to D Troop. It was addressed "Sergeant-major Uren." Thus, off-handedly, ended my career as grocery man. The Army is a queer institution—it has no heart. There was no such thing as someone in authority saying, "Oh, I say, staff, I've decided to recommend you as a warrant officer." Just a message out of the ether, "Report immediately, sergeant-major."

Within half an hour I was installed in the house D Troop were using as a command post. I put my wire-wove bed upstairs, beside a great pile of corn which (mysteriously) seemed to get into my blankets each day and my boots each night. The gun teams slept all around me. Below in the living-room was a roaring fire. Out in the yard was mud, over a foot deep. In front of the house in the boggy field were the guns.

Life here was entertaining. B Echelon had been deadly dull and, I found at times, more dangerous. This existence had its moments.

As long as I live, I shall not forget the lunches. Half a fowl, roasted crisp and brown, with potatoes to match; sometimes preceded by tomato soup; often followed by peaches and cream! But fowls palled, and, to vary the diet, we descended to oyster or whitebait fritters and toast. Once we had toast only, and I was so surprised at being able to move after my lunch that I chopped some wood!

There must have been two hundred fowls roosting in the trees outside our house when first we came. After a fortnight it took some cunning and native stealth to find any at all for the pot! Some of the greatest hunts I ever saw took place around that field. A couple of stalwart men, armed with machetes (like butchers' hatchets), in pursuit of a wildly-cackling hen, through the mud, across the paddock into a hawthorn hedge! And at dawn, too, the sight of a sixteen-stone gunner creeping up behind a haystack to grab an egg! The hens screamed and yelled; the pigs under the house grunted and trumpeted: but the hunt went on. The farmer used to appear every few days—he and his family were living in an air-raid shelter—and, curiously enough, he used to count his rotten tomatoes hanging on a string near my bed. Why he never counted his chickens, or, if he did so, why he did not mention their very apparent disappearance, I do not know. After a week he removed his pigs.

One day two English lads came down our little road in a truck. They carried rifles, and were plainly

on a fowl-hunt. Our gun-position officer, Alan Smith, had his eye on them. I was watching the episode, which definitely had its possibilities, from a top window. Presently two shots rang out and the boys retrieved two fowls. Alan, his revolver and other regalia girded on, stalked out as forbidding as a centurion. He waggled a majestic finger at the two Tommies. Now, had these been New Zealand troops, the betting would be even as to whether they would cut and run or defiantly hold their ground. But the Tommy is a well-disciplined soldier, and is no less a fighting man because of it. The two men marched over, the tell-tale birds dangling at their side, sheepish and awed.

"Give me those," said Lieutenant Smith.

("They'll be nice for lunch," said Alan to himself.)

"Yes, sir," obediently.

"Give me your names and numbers and unit."

They complied, while the grim lieutenant wrote them down.

"Now I will decide whether or not to have you up for this," said Alan, tongue in cheek. "If I ever catch you around here again 'looting' (they winced) I shall put you under close arrest. Hop it."

They did hop it without delay.

The sequel, however, happened a few days later. It was a cold and wintry night. We were all seated round the fire having a sip of vermouth—there was a vermouth factory just up the road. There came a knock at the door and an English officer stepped into

the smoke and the glare of the room, looked owlishly around and said, "Could I speak to your officer?"

I waved a lazy arm towards the fire, where sat Alan, comfortable in a chair and a haze, feet up on the mantelpiece.

"Ah," said Alan brightly, "sit down and have a drink."

"Thank you, old man," the stranger said, glancing around guiltily at all the mere gunners and sergeants around him. The British distinction is far greater than ours. He drank two vermouths with some relish. He warmed up after a while, and confessed that his truck was in the ditch outside.

"What a cow," we said.

Alan rang up F Troop, and a quad was sent round to pull the truck and its heartily profane driver out of the muddy stream.

After ten minutes the Englishman excused himself, thanked us for the topping drinks, and was gone into the night. Meanwhile two of his lads (we wondered if they were the chicken-poachers) had whisked away our thermet, an article of great value which has caused the Tommies no little admiration. It, like the officer, had disappeared into the night.

Alan was furious. "There he was," he said, "sitting in our best chair, taking up most of the fire and drinking our beautiful booze. We got his damned truck out for him, and what happens? Some of his blasted minions pinch our bleeding thermet."

I got another thermet made at the workshops; but I felt that the Tommies were a little ahead on points in that round.

