

# A TOWER IN ITALY



by

ANTHONY AIKMAN

I had a tower in Italy. It was not one of those noble or imposing edifices, rather it perched on the lower edge of a ruinous village that threatened any moment to topple off its insecure crag and plunge headlong into the river valley far below. Perhaps the tower had once served as a sentinel for security in those days where every hill village was a virtual law unto itself – for the small courtyard below was claimed to be the site of the ancient gateway long since walled-in. Of the other towers – the village possessed 4; the church had commandeered the uppermost, to which spiritual heart the rambling labyrinth of steps and alley fed as hardened arteries between and beneath a diaspora of decaying buildings. Unlike any other church I had seen in Italy the bells were hung aloft between two stone pillars rather resembling gallows, but I later learned the design was not intentional. It was simply because the spire above had fallen off a hundred years before. Of the remaining towers one was romantically draped with ivy and possessed a small balcony that tempted the imagination to visualize Juliet wooing her Romeo. The last tower – half filled with fallen rubble was reputed by village legend to contain a fabulous buried treasure. That no one bothered to dig for it suggested even the impecunious and practical villagers placed this story firmly in the realm of myth.

As with so much that happens to us in life, chance played a large part in my acquisition of the tower, - a number of chances which at the time suggested nothing but viewed in the wider horizon of hindsight could be easily assembled into the conspiratorial steps of destiny. A chance summer weekend spent at a nearby lake, in a house borrowed from friends of friends who it was rumoured had discovered an unspoiled hill village without even a proper road linking it to the rest of fast modernising Italy. The princely sum of £1,500, and no more, to spend – which sadly had already put me out of the hunt to buy a small vineyard in Cortona – or anything else in a more fashionable area. A rainswept return to the same lake one November Sunday trying to fry sausages over a Primus stove in my battered jeep while the wind strove to heave us overboard into the lake, and a very inebriated landlord in the tavern opposite where I sought refuge and brandy – who mesmerized me

with tales of tempo di Guerra (wartime) – particularly one incident near the village I sought, where a heap of pine logs he had bought one day had magically vanished when he went to collect them. ‘They are all thieves and bandits’ he declared unpropitiously. So what on earth tempted me onto dirt tracks rising into swirling mist and storm-girt heights with the wintry evening closing in, - I can never quite understand. Several times I was on the point of turning back but after picking a way past a recent landslide, a turn in the track revealed, through a gap in the clouds a sentinel of stone houses as grey and forbidding as the weather, clinging to a mountainside with forest threatening to engulf it from above and vineyards and olive groves reaching up to ensnare it from below. There was no one about. I wildly speculated the entire population had recently succumbed to the plague. Finally as I sheltered inside the gateway a stooped and wizened ancient appeared and offered a toothless smile. He crouched in the doorway of a cantina clutching a bottle of wine and then as another squall blasted the stones, he vanished.

So why did I return in sunshine a week later? Running out of places perhaps, drawn by some hidden thread linking my imagination to this tumble of grey ruins. At a safe distance of more than 30 years it is hard to separate fact from fancy. Now I would never take such a risk, but I was young then – when nothing is insurmountable and the greater the challenge ironically invokes the greater enthusiasm. That second visit the entire village population turned out to inspect me – 33 in all, comprising 9 families – but these supported a village school of six children plus the poor teacher who had to risk the arduous ascent daily from the valley. I was as impressed by the fresh faces of the children as by the weathered visages of their elders – clad in a mismatch of patched garments, sacks and boots. At such gatherings there is always one particularly voluble voice who takes command. Here it was Nazarena, big bosomed, loud mouthed who was instantly ordering everyone about as though a wave of her hand like a magician’s wand could deliver anything. Later I learned from the tangle of gossip webbing the village together – that she had been dumped off an American G.I. truck in the valley at the end of



the war together with a sack of army boots – precious commodity at that time – and dragging them up to the village had used them as dowry to secure a frail red-haired but surprisingly tenacious man by the unlikely man of Fiori (Flowers). Nazarena – official street cleaner, unofficial nurse, midwife and guardian angel of the confessional where she beat her ample breasts, roaring '*mea culpa*' and exclaiming her 'manifold sins and wickedness' with such enthusiasm one hoped they belonged to her imagination (although her single English phrase "Hallo, Soldier, when you come back see me soon, love," hinted at a more oblique past).

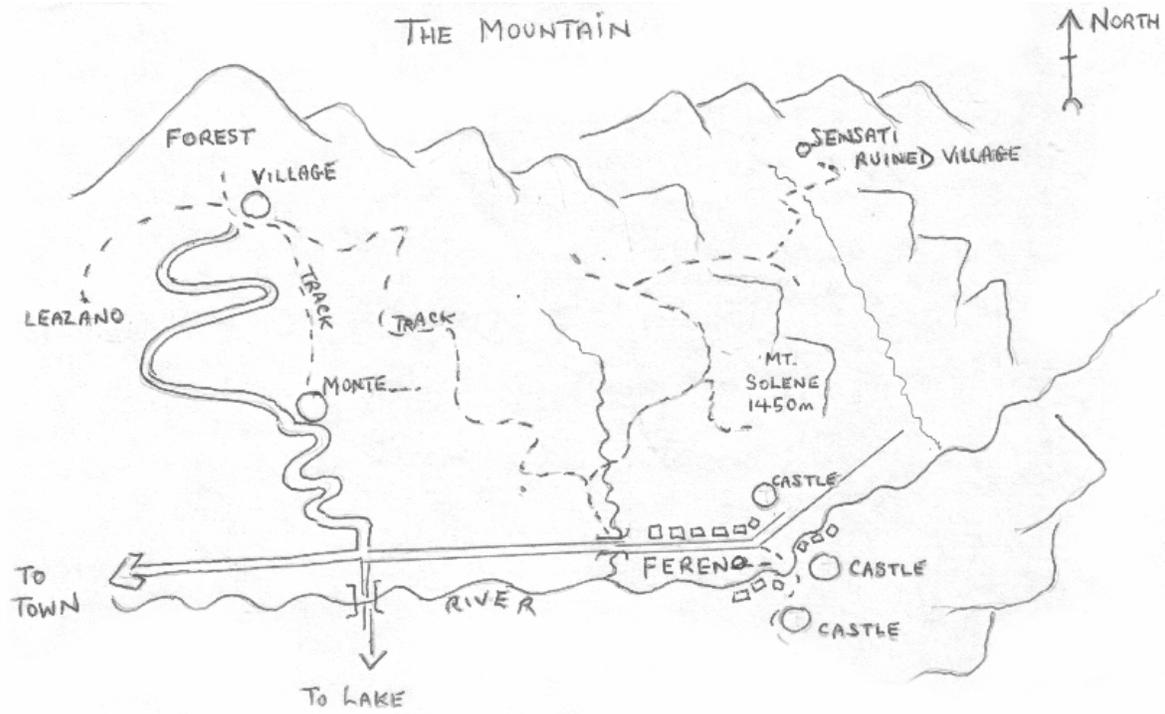
Today she merely introduced to me the locals in an offhand and rather contemptuous fashion cackling at their various misfortunes; Lindo's wooden leg, Natale's drunkenness, Bruno's supposedly incestuous interest in his stepchildren. Fortunately for all concerned, Canzio cut her short. Canzio superintended the only shop which having a commanding view over the piazza enabled him to note everyone's comings and goings. He had a vague air, given to scratching his head, sucking in his cheeks and using a toothpick to quantify the indefinite. He was particularly non-committal when it came to vacant properties. His quizzical expression implied who could be so mad as to wish to buy anything in this tumbled heap of ruins half of which had been condemned by the local fire brigade, following the last earthquake, as unfit for human habitation. They had actually started to tear some of it down until concerns for their own safety halted the endeavour. On the other hand the shopkeeper in him rejoiced at the prospect of another customer. The suggestion I might actually live here produced even more mirth – understandable when considering that if given the opportunity the entire population would happily abandon the village in a moment and never look back. But when it came to selling property the villagers displayed a canny reluctance and all I was offered were pig sties and goat huts, until as I prepared to leave Nazarena came to my aid. 'Don Vincenzo' she uttered as if the name was a magic charm.

Don Vincenzo was the parish priest who ventured into this outpost of Christianity on alternate Sundays – crossing himself a dozen times a minute and keeping his head turned strangely upward as if to implore divine protection from the insidious iniquity all around. The rest of the time this good Samaritan remained happily ensconced in the rural village of Monti where women actually attended mass in veils and the men folk did not glower at the back, arms folded, stamping their boots.

I wrote him a letter, left it in the only bar in sight when I drove back down the mountain and promised to call the next week. Had I admitted I was somewhat less than a true Christian (hiding behind the Anglican creed of convenience that claims to believe in the holy Catholic church – but which Catholics condemn as heresy to the core) – I have no doubt as to the outcome of my request, but D.V. *'Deo Volente'* (God's Will) as I came to think of him and was probably exactly what Don Vincenzo thought of himself – possibly envisaging a civilising influence among his errant mountain folk, and pressured by a neighbour's wife who was anxious to get rid of their residual property up there before it succumbed to another earthquake delivered me to the house of Ivo Grifoni who drove me up to the village in his tiny but spotless Fiat to offer me the tower at a non-negotiable price of 3 million lire (£1,500) settled on a handshake (*un stretto di mano*) plus a few glasses of his own unreproachable wine, details to be arranged by *geometro* (surveyor), Mirabelli, in the Commune town in the valley.

The decision occurred at bewildering speed partly because most of the tower was in too dangerous a state for thorough inspection. When Ivo declared the windows looked out on panoramic views I had to trust his judgement, not having the necessary wings to fly across and verify it. Ivo threw in a few cellars and one habitable room – which had been the village bakery and was still half-filled by a large brick oven – big enough for Shadrack, Meesak and Abednigo to cavort in. Later when the property came to be officially listed under my name in the Land Registry office there were discrepancies since

Mirabella had only drawn up plans from a safe distance. 'Antonio, you didn't expect me to risk my neck measuring – why I have a wife and family to think of.' He thereby omitted about half the actual property from his vague plan. Mirabelli was the manager of the local bank but he was also manager of the local football club. Many years before he had briefly been a substitute player in a minor league team and football claimed 100% of his enthusiasm to the unfortunate neglect of both the bank and the surveying. When I tried to change money it was obvious he had never seen English banknotes and telephoned head office to describe them in detail, 'just in case,' (he winked conspiratorially). As for surveys – a wave of his hand and a beguiling smile seemed to suffice. Another problem was that Ivo Grifoni had four brothers living in different corners of Italy and all had to be present at the signing of the contract. Even more crucial was the signature of Ivo's aged father – and this was by no means certain despite his willingness for the disabling effects of age had rendered him almost incapable of speech or action, and when we finally assembled at the notary's office one rainy January day, we all watched spellbound, concentration willing his wavering hand to meet paper with pen at roughly the space allotted for signature. Finally he managed and we all expressed a gasp of relief. As we left Ivo ceremonially handed me a large iron key. It was also ceremonial as it gave me access to what amounted largely to an open roofless space.