The position was not a very quiet one, but I found that it had less effect on my nerves than, for instance, one certain night sleeping in a ditch near Rimini. On that night, each time a 170 had rocked me like a giant cradle, I had quaked in fear. But there is something about guns which helps you. I never really worried here.

Except once. Alan Smith has a copyright on the story, because he always tells it; but, as it is against me, I think I have a right to tell it too. It must have been about one or two in the morning. I had occasion to leave my warm bed upstairs and venture outside. I was standing in gum boots by the haystack. Suddenly there was a whoosh and an explosion fifty yards up the paddock. Splinters clipped off twigs over my head. I hastened inside.

Having reached the doubtful security of the dwelling, I turned about and poked my head out. Another shell shrieked in.

"Where did that blighter go?" I said aloud. I looked behind me, but Alan and the others appeared to be asleep. Then one landed just past the haystack.

"To Hell with this," I said, "I think I'll sit by the fire."

There was not a single ember left, but I sat there and shivered for half a minute. Tiring of this, I crept sheepishly up the stairs, muttering to myself. Had

it been light enough I would have seen Alan's blankets quaking with silent, helpless laughter.

Although shells did sometimes land near the guns, we were not actually the target. The German was chiefly intent upon our life-line, Route Nine. Never had the old *via* Emelia known such traffic. And never had it felt before the crash and thud of heavy shells; and the welt of great guns placed in the back yards of houses on the roadside. Our guns and the German heavies kept up a constant harassing . . . we received the overs. Route Nine was a warm place. One day I passed along it in a jeep and noticed that everyone was wearing steel helmets and taking cover. The military policeman on our corner was standing in a deep ditch, directing traffic from there. A hundred seconds later a 170 landed in the ditch beside him, obliterating all trace.

CHAPTER XIX

THE SIGN OF THE GHURKAS

The next step forward was a difficult one. Faenza lay on the far bank of the Lamone River, one of the most formidable obstacles since the Gothic Line. Stop-banks, built of clay and silt, rose fifteen feet on either bank. These were well fortified and entrenched.

On the 30th November a beautifully executed little attack by one company of a Wellington battalion and a squadron of tanks cleared out a pocket on our side of the river. A German company commander and some other prisoners were taken. Then several bridge-heads were made. The Canadians crossed the Lamone to our north, between Faenza and Ravenna. Indian and New Zealand troops swarmed across the river to the south of the town. Here the river forked into two shallow streams flowing out of the hills where they find their source. This bridgehead was made over flat marshy ground and was held in spite of counter-attacks.

The attack upon Faenza from this flanking position was set for the middle of December. Just to the left of our troops were the Ghurkas, who were to add to the weight of the attack by a deadly, silent infiltration from the flank.

The Ghurkas are a race born to fight. It is their tradition. They fight best with their *kukris*, long

curved blades shaped like a goose's feather. These they are sworn never to draw without blooding. They are small men, sturdy and powerful; their heads are cleanly shaven. In Nepal, their military-minded home close to the Himalayas, their life originates of strife, exists amid strife, and only death in fighting is an honourable death. Attacks of this kind, the investing by surprise of a town, they are well suited for. It was to be a fight with *kukris,* a silent infiltration. At this they are unequalled anywhere in the world.

One of the preliminary acts of the next few days came suddenly out of the sky. It was proven that the Germans were using the towers of Faenza's municipal buildings as observation posts for their artillery. This had made the position uncomfortable for all our medium artillery, who were being systematically flash-spotted.*

The Air Force was called in. Rocket-firing fighters roared down upon Faenza's towers. From where we were, two miles away, we could distinctly see the streaks of smoke as the rockets sped to their targets. In that attack the spire of the Cathedral St. Pietro (St. Peters) was badly damaged and the "eyes" shot out of it. The tower beside the Piazza Vittorio Emmanuele received attention too.

Then it became apparent that we should have to move slightly over towards the Indians' front, as we could not cover them in case of need of defensive fire.

*Employed by both sides: the taking of accurate bearings from various points of flashes of guns, the plotting of these angles giving on paper the position of the guns firing.

We moved hurriedly at dawn about the 18th December, lined up on Route Nine in close column, hoping the German gunners were not awake; and took the worst road I have ever seen. Ten times it had disappeared under the weight of heavy trucks into the fens that border on the tributaries of the upper Lamone. Ten times the Indian workers and British engineers had built it up again. Heart-breaking work in a land of bogs.