## MOVING IN

In order to avoid an invasion of the curious I took up occupancy under cover of night but despite my precaution I was woken by a black-shawled, toothless face thrusting at the bars of the 'bakery's' only window and greeting me with a friendly 'Fug off'. Her face was replaced by others all offering the same statement, until a large male head beamed in and cried out 'Son-of-a-beech' all in one mouthful. I gave up attempts at anonymity and unbolted the door. The entire village trooped in. Black-shawled Binetta lived next door, while Amadio of the catchy phrase dwelled below it amid a medley of pigs, sheep, goats, hens and a roaring donkey. Nazarena was already on hand brandishing a broom. Vaisi the energetic mother of two from opposite shrieked at Gianni her son who came struggling back with a table on which Sofia – motherly, white haired and white moustachioed, placed a steaming plate of pasta. Bruno of the incestuous family tilted his cap and removed the cigarette otherwise stuck permanently on his lower lip to spit, and everyone else stood in breathless silence watching me eat. I felt as if I was the prime exhibit at a zoo mealtime.

Having studied me scooping in as much spaghetti as I was able to under such scrutiny the village sighed and nodded. Nazarena handed the broom to Bruno's twins, who due to their spidery bodies and misshapen heads (the result, it was claimed of Nazarena's mishandling her midwife's tongs) – were nicknamed 'the Martians'. Enzo, Binetta's son, poked a stick up the chimney and dislodged an owl who had been sleeping there undisturbed for many a year, plus a lot of soot. Natale arrived inebriated and fed any tottering infants wine like an alcoholic wet nurse. Finally, Canzio – preceded by his aged father Paolino – the stooping ancient of my first encounter – came to survey the scene. By then a fire had been lit and the top half of the room was swallowed in dense smoke. Canzio stood there in his white grocer's coat pursing his lips and ticking off my needs with a toothpick to give each item greater emphasis. By now I was busy digging up the road to discover the

waterpipe, watched with concern by the village in case I chopped it in half and severed their 'life-line', and superintended by two water engineers Ivo had thoughtfully sent up, who stood by with the official valve and seal to connect me up.

Water was the most precious commodity in the village and any feuds usually arose out of someone accusing someone else (invariably Nazarena) of stealing it. Each house had a valve, adjusted and sealed annually by the water engineer – but there wasn't a valve without its seal snapped. If too much water was drawn off higher up there was none lower down. Some nights, especially when the small fields of vegetables below the village walls were in short supply there was a merry-go-round of hooded figures furtively screwing off water here and turning on more water somewhere else. My only defense after repeated failures – was a particularly sticky glue used to catch rats. After this was applied my water supply was unmolested.

Although obtaining water was a top priority, there was a general lack of concern how it was got rid of. No one bothered about waste disposal. Buckets and rubbish were just emptied out of windows into the street below, and it was risking a dousing from a brim-full potty to walk close to the walls early in the morning. Overlooking my small courtyard was the bedroom of one-legged Lindo who seemed to take a particular aim at emptying over anyone who was passing – especially Nazarena marching through to inspect the cellar of her rabbits.

Those first few days – aided principally by Enzo and scrutinised by Canzio, Amadio, Natale and the rest who were generous both with suggestions and criticisms but not much else – were spent making the one room habitable. This meant dismantling the domed bread oven. In the midst of the fog of filth and dust this demolition caused, Mario the Mayor of the Commune chose to pay his official visit. Having heard that an Englishman had arrived in the mountain he had dressed up for the occasion wearing his official silk sash and



hat to match. We discovered him peering doubtfully into the gloom of brick-dust and I was presented caked in filth. Mario tried to hide his obvious disappointment – he must have expected better, but he brightened when it occurred to him I could be a rich eccentric. ‘What is your job?’ he inquired. I am never certain how to reply to that. As I was only in my thirties I decided to joke that I was retired, but because my mouth was full of dust the word I spat out must have sounded like ‘retarded’. Marcio repeated this to himself, exclaiming aghast, ‘No, no, no’ while I wishing to add emphasis to my joke insisted ‘Yes, yes, yes.’ Mario frowned, kissed a few of the cleaner babies, slipped in a heap of donkey droppings – scolding Nazarena for not sweeping the street and retired hastily down the mountain to his official office in Fereno.

Some days later when I made my first appearance in the town to post a letter I casually inquired at the post office if there were any foreigners living in the vicinity. The spidery post-mistress clutched my wrist and led me outside where she pointed to my tower perched high above us on the skyline, ‘Up there lives an Englishman. Mad,’ she declared, tapping her head, ‘Quite mad.’

My next visitor was the local police chief. He was formidably attired in white gloves, tricorn hat and a long ceremonial sword that kept getting stuck in discarded piles of bricks. He was more interested in the financial expectations prompted by my arrival. ‘I collect coins,’ he told me. Did I have any English gold sovereigns for his collection? He too retired down the mountain a disappointed man.

By the time the bakery room was habitable I had persuaded Binetta not to greet me with her customary hearty expletive. Apparently during the war three Scottish soldiers had been marooned for several days in the village – in which time they had managed to drain it of more wine and food than the Germans had in three years, and apart from desecrating the church the only words they spoke to the villagers were ‘F... O..’ Naturally the villagers had assumed this was a friendly greeting for ‘Good morning’ and had been proudly displaying

their linguistic expertise by announcing this to any foreigners they met ever since. Amadio's hearty 'son-of-a-beech' mouthful clearly indicated American influences.

## RESTORATION

There were two handicaps to restoring my ruin; a deficiency of building vocabulary and a limitation of funds. The latter led to an originality in design and a tendency to scavenge, the former to some embarrassing moments in shops, brickyards and steelworks of the main town, some 18 Km away where I obtained most of my supplies. When money ran out empty bottles took the place of bricks to make walls, when words and diagrams ran out there was much head scratching. Why, for instance, is the object that controls the flow from a water tank called a 'ball cock,' and consider the embarrassment to my already long-suffering ironmonger when I translated the expression literally.

Asking his by-now curious female customers to move back he handed me pencil and paper. His relief when the object represented was not the obscenity he feared was spontaneous. 'You want a float – why didn't you say so?' Fortunately there is one saving word for just about everything, and that is '*macchina*' (machine) which substitutes for 'thing' in English. Hence a typewriter is a machine for writing, just as a lawnmower is a machine for cutting grass. I needed a lot of 'things' and stretched the use of the word to its limit. My early decision not to follow the locals into the woods each morning for their call of nature required a thing to sit on (no, not a chair). I wonder why we find it embarrassing to use functional words. I am sure my forebears, the three Scottish soldiers would have had no such qualms. Anyway when I proudly hauled my toilet up from the piazza in Enzo's wheelbarrow it was viewed with considerable puzzlement. 'Surely, Antonio,' Amadio remarked, 'Would not a simple hole have served just as well?' Canzio however welcomed the change in habits and laid in a stock of toilet rolls. However, because water was at a premium and a 'flusher' beyond my finances, a bucket of water had to do, while an upturned roof tile made an excellent urinal. Somewhere outside and far below I built a cesspit which must have leaked as the nearby fig trees flourished magnificent fruits from then on.

I built the tower from the bottom upwards – which isn't quite true as the bottom became a grotto with fake plaster stalactites but the water was generally too freezing for even the briefest dip and the dead rats and scorpions who sought it out as a final resting place rather put bathers off. Apart from Nazarena who I discovered one sweltering day taking a summer plunge – fully clothed, boots and all.

Above the grotto I simply worked my way up putting a floor or ceiling in every three metres. Apart from the grinding effort of wheelbarrowing sand up from the piazza and manhandling sacks of cement the work was surprisingly easy. At one metre intervals you hacked a hole out of the stonework and then laid a row of steel girders. In between the girders went metre-long hollow tile wafers and when these were all slotted in one buried it all in a few inches of cement. Hey presto – a floor, and so on upwards until the top which I partly tiled over a bedroom and partly left open as a terrace. The view over the edge was rather precipitous even if one didn't suffer from vertigo and I decided to put up a row of arches and drape them with vine pergolas. The rather bacchanalian idea was to be able to sit there admiring the view and reaching up for a bunch of grapes if you were hungry, hoping the birds or rats – the village swarmed with rats – hadn't already stripped the branches. Planning permission didn't seem to apply but just in case, I went to see Mayor Mario about my designs. I found him playing cards in Dora's bar.

He took the practical view, 'Antonio, if I can't see what you are doing when I look out of my window – no worries. And I have very bad eye sight,' he added.

For hot water I relied on an old oil drum over a very small paraffin stove – and so long as I remembered to light it at night I was able to scoop an abundance of hot water over myself in the morning. Lighting was supplied by oil lamps. I was even lucky to discover an old pewter one that looked like a miniature teapot and worked with a taper. The open fireplace in the bakery either blasted smoke down or sucked most of the heat up – but it remained the

convivial focal point and from a large hook hung a cauldron in which I did most of my cooking. The problem was usually what to put in it since building the tower drained most of my resources.

Nazarena's nearby rabbit cellar helped once I had excavated out a tunnel and waited with cudgel raised for the first plump bunny to venture through tempted by one of Canzio's cabbage leaves. Hunters were very obliging once they realised I would eat anything. Squirrel stew was often on the menu – the only hazard being trying to avoid biting on the lead pellets. Once a porcupine arrived which might have even puzzled Mrs Beaton for a moment. Enzo frequently stopped by at supper time, usually with a bottle of wine from his generous cantina and curious to know what I might be eating, sampled the cauldron with the large ladle hanging nearby. I also used the cauldron to boil up my washing – especially socks and underpants. Once, before I could stop him, Enzo poked the ladle into my stewing socks and took a discriminating taste. He grimaced and spat. I won't repeat his actual words but when I explained it was 'sock soup', he replied, 'And if that's the first course, what is the second!'

Most of my guests were very welcome especially as they invariably brought something to eat or drink, but during my renovations I discovered two unexpected acquaintances. One evening as I was cooking there was a loud crash from the back of the fireplace. A hole appeared and in it a large eye surveyed me. This was my introduction to my nearest neighbour – of whom until then I had been quite unaware – Rondinella, the donkey. Later on as our friendship deepened many were the occasions when she obligingly carried me back in a rather inebriated condition, up the old mule track from Don Vincenzo's village lower down. My other discovery had been there a very long time. When I was digging out the grotto I unearthed a complete human skeleton. It lay there in a reclining position as if long ago it had dropped off to sleep and forgotten to wake up. I didn't want to tell anyone as the chances were it was someone's long lost ancestor. I assumed it would fall to pieces but

it showed an obstinate tenacity to remain in one piece. Just then a school teacher from Rome arrived. 'Ah,' he declared, 'What a wonderful specimen for our biology laboratory.' Gone were my hopes of a rapid reburial in the woods. We bound its skeletal frame in Canzio's toilet paper, dressed it in some discarded clothes, a wooly cap, marble eyes and a football club scarf disguised most of its head – but I experienced some heart-sinking moments as we drove to Rome that night. The traffic police stopped us at the motorway tollgate curious at my English number-plate. 'Tourists,' I explained – with a wave that included my teacher friend and the old gentleman propped up in the back who regarded the police like the ancient marine – with a fixed and glassy stare. 'He's had too much to drink,' the teacher explained. The police saluted and we drove on.