We squelched on through the clay and bricks and sticks which composed the road, a one-way track, forward. We followed the sign of the Ghurkas, the sign of the *kukris* painted on to little tin sign-posts.

All divisions use such signs to mark the axis of their advance. It benefits the trucks and supply people coming behind, and it benefits any one else who is looking for the division in question.

Ours was the diamond sign—a black diamond which bears, on an open move, a white fern-leaf, on a secret move no sign except the diamond. This sign had blazoned its way through the wastes of Egypt and Libya, Tripolitania and Tunisia. Thousands of trucks, tanks and guns had followed it to Hell or victory.

And so it was with the Ghurkas. We followed that little sign like a goose's feather, which spelt death to an unwary German. Soon we passed the men to whom it meant so much. The little, happy men were debussing on the roadside—we were very near the front—and marching off in single file across the marshy ground. Some touched the *kukris* at their side and grinned.

Eventually we found our position, near the Florence road. It was, strange to say, dry and sandy. The field

was flat and hard, a perfect wet-weather position. We marked the gun positions; moved some Italians out of the house and into the air-raid shelter; were shown by a friendly Italian peasant where all the mines were; led the guns in; found accommodation for the trucks and drivers.

Up in front there had occurred a heated exchange of pamphlets, sent over by time-fuse shells. Our opponents were the 90th Panzer Grenadiers, successors to the famous 90th Light Division, whom we had shocked rather badly at Minqar Qaim in the desert and defeated finally in Tunisia. One pamphlet abused us as "Freyberg's butchers"; we replied, saying their defeat was inevitable once again.

On the 16th we launched our attack. It was preceded by a terrific barrage on a small "lane" to the south of the town. The infantry advanced behind it as close as our shells would permit. The concentration of fire was so great that the ground was furrowed, cratered and ploughed every inch of the way. Trees were chopped out and uprooted. The Germans were dazed. By daylight it was almost over. The Maoris and another battalion had cut the road on the far side of the town and invested almost the entire area. Only a small pocket held out for an hour.

In not much more than eight hours the capture of Faenza had been accomplished. In this we must share the honours with the Ghurkas. One hundred and fifty enemy dead were counted and a number had their throats neatly cut. Three hundred prisoners were taken. An order from Berlin to hold out at all costs had failed!

Occupation of the town was finally completed by a direct crossing of the river in pontoons.

Surely the river, called Anemo by the Romans who built the original village on its banks, had never seen a stranger sight! Up stream little dark men swarming over the shallow fords, knives gleaming in the dark. And here, where the current ran slow and deep, strange boats, light and bulky, connecting with each bank. And within 48 hours a gaunt structure of steel and bolts rolls across on steel rollers and joins one shattered portion of the *via* Emelia with the other. Augustus and Julius would have wondered: even Caesar Borgia, who took Faenza in 1501, might have been surprised.

But surely there could have been no sight more strange to the good Romans than that of the Piazza, the town square, a week later. Huge forty-ton engines of war, squat and ugly, sat around in a perfect rectangle, denoting rather oddly some occult knowledge of the original rectangular shape of the early Roman Faenza. And in doorways and shop fronts were parked a thousand or so trucks, seeming to fill the town to suffocation.

For months Faenza was to remain a front-line town, a place of disaster and destruction. Where the houses on the river bank had stood were piles of rubble. Great bulldozers came along and smoothed it out; dozens of lorries carted it away to pour into the roads that sank into the mud. The trees that lined the *via della* Stazione, graceful pines and firs, were constantly chopped by shells that hurtled in.

The ancient Roman bridge over the Lamone, which had been renovated in September, 1842, was no more. The towers of the three main squares—Maggiora, Vittorio Emmanuele and Umberto—were shattered skeletons. Only the two massive gates, the brick edifice at the Rimini end bearing the sign "to Bologna," and the older stone archway, Porta Imolese, remained untouched—rather too solid to be disturbed by passing armies, conquered nations and the death of cities.

Of its pottery industry, called *faience,* from which the town took its modern name, I found no trace. The historian Pliny, too, remarked upon the whiteness of its linen and the excellence of her wines. I found no trace of these. There was nothing white in Faenza, all was mud and filthy rubble; and the wines were new and bitter to the taste.

On the 17th December the B.B.C. announced that the New Zealanders had taken Faenza. I think, from memory, that the Ghurkas were not mentioned.