## **SAN BIAGGIO**

No one doubted that the church was the most important building in the village, nor that its patron saint San Biaggio (deceased) its most important citizen. Not that Biaggio had ever visited the village during his saintly life-time and as for his mortal remains, Palermo in Sicily claimed most of them, leaving the village in proud possession of his holy throat. This was kept safely stored along with other relics in some place known only to Don Vincenzo. San Biaggio made his official appearance once a year, February 3<sup>rd</sup>, which also happened to be my birthday.

The remainder of the year the church was left in the protection of various other surrogate saints whose statues lined each wall and who equipped with metal halos – like circular television antennae and beautiful expressions on their faces, blessed all who entered with holy gestures. At least they should have been holy. They were designed to be holy and would have remained that way had not the three Scottish soldiers sought diversion from boredom or hangover by pistol practice, artistically amputating various fingers and rendering the hands raised so solemnly to heaven giving in effect a one-fingered or a two-fingered salute. Fortunately these Anglo-Saxon gestures were unknown in the ample vocabulary of Italian signs and none of the villagers were any the wiser.

Alternate Sundays Don Vincenzo arrived in the piazza in his little Fiat car and hurried up the alleys with neither a look to left or right until he reached his religious destination where he started energetically hauling on to bell ropes summoning the sinful to his sanctuary. They arrived in dribs and drabs, the women first occupying the chairs and the men last, standing arms folded in a sort of pagan defiance at the rear. Whereas the women energetically involved themselves in the service, making the responses and crossing themselves, the men glowered in a silence which varied from sullen to solemn. As the centrepiece of the Mass was the communion a visit to the confessional was

obligatory to anyone who wished to avail themselves of the sacrament. The confessional had the size and shape of a large wardrobe and the grille, through which the penitents whispered – or, in Nazarena’s case, boomed – their shortcomings, appeared on close inspection to be none other than a biscuit tin lid with holes punched through and fragments of the words ‘Edinburgh shortbread’ clearly visible. Was this too a legacy of those same sacriligious Scots perhaps driven by guilt to atone for their desecrations?

For the Feast of San Biaggio however – everyone, or nearly everyone – turned up spick and span in best apparel. Amadio acted as a rather portly acolyte and a Jesuit father accompanied Don Vincenzo whose prize turn was that of holy magician bearing aloft the sacred and seemingly bloody throat of their patron. As was only entirely appropriate San Biaggio was the saint of throats, and the whole congregation lined up to have their throats blessed with a dab of holy oil – a sure prevention in the wintry weather for coughs and colds.

Unfortunately the harmony of the ceremony was interrupted on my first occasion by the church doors suddenly banging open and the drunken figure of Natale tottering in, looking about him with a bewildered expression and demanding to know in the name of the mother of Jesus what was going on. Regrettably he involved the name of the blessed virgin in some unholy and unlikely liaison with pigs.

Perhaps in his drunken state he thought he had stumbled upon the local pig breeders meeting but now the wrath of the Jesuit fell full fury on him barring his progress and declaring ‘Stop – This is the house of God’ which for some reason Natale thought very funny for he burst into uproarious laughter, tilted his bottle of wine at one and all – the Jesuit included, and staggered out into the cold February morning where we found him fast asleep on the church steps. Later Amadio invited me to his house for a feast – and quite a feast it was.

Some years passed and I happened to be visiting Don Vincenzo's village on the evening before our feast day when I was surprised to see him hurry rather furtively out of the back door of the butcher's shop clutching something bloody wrapped up in newspapers, and next morning also happened to glimpse him hurrying up from piazza to church hugging the self-same parcel. Could it possibly be that it wasn't the holy throat of San Biaggio we were venerating — but a bit of scrag-end from the butcher's — or does such doubt simply expose me as a heretical Anglican?



Mario the Mayor

## THE ELECTION

In the spring of my first year local elections were held. There were 27 political parties in Italy but only the Christian Democrats and the Communists made the effort of toiling up the mountain in search of our 20 or so votes.

Fereno was one of the smallest communes in Italy. The town and its 18 tiny villages totalled no more than 2000 souls yet it controlled its own hygiene, welfare, fire service, police, finance and so forth. In presiding over this mini-state Mario wielded considerable power but he did so modestly and honestly. His 'office', either in Dora's bar where he might be found reading the newspaper or playing cards, or at the Town Hall, was always open to supplicants, (Nazarena came down to complain at least once a week). Mario was short, stout and rather intrepid. Years later when the commune started a small sports centre (bowling, tennis and a swimming pool) it was Mario – who couldn't swim – who had to open it with a ceremonial plunge. You could see he was terrified and yet in he went with the flattest belly-flop ever, which brought cheers of applause, and gasps from the floundering Mayor. Mario's Christian Democrats had controlled the commune for some years but there was a general swing to the left all over Italy and the Communists sensed the chance of victory. A straw poll had given Mario a lead of less than 80, so there was every vote to play for. Preceding Mario up the mountain that bright spring afternoon came his henchmen driving the fire truck laden with loudspeakers and amplifiers and planks to assemble a small stage. With so much preparation going on a good reception was assured and by the time Mario arrived just about every living creature for miles around, human or otherwise, had turned out to hear him. The stage was erected beside the well at the end of the piazza so he had to contend with a thirsty throng of donkeys, oxen, cows and Nazarena's horses plus assorted goats. Mario didn't seem to mind. He kissed the more washed babies, patted infants' heads that seemed less rich in nits, shook the trembling hands of the aged, avoided Nazarena's

beseeking embrace and climbed – with difficulty – onto the podium. And then had to mount a chair to reach the microphone.

‘Friends, Citizens, Countrymen,’ he began in a fine oratorical style. ‘I have not come here today to discuss national issues, but domestic ones’ (Applause). ‘Domestic issues that affect each one of you in your everyday lives’ (more applause). Mario looked steadily at the expectant crowd. ‘I am proud to consider myself father of this community.’ (slight hand claps) ‘I even consider it a compliment when Nazarena comes to my office to complain,’ (ribald laughter). ‘My friends,’ (adopting a more intimate tone now), ‘A vote for me is a vote for every one of you. No one, I promise, will be forgotten.’ (breathless silence) Mario glanced around his expectant audience – even Nazarena’s horses looked hopeful. ‘Why I see Natale – who is so generous with his wine, has a roof in danger of collapsing (an inebriated grunt from Natale). ‘Amadio needs help to repair his barn’ (a solemn ‘grazie’ from Amadio). And so it went on. No one was forgotten. Even Lindo was assured of a spare wooden leg in case death-watch beetle or a careless chain-saw claimed the first. But one could sense more was in store – and there was. Mario pulled himself up to his full height (not very considerable) and after a prolonged pause he made his big announcement. ‘My friends, I see a village looking to the future; I see a village wanting progress, I see people who do not wish to be left behind in today’s society.’ Mario’s free hand (the other was clutching the chair he was perched on) described a grand gesture that took in most of the surrounding mountains. ‘If our great party is returned next month and I am still your mayor, I see rising post by post up the hillside a cable and here in the village a telephone kiosk.’ For a moment there was a silence and Mario looked puzzled, then his henchmen started applauding wildly and with slight reluctance the village joined in. Mario smiled again – it was as if the sun, for a moment shaded by clouds, had emerged once more.

One could sympathise with the villagers’ scepticism. Mario’s last election pledge had been a public toilet. It still stood where it had been built – tucked



Pasquale

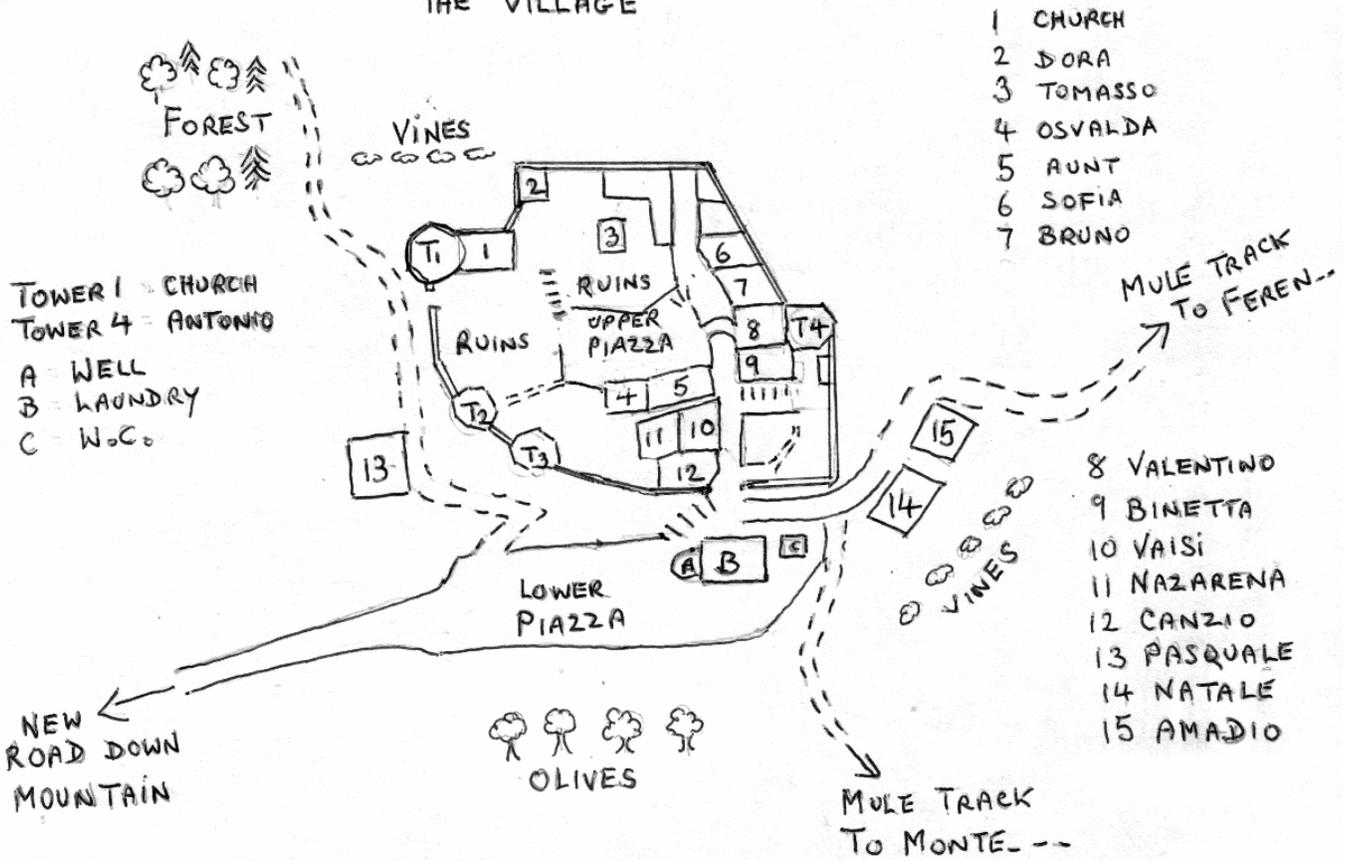
behind the communal well where the women (women only – no men allowed) engaged in their daily gossip plus laundering. A small brick monument to progress. Unfortunately, however well-meaning the idea, there was no water supply to sustain it – or if there had been this was quickly diverted – nor any maintenance. For a while Amadio's sheep had used it for a shelter but the flies got too bad even for them. Desperate men would be driven off by humming swarms and none but the bravest backside would dare risk exposing itself within.