By the 20th we had advanced up as far as the Senio River under a lifting barrage. Only two pockets remained, and these were cleaned out before the turn of the year.

Some of the heaviest fighting of the campaign took place near Celle, a village on a hill south-west of Faenza. It raged with bitter hatred for some days; another Cassino. When finally Celle fell, the field was littered with the dead, and the village but a shattered, empty shell.

CHAPTER XX

SNOW-BOUND AT FAENZA

With these events came the snow. It meant the end of our slow progress. By now we had sent two divisions from Italy to subdue the political crisis in Greece, and stop the senseless fratricide. This had weakened the Eighth Army.

Both these factors decided the issue. We had to make this into a static position. Faenza had to be fortified against possible counter-attack. Each house on the western edge became a sand-bagged fortress. The bridges over the Lamone (by now there were two) were mined—just in case. We saw the explosive blocks and the wires to the electrical switches, each time we crossed the river.

The line was straightened out by wiping out the enemy pockets on our side of the river. One large pocket, however, remained for some time, a constant danger, and was supplied through Imola, the next town up the Emelian Way.

When the snow came we were glad of our house and our fires. Unfortunately, the majority of the gunners had to sleep in their bivvies, as we had only one house for battery headquarters and command post, and one room for our troop command post. However, they made the best of it, found the digging in the sandy soil quite easy, and made dug-outs for themselves. In these they installed cunning fireplaces and

chimneys, built from ammunition boxes, and maintained roaring fires.

The view from the house was absorbing. Long lines of persimmon trees, yellow with fruit; grape vines extended in review order along the lines of trees; the four gun-pits looming black against the snow whiteness on the ground; around each gun-pit the collection of little dug-out roofs, each belching smoke and, when "Take post" was ordered, spewing men; beyond and at the back, the snow-clad hills near Celle; and to their right, Faenza's hollow sticks.

It was a happy, care-free area. There was no mud, and no one minded the snow. There was not a great deal of heavy work, only the initial digging and the barrage, followed by a smaller barrage to clear the way to the Senio. Not a shell ever came back at us. Some landed near the main road to Faenza; and B Echelon, who were still back on Route Nine beside our last position, received an occasional 170. But none came within half a mile of us. There was no bombing, although almost every night an enemy plane would drum over the roof-tops of Faenza and make the night a blaze of glory. Ack-ack fire streaked into the heavens and made them lurid and spectacular.

There were pleasant nights around the fires, visiting from dug-out to dug-out, drinking wine. There were songs sung far into the night; ballads that regaled the silent hills, and livid ditties which melted the snow around the doors. Evenings passed like magic, seated around the blazing wood, talking and laughing in the murky dug-outs. One passed from hole to hole, a dozen drinks, a song, bottle clutched under an arm,

out into the snow again to the next-door neighbour. Right royal suppers were prepared: great gobs of brown toast crisped over wood embers as only soldiers can, huge mugs of scalding coffee from a blackened billy that has been bubbling on the fire all night. Once emptied, the billy receives another handful of the brown beans ground fine and, after replenishment of water, is left to bubble for the next team of visitors.

I loved these days. Nights of fun and song and laughter; days white and cold; and air like wine. No need always to get up for breakfast; one man would fetch in at once a dozen steaming dixies. Always a few men up to work the guns by day; half gun-teams ready, if called, to take post by night.

Keith, called Pinky, had a birthday on the 22nd. I fought my way into the crowd that bulged his little "recreation tent" and added some stuff called "Elixir Cafe" to the growing piles of bottles on the floor. We stoked the fire until the iron chimney was red-hot and we had to put our heads outside the door for air. Then a round of songs, five rounds of drinks, more songs, less organised, more ribald; more rounds of drinks . . . Pinky's health proposed a hundred times . . . an air raid outside passed unnoticed . . . another crowd of well-wishers, sprawling in, knocked down the roof, told us about the beautiful bombs falling near the town and the lovely shells bursting in the air like comets in the night.

Great days! Rumours of home were rife, and swapped each night by the "old sods" like myself. I

did not think I would see Christmas with the troop—so sure was I about the future.

But Christmas came—a white Christmas. The ground was white with snow; the trees bowed their limbs gracefully to winter. The sun came out and made the landscape glitter in the lively breeze. The cooks made a royal feast of turkey, chicken and roast vegetables, pork roasted and crackling, plum pudding and jellied fruit salad. We received three patriotic gift bottles of beer; sergeants and above bought spirits; wine flowed like water. The colonel came to see us at our dinner, mounted the rickety table and made a speech. He had led us in and out of Greece, as our major. We cheered him. There were lots of visitors. There were football scrums beside the dinner table, dive-tackling and wrestling. Tom came up to see us, riding on the colonel's tank. Someone dive-tackled him and hit him where the pine tree had fallen on him. He was carried off on a stretcher. Dive-tackling ceased when a battery captain hit his head against a stone wall and was taken to the doctor. Heavy casualties that day.

Then came that period of remorse and sore heads, during which all hands were sworn off the drink. We led quiet lives, retiring to bed early. But at the end of December it was apparent that fresh revels were brewing in their minds. Large flasks containing fifty litres and one hundred litres of wine came in quietly and unobtrusively. Stores of bottles grew on the dug-out shelves. I spent all one afternoon filling bottles from a syphon and a keg; a mixture of vermouth and white wine.

New Year's Eve came with a bang. Everyone was determined to see 1945 come rolling home, if it was the last thing they ever did. But some did not make the full distance. I have confused memories of visiting dug-outs; of broadcasting two songs over the loud-speaker system to all guns; of dancing to *Auld Lang Syne* on the field beside the guns; a great ring of us holding hands like children, seeing the New Year in. I remember entering a gun-pit in time to deftly remove the firing mechanism, thereby preventing an unexpected shell from arriving at an unexpected destination. I heard some boys say, "Poop her up at 13,000 and let 'er go." I recall talking sentimentally to Jimmy, my old friend of Grecian days—he and I were the only two left in the troop who had made the trip to Greece both ways. Dimly I recall rendering the aria *Softly Awakes My Heart* from Samson and Delilah upon the noise-filled air, and Jimmy saying I was so good I could compose my own arias.

These simple pleasures are our happiest memories. Forgotten are the hard times and the rough spots. Forgotten were the melees of Sidi Rezegh and the hell of Alamein. Only the jokes and the grim ironies are remembered. Murder Valley seemed only yesterday—but fogged by mist; Cassino a thing in the limbo of forgotten things. No . . . not forgotten. Rather shall we say glossed over by the memories that come to mind more readily.

On the 2nd January we took up another position. It was half a mile in from Route Nine, and to get to it one had to turn off the main road at the first of the Faenza gates, which bears the sign "Bologna." It

was a splendid place, slightly elevated, and gave a fine view of Faenza, less than a mile away.

We lived in a large two-storeyed house built of stone. I shall always remember it for the excellence of its furniture, which we persuaded the Italians to move into one room. We did, however, retain the use of a few armchairs and a couple of mahogany tables. The gunners, all except one team, who built a dug-out, resided in houses. One house rather smelt a little, due to the fact that three Germans and a girl were buried in the rubble, but the prevailing breeze was fortunately the other way. The girl was the sister of the man in whose house I slept.

Here the snow was heavy. Life existed around the fire. Our main occupation was obtaining firewood. To this end a quad and a three-tonner would go scavenging. Stopping outside a likely-looking ruin, they would attach the winch-rope of the quad to an oak rafter or cross-beam and let the engine roar. The house usually collapsed like a pack of cards, the wooden portions were thrown aboard the truck, and we had firewood for a week. Perhaps I should point out that these houses were not habitable, but completely ruined.

The tactical situation was a complete stalemate. There was patrolling by both sides along the respective banks of the Senio, but nothing more. Snow held us bound fast. We were holding the Germans, who were holding us. Thereby we still carried out our programme of retaining their divisions in Italy, and keeping them away from the more important fronts. By now, in Germany, Runstedt was attacking, had gained a bulge, expended his power. This advantage

he soon was to lose in such a manner as to become a major defeat. Soon we were to cross the Rhine.

The war was almost in our hands! It was hard to believe. Looking back along the years it seemed only yesterday that I was preserving my life with the utmost difficulty. It seems only a day or two ago that I was picking myself out from among the ruins of a slit trench; that I was running and fighting like everyone else; that Montgomery said to his Eighth Army, "We are ready now. The battle which is about to begin will be the turning point of the war." Cassino was not an hour away, it seemed. I remembered my feelings then, "What if there are a hundred Cassinos, a thousand Cassinos?"