Mario retired down the mountain, his paraphernalia dismantled and loaded in the fire truck, and a few days later the communists arrived. They did not bring any amplification. Their leader was a tall stooping grey-haired man with a kindly expression and quiet demeanour. He didn't kiss babies, or pat heads, although he had a kindly word to say here and there. He stood on the steps leading up to Canzio's store and spoke about freedom. He was generous – perhaps a little over generous in his offer. In fact one almost had the impression that any moment he would cause the skies to open and freedom fall like divine manna from the Red Gods above. The villagers were unconvinced and unimpressed. Old Pasquale voiced their grievances. 'Freedom,' he muttered, pissing on his beans above the piazza and forgetting Nazarena standing directly below ('Well, they are my beans,' he shouted, when she complained.) 'Freedom – you can't eat it, you can't drink it – and we have it anyway, don't we?'

In case victory was in any doubt Don Vincenzo threw his backing behind the Christian Democrats. In his sermon he declared a vote for communism was a vote for anti-Christ, and anyone who supported them deserved instant excommunication and the fires of hell. The result was now a foregone conclusion. The church bells rang out, Mario toured the town in a victory procession of tooting Fiats and Don Vincenzo hosted a barbecue for believers outside the town church. And just in case there were any cynical doubters Mario's dream of telephone poles quickly materialised and a kiosk, gift-

wrapped as though for Christmas, was delivered and installed in Canzio's shop so that everyone could hear everyone else's conversations.

# THE VILLAGE



## DON VINCENZO'S FLOCK

A rough guide to the village would show the church at the top, and the main piazza, guarded by the gateway and Canzio's shop at the bottom. A steep track outside the perimeter wall led up to the forest. Below the piazza the unfinished road meandered recklessly as if it was built with no clear plan in mind but finally joined the road to Monti (Don Vincenzo's official hideaway) while another track zig-zagged perilously down the mountain to Fereno. If in doubt consult the map. Within the village walls lived everyone except Amadio, Natale's family and Pasquale who had recently built a new house beside his bean plot and this also served for the school.

The only inhabited house by the church was Dora's – who owned the bar in Fereno - and whose son Franco had an amazing and lucrative talent for finding truffles. Dora's aged parents also lived there but only emerged in summer, like the butterflies to warm their wings in the sunshine. Silvestro was nearly 100 and was justly proud of having gone to America when he was a lad for 123 lire (the price of a cup of coffee today). He described how he rode on the railways like a hobo and earned money playing his mandolin.

'Antonio, I was a vagabond,' he insisted. However the San Francisco earthquake unnerved him and he returned home and remained there ever since.

Although there were plenty of animals, great and small, occupying byres and barns the next human occupant was Tomasso who had purchased all the ruins that the fire brigade had failed to pull down and lived in one of them, just two rooms to be precise. Tomasso – painter, poet, philosopher came up from Rome in an old army jeep on a regular basis, 'to escape his wife' – the village 'tongues' insisted. A fine looking man with a mane of silvery grey hair and moustache to match. A man of eloquent gestures, a gracious smile who could

have passed for a senator, judge, even the ex-king himself; he was actually a hospital porter.

Tomasso had bought up all the ruined part of the village and half the hillside above. The problem was not that he didn't know what to do with it – Tomasso had the grandest vision of anyone I ever met, it was putting the plans into effect. For Tomasso was a dreamer. Once when I asked him what he painted he breathed in deeply and staring out of the window at the valley spreading below declared, 'Antonio, I steal the light. I am a thief of light.' He believed it, too – which is surely all that matters.

Out on the hillside he had constructed some pens now collapsed, like his empty ruins. To the villagers this was all a pointless waste – but not to Tomasso. Sitting among his unpruned and unproductive olive trees he pointed around him. 'Antonio, here I have sky, hills, space – all mine.' Or putting his hand gently on my arm he suggested, 'Antonio, the poetry, the painting, the philosophy – it is all outside – why try to trap it into words, onto canvas?' I liked Tomasso. His living room was full of herbs and spices collected on his rambles and he made a very good wine. All I had to do was buy some bread and sausages from Canzio and Tomasso would prepare a meal made more enjoyable by the scope of his imagination and his rich and varied commentary on life. Unfortunately he seemed to have made enemies with most of the village who thought he was mad.