But it was almost over. There had not been a hundred Cassinos: there had been a few potential Cassinos, but sheer strength had pushed them under the waves. The great Allied tide in Europe had flowed onward, leaving behind, dry and isolated like unwanted rocks, the cities which resisted.

The last acts of the drama for me were trivial. Just the common-place life of static warfare . . . and the waiting. There were rumours now which could not be denied. No well-kept secrets of this nature are well-kept for long; they leak out somehow. Someone's driver overhears a chance reference, and tells three men in confidence. It is broadcast to twenty thousand men by the grape-vine method in two hours! Nothing can keep it back. Rumour "is a lying jade," but she does sometimes find the spark of truth. That spark spreads like the forest fires of the West, twenty years ago.

The trivialities of this existence, and the potentialities of these rumours, made for an uneasy mind. I could not settle. Restless, I roamed the snow-clad fields in search of wine, wood, vegetables and rumours. Of these the first and the last were most easily obtained—wine and rumour. Twice I went to the liaison post, which was situated near the infantry battalion we were supporting, and brought back wine which the boys had found concealed in a haystack. I vividly remember the sign on Route Nine, about five miles past Faenza, "Only jeeps past here. Move carefully. Jerry can see you!"

On the last day of January, our then battery captain, Monty Black, asked me to go with an Italian to a house where we could collect a large quantity of potatoes. First we had to visit a friend of the Italian to find out the exact locality of the house and whether they were still available. Monty said he thought it was about seven miles past Faenza, but pointed out I could not go much further.

We visited the friend. Here I also ran into Brian, one of my friends. He said, "You will be told the day after to-morrow that you are going home."

"I've heard that one before," I said suspiciously.

"It's right, this time," replied Brian. "I've just been to the parade ground, where we say good-bye to Tiny Freyberg."

I walked over to my Italian guide, distinguishable in a crowd of volubly-talking Italians by his Astrakan coat and foxy-looking cap. He looked at me solemnly.

"Niente possible" (not possible), he said.

"Oh," said I, caring little.

He told me why. The house was beside the Ponte Felice, over the Senio River!

To this observation that it was impossible, I forcefully agreed, and we returned to the house. In view of the good story I had just heard, I was rather relieved.

I told Percy about the story, and he said he could see the funnels of the ships.

◆

CHAPTER XXI

GOOD-BYE TO ALL THAT

The final scene was laid in the slushy square of the Adolf Hitler Barracks near Forli. Some two or three thousand of us formed up in two hollow squares. Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, V.C., stood in our midst. He said words that struck deep into our hearts. I for one was greatly moved by this moment in our lives. I stood still and looked at the tall figure that had lived in the hell of war so long Churchill had called him Salamander. His eyes, that can be so penetrating, stern and rapier-like, were full of kindness. His first word was "Gentlemen," and I thought how typical of him it was to choose a word that, if not always true of us, expressed so perfectly the transition of our fates from that of soldiers to civilians. It was a milestone in our lives. I think I shall always have cause to remember those last minutes. They bit deeply into my memory, like acid on a photogravure plate. The quadrangle built for Hitler's super-men had never witnessed such a moment.

From there we piled into trucks and began the first step of our long road home. As we passed out of the gate, the General, tall, a little older with battle wounds, was standing there waving to us all. I have shaken the hand of Freyberg twice, and once received his letter, but no gesture is closer to a soldier's heart than this cheery wave. Once or twice, when things were bad,

and tank shells and bullets hurtling by, he had appeared, standing up unscathed and unconcerned, and given us that same wave. It had done more than endear him to us—it had given us some little of his courage.

There is the story, true, I believe to to be, of the visit to Maadi New Zealand Base Camp of a high-ranking general officer. Sir Bernard Freyberg had toured the camp with him in his car, pointing out this and that. Finally the visitor remarked, "Your men rarely seem to salute you."

"Oh," said Freyberg, "you just wave at them. They always wave back."

The visitor was shocked. But great men know the value of their cheery wave. It is good, when things are really grim, to see the man who won a Victoria Cross in France last war, who earned his first of four D.S.O.'s by swimming, black with grease, to the shores of Gallipoli to light the landing flares—it is good, I say, to see him there amid the shellfire, sticking up a thumb and grinning as if he loved it. I think he does love it.

Anyway, we waved at him. Some cheered. Some called out, "Good old Tiny," and the big man smiled. Thus we passed out of his command.

Two miles along the road someone said, "Well, old Jerry will have to poop her up now to hit us," and we all laughed. We had been quiet, deep in thought. This broke our tension, for it summed things up so well. I wondered if the men in all the other trucks had made the same remark.

Safety is a precious thing, and yet some men spend all their lives giving it away. Freyberg, for instance, never thought of safety. Danger was the breath that fired his nostrils. But to us, mere men, who have been known to do whatever has been asked of us, gritting our teeth and scared to death, this moment, when we knew that our arrival home was almost certain, meant much. The fact that we had passed out of gun range was yet another chapter closed.

The final chapter, I feel, belongs to another book, so let's not tell it now. Happiness is not a thing to tag on the end of a book, like a tail to a kite. Happiness is our life and, when we leave the zone of death and war, we start to live anew. We close our book and put it on the special shelf of memories, retaining from it only what we learnt of how to live. The years enclosed within the pages have taught us much, and I only hope I will not need to see another war to refresh my memory.

* * * *

The unconditional surrender of Germany was signed three weeks after we landed on these shores.

THE END.

SPECIAL ORDER OF THE DAY

BY

Lt.-General Sir B. C. Freyberg, V.C., etc.

"I cannot let such a large part of the old 2nd New Zealand Division and 2nd N.Z.E.F. leave without sending you a message of appreciation for your great work during the years that you have served so faithfully under my command. You have earned your rest and you take with you the good wishes of all who remain to carry on.

"It has been a hard war and a long one from first to last. I feel that in leaving the 2nd N.Z.E.F. as you do to-day, you will look back with pride on the distinguished part you have played here with the N.Z.E.F. in the Mediterranean theatre of war. Nobody knows better than I do how important a part this Force has played in the cause of the Allies. When the history of the war is written we shall have a most impressive list of battle honours. Some of our battles have been outstandingly successful; for example, those in the Western Desert from Alamein onwards; but I venture to think that we shall look back with the greatest pride to the times when we fought without adequate equipment. It was then that our Star shone brightest, then that our best work was done, holding the enemy in the Middle East until the Allies were organised on a war footing. Greece, Crete, Sidi Rezegh, Minqar Qa'im and Ruweisat Ridge are names which will be amongst our proudest memories.

"On going back to civil life all of us ought to make at least one resolution, that is that we take an interest in the affairs of ex-servicemen. I hope that you will all join your local Returned Services' Association and do all you can for those ex-servicemen who find it difficult to become settled again in civil life.

"Good-bye, God Speed, *Kia Ora Katoa.*

"B. C. FREYBERG
"Lt.-General
"Commanding 2nd N.Z. Division
"and 2nd N.Z.E.F."

"Italy
"28th February, 1945.

Diamond Trails of Italy.

UREN Martyn

UREN Martyn.

DIAMOND TRAILS *of* ITALY

Sequel to "KIWI SAGA"

Coming as it does after two books that were conceived and forged in the heat of battle, "Diamond Trails of Italy" bears the marks of the peace that has come to the author and to all the world. Unlike "Kiwi Saga" and "They Will Arise," this latter book contains nothing stark or sensational, nothing that reeks of war. Rather is it a prelude to the peace — a book of record, yet an account of great beauty. That gift of putting the reader amid scenic and historic wonders, and bringing to the pages the atmosphere of towns and villages, green valleys and the great cities, is evident here even more than in Martyn Uren's earlier books.

ILLUSTRATED

10/6

PRESS

OPINIONS OF THE WORKS OF THIS NEW ZEALAND AUTHOR

"THEY WILL ARISE"

by Martyn Uren

Evening Post — "There is no better picture extant to the ordinary reader of the fearful struggle of the Greek people than that presented in 'They Will Arise.' It breathes the fiery, independent spirit of the people. . . ."

New Zealand Free Lance — ". . . 'They Will Arise' is proof that in Martyn Uren we have a writer who is likely to go far, and that he should win laurels in the field of imaginative literature. . . ."

"KIWI SAGA" *by Martyn Uren*

New Zealand Herald — ". . . A country which is justly proud of its fighting men will be grateful to Mr. Uren for his virile book, and will wish him the best for the years yet to be. . . ."

New Zealand Truth — ". . . A fine piece of writing. . . ."

Egyptian Gazette — ". . . Wealth of graphic and detailed description in direct and straightforward style. . . ."

ABEL, DYKES LIMITED, AUCKLAND