Once he took me on a perilous tour of his ruined properties. He had such plans – a college for undiscovered geniuses, an academy for composers, a school of philosophy. Vaisi was more tolerantly disposed to him than most. She put it succinctly, '*Ideii sono tanti, risultati sono nienti,*' (The ideas are many, the results are nothing). But what of it, I wondered – what would become of the world without dreamers?



Below Tomasso a narrow flight of steps led down into a sloping piazza. Shored-up ruins threatened it from above, and a stone column bearing the keys of St Peter teetered over a rancid wall. This was where tomatoes were boiled in huge vats to make puree, and where fattened pigs were dragged squealing to slaughter at Christmas. Vaisi's senile aunt was housed here – but often at night she escaped from her confinement and would be seen sleepwalking. A frail spectral figure in a white nightie – assuming the role of village ghost.

Also living here with her two husbands – conveniently brothers, was stout, jolly Osvalda. Both the husbands defecated daily under adjoining bushes below my tower. ('Well, it's our land!' they roared in unison when Nazarena prudishly objected as she picked a way past with her prowling pigs.)

An arched bridge connected the upper piazza to the house of Valentino and one-legged Lindo on whom no village sympathy was spared. He was supposed to beat Valentino's wife, a thin scrawny figure who was always dragging huge loads of firewood and never spoke to anyone – unless it was to call after her daughter Agada. 'Agada, Agada!' how often I heard that haunting, fearful cry. For Lindo was also supposed to abuse the daughter who on his instruction was not allowed to play with the other children.

To enter their house was a depressing experience. They lived around the hearth, dirty and grimed. Valentino was cross-eyed but tried to be friendly, Lindo tapped his wooden leg sullenly, and the wife nervously fed the fire, too terrified of a later beating to speak. Even a Neanderthal cave-dwelling must have been more cheerful. Beneath the dirt and the torn clothes Agada was a beautiful child whose pale blue eyes delivered a penetrating hypnotic stare, but when her mother, skinny and draped in black rags called after her 'Agada, Agada,' it sounded like the cry from a wounded bird that had lost the will to fly.

The upper piazza always gave me a sense of foreboding and it was a relief to step down from it into the main village thoroughfare below. This was invariably full of activity and banter. Here in the morning and evening cattle, horses, sheep or goats were led out or back to the stables beneath the houses. When grapes were pressed the cobbles ran red with streams of sour wine. The air always stank richly of wine, urine, straw, sweat, manure. In the afternoons the women sat gossiping on the doorsteps, knitting lace, playing cards, fondling babies.

Here dwelled big motherly Sofia, her mass of white hair tied up in a shawl, and Angelino her husband. Sofia often recounted, when I took supper there, how she had grown up across the mountains and when Angelino courted her as a young man it took him 8 hours walking to reach her and 8 hours to come back. But the courting paid off and he finally brought his bride back. That was many years ago. Their children had long since moved to Rome and married, but when her grandchildren visited the house came alive again as if responding to their cries and laughter.

Despite their age, Sofia and Angelino still farmed their patches of land, pruned the olives, harvested their grapes, kept their goats and pigeons, hens and horses. It was here in the stable below the house I watched for the first time a foal being born, emerging in a slimy skin, being licked dry in the straw. It was Christmas. Outside snow was falling. Angelino banked straw around the foal to save it from draughts. I thought how Christ was born in just such a stable. How impelling and magical is the miracle of new birth.

In the room above Sofia was cooking her Christmas treat – *codice & fagiole* (pigs' skin and beans) which may not sound very appetizing but was the most delicious meal I have ever tasted. I can still taste it from a distance of 30 years, as we sat around the table, dipping in hunks of bread and sipping the thin red wine. 'Antonio,' she urged, '*Pia moglie*' (Take a wife).

Bruno and Luigetti occupied the next house – which they rented from old Pasquale, together with their brood of twins. Luigetti was Natale's sister but quite where Bruno came from no one was sure. He had arrived from nowhere and moved in with Luigetti who had already one pair of twins, and he soon provided her with a second set. Because they were unmarried the children were officially listed as '*Bastardi*' on the Commune register and received a small subsidy. The girl twins – especially Mariaretti were very pretty and the boy twins spindly and misshapen; but that Luigetti insisted was not because they were cursed for being bastards but because Nazarena, unprepared for delivering twins, had been too hasty with her midwife's tongs. Bruno had no fixed job but was always called on for casual labouring jobs. He was short, strong, wore a cloth cap and was never without a cigarette stuck on his lip. Somehow he managed to sustain the family, and once after a period of steady work a travelling salesman conned him into buying a complete set of *Encyclopedia Italiano* – which Bruno was immensely proud of. The acquisition seemed to make up for him not being able to read or write. As it was the only set in the entire locality all sorts of people came up to browse, and Bruno's smoky room became a sort of library.

The family all slept together in one huge bed – or rather three iron bedsteads tied together, and they were so attached to this system that when there was an earthquake and everyone slept outside, Bruno carried all three beds outside the church, tied them together and resumed their customary arrangement. After another man, half a mile from the village was imprisoned for incest Bruno got very worried but when it was suggested that three separate beds might help to solve the problem neither he nor Luigetti would agree.

Next to me on one side lived Binetta and her son, Enzo. Binetta was short and dumpy and peered at the world through a milky fog of cataracts and heavy lensed spectacles. She was invariably cheerful and smiling and when I finally persuaded her to stop announcing 'F... off' in public, it remained a private joke